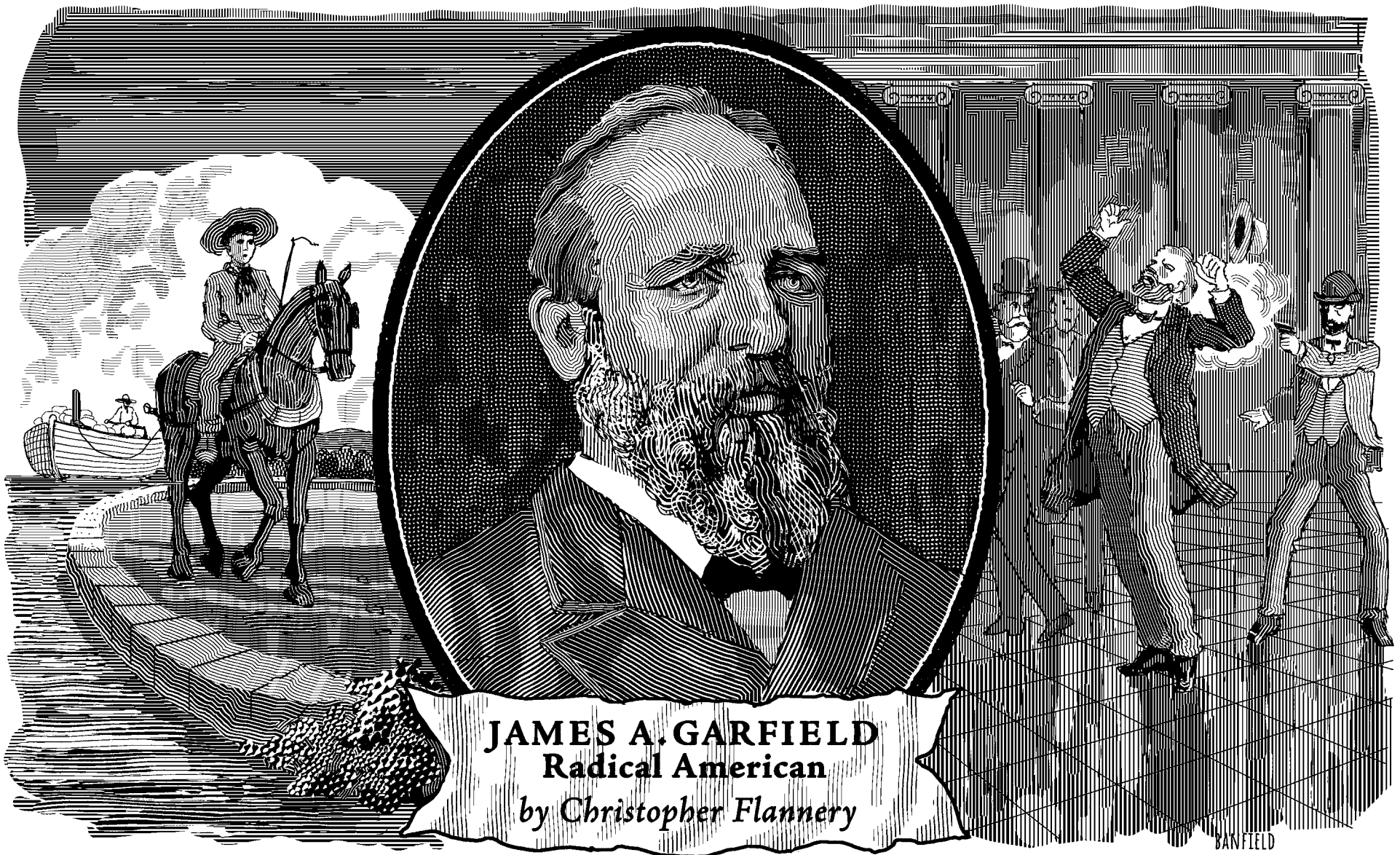


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Essay by Algis Valiunas

OUT OF *THE WASTE LAND*

T.S. Eliot's modernist masterpiece.



