

Eliot and I

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FOR MY fourteenth birthday I was given a copy of the *Poems of Shelley* in the lovely little World's Classics edition. This was in Egypt, where I grew up and where the only form of public culture was the Saturday evening open-air film at the Sporting Club, usually a Western or an American musical of the forties. I carried the little book around with me, reading into it at random, and feeling as I did so both exalted and virtuous. This was Poetry, I said to myself, sonorous, beautiful, profound.

Two years later, and this time at school in England, working for my A-levels, I came across Michael Roberts's *Faber Book of Modern Verse*, first published in 1936, which began with Hopkins and ended with David Gascoyne and Dylan Thomas. In between was a poem I had heard was a landmark of modern literature, *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot. I turned to it eagerly, and as I began to read my heartbeat went up a notch and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. It was what the French, describing love at first sight, call a *coup de foudre*—a lightning strike. My passion for Shelley, I now realized, though not exactly fake, was, like those early crushes we take for love, more a response to what I imagined poetry *should* be than the thing itself. The thing itself I could not explain, nor had I any wish to: it had just manifested itself as I read *The Waste Land*. I knew my life would never be the same again.

I had no idea what the poem was about and I also knew that *it didn't matter*. And the same was true of the other poems by Eliot in the Roberts anthology, "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," "The Journey of the Magi," *Ash Wednesday*. Every time I reread them—and I reread them frequently in those months as I was working for my A-levels—I felt the same excitement, and I went on feeling that I had no idea what they were about or why they generated those feelings, and that I was perfectly happy for it to remain like that. What I knew

with absolute certainty was that something of immense importance had happened to me. My life, it could almost be said, could be divided into BE and AE: before Eliot and after Eliot.



I have thought a lot about this experience since, as I've reread the poems, worked through them with generations of students, and even written a little about them. And I think that what struck me most of all, or penetrated me most deeply, that first day, was something that was summarized by four short lines at the center of the poem:

On Margate Sands.
I can connect
Nothing with nothing.
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.

This is not just an admission of failure; it is a scene of desolation. The speaker/poet can hardly speak. Three words to note the place: the beach at Margate. Then three more: "I can connect," which peter out as it grows evident to the speaker that this is precisely what he cannot do, and so he makes a kind of ironic attempt to save the situation by taking away what he had been reaching for: "I can connect / Nothing with nothing." And then, without any overt link to what has gone before but deftly nailing the state of the speaker, a physical expression of hopelessness, abjection: "The broken fingernails of dirty hands"—which suggests, if we stop to think about it, a letting go of the self in hopelessness, not doing the minimum to retain his self-respect, such as cutting his fingernails, but instead letting them break as he scrabbles about in sand and dirt, no longer a poet or even a visitor but a tramp, a hobo.

Like many adolescents I was trying to write myself. Not poetry but prose. (For some reason I've never been drawn to writing poetry.) And like most adolescents I was acutely conscious of the gulf between what I felt I had in me to write and the stuff I found myself producing. This is utterly depressing because it seems to be an indictment of one's very being: if I feel the need to express and no one is stopping

me, why can I not do it? And suddenly, in this wonderful poem, this poem which felt, as I read it, so complete, so fully realized, were these lines, not just *talking* about failure but *dramatizing* it in all its banality and horror.

Other passages in the poem, such as “These fragments have I shored against my ruins,” took up the theme, but so did the way the poem would run with something for a while and then abruptly drop it, as if there was no way forward there, and cut to something else: “I can connect / Nothing with nothing.” Yet at the same time the poem called up images or memories of beauty and wonder, groped toward a wholeness, a fullness, that was never quite graspable, that vanished as soon as one tried to hold it:

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.

All this said to me that the confused feelings of a kind of wonder and plenitude which occasionally came over me and were what drove me to write, as well as my repeated failure to reach it, were not a unique failing of my own but had been experienced by someone else, someone far removed from me and my life, yet who had then been able to convey it to me in words. And if he could, why couldn't I?

