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 Du-
ineser Elegien (Duino Elegies), and Paul Valéry’s
La jeune Parque (The Young Fate) are the found-
ing 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 in-
troduction to The Idea of Perfection: The Poetry
and Prose of Paul Valéry (2020). A century after
the publication of Eliot’s masterpiece in 1922,
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 under-
stand. There are allusions to the Gospel Ac-
cording to Saint Luke, Saint Augustine’s
Confessions, and a scholarly investigation into
whether the Holy Grail legend originated in
primitive vegetation rites. There are quota-
tions 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 edu-
cating 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 Vir-
ginia Woolf sighed that their cryptic enigmas
could not compare to the great-souled effu-
sions of Romantics such as John Keats and
Percy Shelley, Eliot replied that what he and
Woolf were trying to do was harder. The po-
ets of a century before could simply pour out
song from the fullness of their being, while
the modernists were undertaking to piece to-
gether 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 dig-
ging 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 tran-
sceded the modern spiritual disorder. Where
Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, and Karl Marx
had erected vast dogmatic systems of com-
prehensive explanation, Friedrich Nietzsche
seized thought on the fly and composed in im-
passioned speculative flashes. He could discern
the all-too-human individuals taking refuge
behind the pretensions of monumental ideas,
which he shredded one after another. Rely-
ing on paradox, aphorism, and mythmaking,
Nietzsche sketched the outlines of a heroic
modern soul no less extraordinary for being
incomplete and most likely impossible: Ca-
esar 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 unexamined 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 in all its complication. Yet while The Waste Land lades 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 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-floating 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 reprehensible 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 abscinding 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 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 escape 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 dispersion, 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 redocuments 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 rhetorical 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
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 Haigh-Wood, daughter of a Royal Academy friend during his year in Paris. He completed his 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 ever get the chance, and taking a full-time position at Lloyds Bank in 1917. In 1921 he

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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, staunching 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 abulia, 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 savage 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.

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 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 ape-like 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 exorcised; 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
This was no ordinary marriage; it was a rare
They have it right,” these common creatures
which ran naturally to probing psychic pain.
“...or if he had made the only choice
she provoked in her husband as the neces-

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 flaw-
less 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 uni-
versal emotional destitution from self-knowl-
dge: he knew what it is to be broken. Happy
people don’t write this kind of stuff. Describ-
ing 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 me-
diocrity 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 woreied of his arid ex-
istence that he did hope—fervently, des-
perately—for something better. And he
believed he had found it in his religious conver-
sion 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 spiritu-
ally 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 imme-
diately suspect to the artists and intellectuals
who had admired his unsparking 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 men-
tal freedom. Virginia Woolf, feline, snide, and
ever so clever, labeled Eliot a ludicrous dupe of
priestcraft, “dead to us all from this day for-
ward.... A corpse would seem to me more credi-
able than he is. I mean, there’s something ob-
scene in a living person sitting by the fire and
believing in God.”

In *Eliot After The Waste Land*, the con-
cluding 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 incompre-
ensible 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
deply, 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 lov-
ing her. Still unchurched at that time—he had
been raised Unitarian, a denomination he de-
spised as unserious—he considered divorcing
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:

All Shall Be Well

**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:

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