MOST ANYBODY WHO HAS HEARD A thing or two about modern poetry can probably tell you that T.S. Eliot (1888–1965) is famous for writing *The Waste Land*. If that person knows a little bit more about the subject, he may add that it was Eliot who said the world ends “Not with a bang but a whimper.” An aficionado might well tell you that *The Waste Land*, Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Duineser Elegien* (*Duino Elegies*), and Paul Valéry’s *La jeune Parque* (*The Young Fate*) are the founding works of literary modernism. They form “a boundary stone where the old culture passes into the new,” as Valéry’s learned translator Nathaniel Rudavsky-Brody declares in the introduction to *The Idea of Perfection: The Poetry and Prose of Paul Valéry* (2020). A century after the publication of Eliot’s masterpiece in 1922, it remains the defining work of modern poetry in the English language, much as James Joyce’s contemporaneous *Ulysses* continues to stand as the supreme modern novel in English.

The most obvious characteristic of Eliot’s signature poem is that it is hard to understand. There are allusions to the Gospel According to Saint Luke, Saint Augustine’s

Confessions, and a scholarly investigation into whether the Holy Grail legend originated in primitive vegetation rites. There are quotations from Wagnerian opera, 19th-century French poetry, Elizabethan revenge tragedy, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and the *Upanishads* (in bloody Sanskrit, which the poet studied at Harvard). Page upon page of the author’s endnotes tend to frustrate the ordinary reader whom they presumably profess to enlighten. If you wish to make serious headway toward comprehension, you have to accept the poet’s demands and submit to the discipline of educating yourself according to his lights.

Eliot took pride in the difficulty of the task he set not only for the reader but for himself. When his friend and sometime publisher Virginia Woolf sighed that their cryptic enigmas could not compare to the great-souled effusions of Romantics such as John Keats and Percy Shelley, Eliot replied that what he and Woolf were trying to do was harder. The poets of a century before could simply pour out song from the fullness of their being, while the modernists were undertaking to piece together plausible souls for themselves from the

jagged shards they had to work with. “These fragments I have shored against my ruins”: so Eliot’s evasive narrator explains the sudden hectic onrush of splintered citations in the closing lines of *The Waste Land*. He can only hope he has made a poem built to last from the wreckage of his own life, however fragile the antique buttresses he has found while digging around in the remnants of civilization.

Even a generation before Eliot and Woolf, thinkers and artists had to stitch together piecemeal works that reflected but also transcended the modern spiritual disorder. Where Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, and Karl Marx had erected vast dogmatic systems of comprehensive explanation, Friedrich Nietzsche seized thought on the fly and composed in impassioned speculative flashes. He could discern the all-too-human individuals taking refuge behind the pretensions of monumental ideas, which he shredded one after another. Relying on paradox, aphorism, and mythmaking, Nietzsche sketched the outlines of a heroic modern soul no less extraordinary for being incomplete and most likely impossible: Caesar with the heart of Christ.



Matthew Arnold, renowned Victorian sage and revered professor of poetry at Oxford, famously promoted the cultivation of the best that has ever been thought and said. But although he was and still is widely considered a leading poet of his time and place—just a cut below Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning—Arnold admitted in a letter to his sister that “My poems are fragments” because “I am fragments.” Gustav Mahler wrote symphonies in a magpie style and with an unexampled amplitude of feeling, doing up the tune of “Frère Jacques” in a funereal minor key hard by the most exquisite rhapsody, mixing echoes of inelegant klezmer music for petit bourgeois Jewish weddings with passages of heaven-storming grandeur reminiscent of Beethoven. Arguing with Jean Sibelius, who insisted on the need for logical rigor in symphonic form, Mahler retorted, “No! A symphony must be like the world. It must embrace everything.”