I had a gap year between school and university, when we moved to London. I had never lived in a big city before. I walked the streets full of excitement and explored its free art galleries and, when I could afford it, went to a play or a concert. I walked from Putney to Hammersmith and saw a production of the rarely performed *Edward II* by Marlowe. I got tickets for us for a reading of the *Four Quartets* by, I recall, Jill Balcon and Marius Goring in the Festival Hall, with the Amadeus Quartet playing Bartók's Fourth Quartet in the middle. I was also now within walking distance of two magnificent public libraries, in Putney and Wandsworth, and I began to read my way through the great European classics. I read Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot,

Stendhal and Flaubert, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. All these writers, I found, could be wise, moving, grandiose, grotesque, and even funny. But they were like mountains, massive, serene, self-contained. They had, I felt, nothing to do with someone like me, born in France during the war, growing up in Egypt, educated at an English school, now an immigrant in England, someone without roots, troubled and confused about my future, but full of eagerness to learn, to understand. And then I read Proust. As with Eliot the year before, as soon as I started I was overwhelmed and knew at once that this was the book for me. And what I found in Proust was exactly what I had found in Eliot: a work of great art that not only acknowledged failure but put failure at the very heart of the book.

The Margate Sands moment comes early on in *À la Recherche*. The young Marcel is walking along the bank of the river on a beautiful spring morning. His heart fills with joy. It overwhelms him. And then, when he tries to articulate what it is he is feeling—nothing. He bangs his umbrella down on the path and can only exclaim: “Zut, zut, zut, zut” (“Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn!”). But again that passage is only the most brutal expression of the central theme of the book, which is Marcel’s desire to make sense of those moments of happiness that periodically overwhelm him and that he feels to be the gateway to a fuller, more meaningful existence—and his repeated failure to do so. But the central lesson of the book is that we must recognize that this failure is not due to personal failings but is a fact of human life, and that we must not simply shrug our shoulders and move on but explore the mechanisms of desire and loss, hope and failure with tenacity and flexibility. The many figures who populate Proust’s enormous novel are unwilling or unable to learn this lesson. Even a sensitive and thoughtful person like Swann, when his great passion for Odette has crumbled to dust, dismisses the whole experience with the remark: “And to think that I wasted years of my life, that I wanted to die, that I experienced my greatest love for a woman who never pleased me and who wasn’t even my type!” Marcel, on the other hand, seeks always to understand what it is that he feels and why he feels it: when his mother will not bend to his blackmail and come upstairs to kiss him

goodnight; when Albertine can no longer bear to be a prisoner in his house and abruptly leaves him; when he tries to write and finds he is producing only banalities. And that questioning, that exploration, painful and slow as it is, is crucial to his growth as both writer and man. It is what makes his book and what that book is made of.

In the same way *The Waste Land* is full of figures who seek to hide the unpalatable from themselves, who “read, much of the night, and go south in winter” instead of confronting their ghosts; who bury the dead in the garden and then have nightmares about them sprouting; who start in terror at the wind under the door; who repeat, after a hurried sexual encounter, “well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over,” and put a record on the gramophone. But not the writer/speaker. He is willing to confront the cruel month of April, when memory and desire, that which makes us human, stir in the blood, but also remind us of what we have not achieved, of the poverty of our lives; willing to try to catch those moments of wonder and intensity—such as the moment in the hyacinth garden—and willing to let them go: “*oed’ und leer das Meer*” (empty and waste the sea). And if all we have are fragments with no way we can see of joining these up, then at the end he is willing to accept this, to recognize that while they cannot save or redeem us they can at least be shored up against our ruins. And the going through with it, the exploration, like Marcel’s, leads in the end to a sense, in the writer and in the reader who has followed him, of what Herbert, one of Eliot’s favorite poets, described, in a beautiful phrase, as “something understood.”