The Artist Vanishes

ELIOT, WHO WAS ALSO THE MOST FORMIDABLE poetry critic of his era, would require that great art encompass “the horror, the boredom, and the glory” of life itself in all its complication. Yet while *The Waste Land* ladles on the horror and the boredom, it comes up notably short on the glory, despite a last-second chant of hopeful prayer (in endnoted Sanskrit...of course). This acknowledged masterwork is dank and dismal through and through, a lamentation from the deepest dungeon—which happens to be the home address of everyday humanity. Neither prosperity, nor accomplishment, nor the myriad diversions of civilized ingenuity can offer more than temporary relief from work without meaning and marriage without love. The spiritual morbidity of commercial democracy—the rush hour procession of the living dead across London Bridge—and the desolation of erotic futility—the almost limitless variety of wrong desire—are of a piece. Eliot lights into the whole rotten business with cold fury.

Not least of all it is himself he hates, for having turned away from the possibility of genuine love and having betrayed the life he ought to have lived. But this self-loathing is couched in subtle allusion, made explicit only when biographical excavation comes to the reader’s aid. Eliot could not stand the thought of professors despoiling his remains in a mad rush to make a name for themselves, and his estate took precautions to discourage would-be biographers. The artist was to be judged by the work alone; his life, no matter how rep-

rehensible or how estimable it might be, had nothing to do with that. Such was the credo of the so-called New Criticism of which Eliot was the leading proponent, for whose practitioners the words on the page were the sole object of interest. For quite a long time Eliot got away with absconding from the vicinity of his own poetry. But the scholars are catching up to the elusive master.

The Waste Land is by no means a confessional poem as customarily defined. It does not dwell upon the stinking mass of the poet’s own horrid failings and well-deserved

cape from these things.” One can readily see here the connection with Keats, who rejected “the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime” in favor of its opposing poetic virtue, the “negative capability” of erasing oneself from a purely disinterested creation. Keats’s model for this kind of literary vanishing act was Shakespeare, whom he extolled in an 1818 letter to the barrister Richard Woodhouse. The true “poetical Character itself” remains coolly detached in the act of creation, wrote Keats; conventional moral considerations are not its concern: “It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen.... [I]t is a very fact that not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature—how can it, when I have no nature?”

Eliot plainly aspired to such ideal dispassion, this effective out-of-body experience of a nearly mystical sort. He had at first intended to call his capacious poem *He Do the Police in All the Voices*, referring to the uncanny variety with which the slum boy Sloppy, in Charles Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*, would mimic the people he read about in the newspaper. A scholar with time on his hands has counted some 66 changes of voice in Eliot’s poem of 434 lines. From upper-class refinement to proletarian squalor, *The Waste Land* discharges its anger and disgust with the botched job that modern men have made of enhancing and safeguarding human happiness. No previous generation was born into such promising means or squandered so golden an opportunity. The inescapable thought of what might have been redoubles the misery of things as they are.

Living on a Knife-Edge

NEVER MENTIONED BUT EVER-PRESENT in the poem is the aftermath of the most destructive war men had fought to date. Placed in the balance against the Great War, the proudest human achievement is found not merely wanting but perfectly weightless: “Falling towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal.” Yet in spite of this grand sweep across time and space, about ten years later Eliot would deprecate the poem as merely a private vendetta against Creation: “To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling.”

In fact, in Eliot’s poem the confluence of world-historical catastrophe and purely domestic unhappiness forms a whirlpool that drowns everyone caught in it, as a host of able biographers and critics argue convincingly in

Books discussed in this essay:

The Idea of Perfection: The Poetry and Prose of Paul Valéry, translated by Nathaniel-Rudavsky Brody. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 400 pages, \$40 (cloth), \$25 (paper)

Eliot After The Waste Land, by Robert Crawford. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 624 pages, \$40

Young Eliot: From St. Louis to The Waste Land, by Robert Crawford. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 512 pages, \$20

The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot’s Hidden Muse, by Lyndall Gordon. W.W. Norton & Company, 512 pages, \$35 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper)

The Waste Land: A Biography of a Poem, by Matthew Hollis. W.W. Norton & Company, 544 pages, \$40 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper)

What the Thunder Said: How The Waste Land Made Poetry Modern, by Jed Rasula. Princeton University Press, \$39.95, 344 pages

wretchedness, but rather produces for inspection an entire civilization in fetid decadence. In the 1919 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (*Selected Essays*), probably the most celebrated piece of literary criticism he ever wrote, Eliot preached the necessity of poetic impersonality, the studied avoidance of emotional self-disclosure: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to es-



recent books to mark the work's centenary. The University of Georgia's Jed Rasula stuffs every conceivable cultural, social, political, economic, and personal influence on Eliot into *What the Thunder Said: How The Waste Land Made Poetry Modern*. The account remains absorbing despite the loose and baggy effect of just too many tangents. Young Eliot was a wandering scholar, a serious student of philosophy with a professorial career in prospect. Harvard was his home base. From there he traveled to Paris in 1911 to attend the lectures of the philosopher Henri Bergson, then to Oxford in 1914 to study with F.H. Bradley, on whose work he would write his Harvard doctoral dissertation. He completed the thesis but never defended it: poetry and love, or at any rate love's beguiling simulacrum, redirected his life's course. At a Magdalen College garden party in March 1915 he met Vivienne Haigh-Wood, daughter of a Royal Academician painter—by all accounts pretty and vivacious, by some accounts vulgar, second-rate, but not unappealing. That June, they married.

Rasula speculates not implausibly that the wedding schedule was accelerated by the death in combat of Jean Verdenal, Eliot's closest friend during his year in Paris. He compressed his mourning under an onslaught of

somewhat forced jubilation. Aldous Huxley remarked that the innocent Eliot simply could not resist his temptress: "It is almost entirely a sexual nexus between Eliot and her: one sees it in the way he looks at her—she's an incarnate provocation." There were other reasons for the whirlwind courtship, however, which Eliot did not admit to himself until much later. Ezra Pound, Eliot's close advisor in matters both personal and poetic, urged on the marriage as a way of keeping the expatriate legally in England where his prospects for literary leisure and connection were greater. Marrying Vivienne was a means to several ends.

The alluring young lady turned out to be a basket case in both body and mind. You name it, she suffered from it. She had concealed her overwhelming indispositions from her suitor but could not hide them from her husband. A month after the wedding, Eliot sailed off to America on his own, hoping to mend relations with his distressed family back in St. Louis, entrusting his bride to his teacher and friend Bertrand Russell—the last man he should have trusted. Vivienne's instability and emotional extravagance alarmed Russell but also drew him closer: "She is a person who lives on a knife-edge, and will end as a criminal or a

saint." The commentators differ in determining just when the new lovers had at it. But all are agreed that for the priapic moral philosopher and mathematical genius, who professed to love Eliot like a son, the seduction was a matter of course.

Upon his return to England, Eliot could not but see he was being or about to be betrayed. Yet he proceeded as though nothing untoward were up. In due course Russell moved on, as he always did, and Eliot was left with the shreds of his marriage, which rotted away in a hurry. His wife's behavior grew furious, and then desperate, and then increasingly bizarre. Virginia Woolf said that Vivienne was a sack of ferrets around Eliot's neck. Little by little Eliot began to hate her, even as he blamed himself for her ruinous ill health, which culminated in her descent into overt insanity.

Nervous Wreckage

HE WAS KEEPING A TERRIFIC PACE at work: teaching school for a spell, turning out numerous book reviews and essays, lecturing in the evenings whenever he got the chance, and taking a full-time position at Lloyds Bank in 1917. In 1921 he

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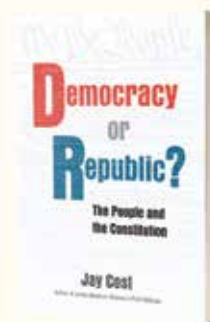
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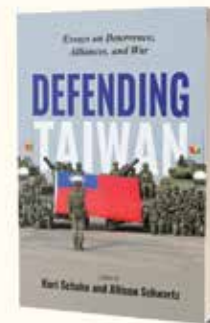
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became the founding editor of a new literary magazine, *The Criterion*, funding for which he had inveigled from Patricia Harmsworth, Lady Rothermere. She would prove a difficult patroness; at first the funding did not include a salary for Eliot, who was nervous that Lloyds would not take well to his moonlighting. The magazine would become a leading publication of European culture, lasting through several incarnations until the eve of the Second World War. But the superabundance of scattered duties meant there was almost no time left for writing poetry—which had been a crucial reason for marrying Vivienne, abandoning academic philosophy, and settling in England.

In October 1921 a specialist informed him that he was suffering a severe depletion of “nervous energy.” Such so-called neurasthenia was almost a badge of honor among literary types—an earnest of sensitivity and seriousness, much as a verdict of bipolar illness is today. Soon after the diagnosis, Eliot broke down. His collapse would presently be the making of him. Lloyds gave their valued employee a three-month leave of absence “under a medical regimen of rest, diet, and repair,” as one learns from Matthew Hollis’s *The Waste Land: A Biography of a Poem*. Hollis, himself a poet, presents a fuller picture than Rasula does of Eliot’s fortunate fall into temporary debility and then into eventual literary clover. Although the nerve doctor instructed his patient that he must go away on his own, Eliot could not bear the thought of being alone with himself. So Vivienne accompanied him to Margate, the seaside resort whose skies were “the loveliest in all Europe” according to J.M.W. Turner, whose paintings testify to their beauty. The sick poet was improving steadily, and Vivienne went back to London before long.

Solitary, undisturbed, Eliot turned to his long poem long delayed and let his psychic wounds bleed freely as he wrote. Still, *stanching* the wounds was more to the point, and he proceeded to Lausanne to seek treatment from the young neuropsychiatric wizard Dr. Roger Vittoz. Vittoz’s patients had included Joseph Conrad and William James; his book on the cure of *aboulia*, the most common and persistent affliction of the will, promised mental and emotional soundness to the sufferer eager to really live at long last. Eliot proved a model patient, and the cure took remarkably well. Yet even as he knew some relief from his misery he continued to write about it:

‘On Margate Sands.
I can connect

Nothing with nothing.
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
My people humble people who expect
Nothing.’

la la

To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning

Hollis justly thinks here of King Lear’s damning retort to his daughter Cordelia, and Saint Augustine’s self-immolation in the flames of lust. Although he does not get there, he points the way to the poem’s great theme, compacted in this passage: the relation of theoretical and practical nihilism to erotic anguish. The crucial question, which Eliot never quite answers, is whether sexual disorder causes lethal thought or the other way around. The most intimate matters connect with grave consequences for the hive mind. The nothingness at the core of modern eroticism, the sav-

Artists have tended to
agree that modern men
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and that we shouldn't
hope for anything better
anytime soon.

age loneliness of two selves who are phantoms to each other, seeps subtly into every aspect of mental life. “My nerves are bad tonight[,]” says one voice,

Yes, bad. Stay with me.
Speak to me. Why do you never speak.
Speak.
What are you thinking of? What
thinking? What?
I never know what you are thinking.
Think.’

I think we are in rats’ alley
Where the dead men lost their bones.

Vivienne recognized herself and her husband in this passage. She even begged Eliot to delete the line “The ivory men make company between us,” which cut too close to the bone—an odd choice, given what remained in. Even without the chessmen, this acid portrayal of a marriage in shambles must have seared them both.

The Hyacinth Girl

BUT THE ELIOTS ARE HARDLY UNIQUE IN their loveless failure to connect. Sexual barbarians and miscreants are legion in the poem: the working-class wife Lil, already old at 31, blaming her premature ugliness on the abortion pills she took to avoid having another brat; the apelike Sweeney, familiar from two earlier poems of Eliot’s (“Sweeney Erect” and “Sweeney Among the Nightingales”), wooing another common trull in lines that parody Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress,” converting cavalier 17th-century wit to crass 20th-century buffoonery; the homosexual Mr. Eugenides, “Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants,” delivering a casual lewd come-on for a weekend getaway; “the typist home at teatime” and “the young man carbuncular,” engaging in a hurried, indifferent, and soon-forgotten coupling; another young woman echoing a damned soul from Dante’s *Inferno* and recalling a liaison lying down in a canoe that made her lover weep with remorse. Here are modern life and modern love *in flagrante*, knickers down around the ankles, an obscenity good for a laugh but sufficiently unclean that one wishes it could be flushed right away.

There is also pathos, however, in love’s promise unrealized and the ensuing emotional vacuum:

‘You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
They called me the hyacinth girl.’
—Yet when we came back, late, from the
Hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I
could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the
silence.
Oed’ und leer das Meer.

This unbearable memory cannot be excised; the knowledge of one’s own nothingness at the critical moment burrows into the flesh like some venomous insect. Emily Hale was the love of Eliot’s life; he first met her in Cambridge, Massachusetts, when he was 17 and she 14. He first realized he loved her at a Boston Opera performance of *Tristan und Isolde* eight years later, “quite shaken to pieces” by the seismic delirium of Wagner’s music and her presence. The German phrase quoted above comes from Wagner’s libretto: it means “Waste and empty the sea.”

In *The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot’s Hidden Muse*, Lyndall Gordon mines Princeton’s archive of 1,131 letters from Eliot to Emily, opened to scholars only in 2020 according to



the stern terms of the poet's estate. Eliot had burned all but 18 of the thousand letters Emily sent to him. Gordon, a prolific biographer and a very good one, has written a book that will have an enduring effect on Eliot scholarship henceforth. She grasps shrewdly the higher purpose which cruelty served in the Eliots' marriage: Vivienne promoted the despair she provoked in her husband as the necessary impetus to his peculiar poetic genius, which ran naturally to probing psychic pain. "This was no ordinary marriage; it was a rare conjunction, bound up with Eliot's gift." Absent the reciprocal devastation in their household—barbed words flying like missiles, silences wielded like sabers—there would have been no grisly masterpiece.

Emily, on the other hand, presented the possibility of ordinary human happiness. It was the kind of happiness with no place—no need—for the sort of genius that is drawn to the blackened underside of life. Gustave Flaubert, for whom the composition of flawless prose was a sacrament but also the most exacting ordeal, once remarked of a bourgeois family picnicking contentedly on the grass on a fine summer day, "*Ils sont dans le vrai.*" "They have it right," these common creatures whom he routinely mauled with dazzling con-

tempt. Which meant Flaubert—unmarried, childless, obsessed with *le mot juste* and the stupidity of the herd—had it wrong. But he knew he could not do otherwise. *The Waste Land* overflows with the antipathy for run-of-the-mill humanity of which Flaubert was past master, and the question that Eliot's love for Emily poses is whether he could have done otherwise, or if he had made the only choice he could.

Eliot produced his definitive image of universal emotional destitution from self-knowledge: he knew what it is to be broken. Happy people don't write this kind of stuff. Describing the misery he felt and saw was the only consolation he could manage. What might an Eliot fortunate in love have amounted to? Would agreeable circumstances have turned him into a torpid dullard, the academic mediocrity he feared becoming? Or would they have loosed colossal energies of beneficence and joy? Goethe observed to his memorialist Johann Peter Eckermann that it should be the purpose of art "to make man contented with the world and his condition." *The Waste Land* issues an emphatic "No way, pal" to Goethe's dictum. And Eliot's example has had far more appeal in the subsequent century than Goethe's. Artists have tended to agree that

modern men deserve a kick in the face, and that we shouldn't hope for anything better anytime soon.

The Crooked Way Made Straight

YET ELIOT SO WEARIED OF HIS ARID EXISTENCE that he did hope—fervently, desperately—for something better. And he believed he had found it in his religious conversion to the Anglican faith. For if the spiritually parched Eliot differed from the usual run of literary mandarins disdainful of the multitude, it was in his certainty that he was not spiritually superior to the misbegotten plebs. (Several notorious examples of gross anti-Semitism in his poetry and prose do mark him as definitely among the imperfect faithful.) His embrace of Christianity naturally rendered him immediately suspect to the artists and intellectuals who had admired his unsparing loathing for the masses and their opiate compensations. Intelligence made atheism mandatory, and Eliot's submission to sacred authority was an unforgivable surrender to the enemies of mental freedom. Virginia Woolf, feline, snide, and ever so clever, labeled Eliot a ludicrous dupe of priestcraft, "dead to us all from this day forward.... A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God."

In *Eliot After The Waste Land*, the concluding volume of a two-volume life (the first, *Young Eliot: From St. Louis to The Waste Land*, reviewed by Joseph Epstein in the Summer 2015 *CRB*), the invaluable biographer Robert Crawford quotes from a letter of the poet's in which he exults quietly in his emergence into spiritual clarity. Perceived in the light of his newfound belief, mental pain that had seemed pointless became charged with significance: "If I had died even five years ago, everything that I had suffered up to then would, so far as I can see, have been just waste and muddle. Then a pattern suddenly emerges from it, without one's seeming to have done anything about it oneself. And I don't suppose it is ever the same pattern for any two people." With a convert's lucid hindsight, the incomprehensible crooked way of sin and folly is made straight: the avenue leading to salvation, laid down just for him.

Eliot's newfound belief, he was quite sure, helped him love Emily Hale more truly and deeply, with his very soul. When in 1923 she came to London, he saw her for the first time in nine years and realized he hadn't stopped loving her. Still unchurched at that time—he had been raised Unitarian, a denomination he despised as unserious—he considered divorcing

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Vivienne and marrying Emily, but held back. Once he was baptized, certifying his devotion to “sanctity, chastity, humility, austerity” at a private ceremony in 1927, the normal pursuit of worldly happiness became impossible. He told Emily that if he were free he would marry her in a minute, but his status as the most visible Anglican layman meant his divorce would be the greatest blow to the faith since John Henry Newman’s defection to Rome. Pure-minded adoration, Dante-Beatrice style, proved the sole acceptable alternative. The long poem “Ash Wednesday” (1930) shows the steep price exacted for balked erotic longing and the purgatorial trial to be endured when passion for an earthly woman must give way to love for the Queen of Heaven:

Terminate torment
Of love unsatisfied
The greater torment
Of love satisfied
...
Grace to the Mother
For the Garden
Where all love ends.

Throughout much of the 1930s, Eliot was separated from Vivienne. He and Emily saw each other with some regularity during her visits to England and his visits to the United States. After one particularly exciting day, when for the first time Eliot “learned ‘what a kiss is,’” he took to calling her “riperaspermymouth.” The peril to their immortal souls forbade any more rousing contact.

In 1938, Eliot and Vivienne’s brother Maurice enlisted two doctors to arrange Vivienne’s commitment to a psychiatric institution—a posh one, but an insane asylum nevertheless. From that day Eliot never saw nor spoke with his wife again. He never read any of the hundred-odd letters she sent him, which his secretary had a standing order to dispose of upon receipt. When Vivienne died in 1947, Emily expected a marriage proposal in the offing.

What she got instead was a gradual retreat on Eliot’s part. At first he looked ahead to their future together, after a year’s decorous wait. But then, he said, seeing Vivienne’s body laid in the ground turned him into an old man. His conscience ached, bringing on “an intense dislike of sex in any form.” Having to reckon with his ethereal beloved’s incarnate reality flummoxed him, and he craved the solitude necessary for his creative gift to flourish. In the end he threw Emily over. Ten years later, at the age of 68, he married Valerie Fletcher, his 30-year-old secretary, who he said made him happy for the first time ever. Quite likely she did.

All Shall Be Well

THE YEARS WHEN HE WAS IN LOVE with Emily, however, produced his best poetry. *Four Quartets*, his longest and most ambitious poem—and also the last one he would write—was written between 1936 and 1942. Each of the four constituent parts was first published separately: “Burnt Norton,” “East Coker,” “The Dry Salvages,” and “Little Gidding.” From the opening lines one feels the force of authoritative assertion by a man who has long considered the matter of time and drawn his conclusions with elegant concision, if not exactly with simplicity.

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.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.

The initial high-gear reasoning presently gives way to reverie, evoking the memory of something that may never actually have happened—hearing the sounds of children playing in a rose garden who perhaps were not there at all. Imagination, Eliot suggests, is as essential as ratiocination to human fulfillment. Without beauty life is incomplete, and beauty is a rare commodity in industrial civilization.

Where *The Waste Land* took a long wallow in the ways life goes horribly wrong, *Four Quartets* conducts a rescue operation and offers instruction in how best to live. For this, beauty is necessary—but not sufficient. In “The Dry Salvages,” Eliot teaches that the privileged instance of rapt aesthetic attentiveness approaching ecstasy—“you are the music / While the music lasts”—does not bestow lasting understanding. The daily routine of a well-ordered life of faith matters more than rapturous moments. “These are only hints and guesses, / Hints followed by guesses; and the rest / Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.”

The objective always remains saintliness, however impossible it may appear. And this religious discipline requires steeling oneself for the worst that life can inflict. In “Little Gidding,” Eliot imparts a Christian lesson by invoking the myth of Heracles and the poisoned shirt of Nessus that killed him. Hidden within this pagan story is a key to braving the daunting paradox of terrible pain as a gift of divine love:

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name

Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.

The great poem’s final lines assert the unity of earthly suffering and natural beauty: nothing less than the perfection of Creation. Although this assertion is neither demonstration nor rational proof, its eloquence gathers force from all that has gone before, drawing on Saint Julian of Norwich and the Book of Acts to form a kind of Christian mantra that can raise the hairs on the back of your neck:

And all shall be well and
All manner of thing 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.

Eliot’s singular voice in this poem is that of someone who feels his thoughts and thinks his feelings. His extended meditative lyric defies the modern “dissociation of sensibility” which, as a critic in his 1921 essay “The Metaphysical Poets” (*Selected Essays*), he had famously traced to the 17th century of Francis Bacon and René Descartes, John Milton and John Dryden. Here Eliot is more than a poet philosophizing; he is that rare being, a complete man, vital in all his parts and preternaturally alert. Like Jean Racine or John Donne, he is not content to look into his heart and write. He “must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts.”

Eliot was only too aware of what his poetry—or anyone’s poetry, however remarkable—couldn’t do. In particular, he argued, thinking poetry will save us when religion has failed is like believing the wallpaper will save us when the walls have fallen down. *Four Quartets* may never bring Eliot the renown that *The Waste Land* has. But in this final poem Eliot shows what even a modern poet, formerly a practicing nihilist, can achieve in the service of his faith when animated by confidence in the everlasting truth. As Vincent van Gogh wrote, “Try to understand the last word of what the great artists, the serious masters, say in their masterpieces: there will be God in it.” Eliot was more than the premiere modernist of English verse: after his long climb out of *The Waste Land*, he arrived at last to write the great religious poem of the 20th century.

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