What is understood cannot be said, and both Eliot and Proust show us why. The “saying” is the whole work and our journey through the whole work—whether it be *The Waste Land*, the *Four Quartets*, or *À la Recherche*. And that is why it is ironic that year after year literature students, in schools and universities, are asked, or imagine they are being asked, to explicate these poems, to say what they *mean*. I was lucky. The English literature syllabus at Oxford, when I was a student there, stopped at the end of the nineteenth century. So Eliot remained *my* poet, the poet I had discovered for myself at sixteen.



Eliot was *my* poet, just as Proust was *my* novelist. No one was going to take that early experience of the *coup de foudre* away from me. And the proof that those encounters had been the genuine thing was that in my writing ever since, I have invariably discovered that, as I groped toward this or that narrative solution to specific problems, Eliot and Proust had been there before me, giving me, when I realized this, the reassurance that I was on the right path, that it was all doable.

When I was writing my first novel, *The Inventory*, for example, I discovered that I could get at what I wanted to do by writing short scenes consisting entirely of dialogue and abruptly juxtaposing them. I did not need, I realized, to spend time and effort on transitions that did not interest me but that I had at first forced myself to do because that was what I found in the novels I had read. A short scene, cut, another short scene, cut again, and slowly build up a mosaic that would be much more than the sum of its parts—that suited me much better. And that of course is how Eliot organizes *his* early poetry. Yet after several novels written in this way, I began to long for something different, something that would unfold slowly and gradually, like an unfurling spiral, returning on itself but at a different point in the trajectory—what Yeats called a widening gyre. The aim here would be not to go from A to B but rather to explore a *field*. When the field had been fully covered I would know I had reached the end.

Yet again Eliot had been there before me. Think of the way *Ash Wednesday* takes off:

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

It begins confidently, as did *Prufrock* (“Let us go then you and I”), then pauses, as though wondering how to proceed; but instead of petering away into silence like those lines about Margate Sands, it regroups, gathers itself for a new advance, repeats the opening phrase,

“Because I do not hope,” repeats it again, but this time going a little further: “Because I do not hope to turn,” and eventually finds the direction it wants: “Desiring this man’s gift and that man’s scope . . .”

And think of the way the Christian liturgy helps Eliot to dispense with punctuation, to allow phrases to float, waiting to be joined by others, which pick up their rhythm, their words, adding gradually to the effect:

Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still

At every step in the poem we grope our way forward, trusting in the rhythm to move us on, returning to our base for reassurance before stepping forth into the void once more.

In an essay about a story of mine, I called this motion, which allows us to sidle into a poem, “When I Begin I Have Already Begun,” and I was thinking not only of *Ash Wednesday* but also of the *Quartets* and of Proust’s *À la Recherche*. In all these works it is not clear where the beginning is. As Marcel wakes up at the start of Proust’s novel, he is unsure where he is, and as he tries to orient himself, imagining himself first in one of the rooms in which he has slept in the course of his life and then in another, Proust takes us into nearly all the places that are going to be important in the story that will unfold, so that, when we come across them later, sometimes thousands of pages later, we feel in a strange way that we have already been there. And see how Eliot opens the first of the *Quartets*, *Burnt Norton*. First the epigraph, in Greek, a language few of us can now read. Hugh Kenner has taught us not to rush to the critics for help or even be in a hurry to translate. Of course what the quote says will be meaningful, but more important is the feeling, as we first open the poem, that there is something there at the start, between us and what we can easily understand, though we have no idea what that is. Just as we have little idea of what is happening when the poem gets going and we are caught up in the hypnotic rhythms and repetitions of the first lines:

And so this modern-day pied piper leads us on. To a garden conjured up by the reader's imagination and now established as a garden of memory/imagination, a garden where an epiphany occurs and then vanishes, leaving us only with the bird and its admonition: "Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind cannot bear very much reality." And with that the opening generalizations, those gropings toward the deepest metaphysical questions, return, but, as in *Ash Wednesday*, transformed, the "perhaps" of the second line now a triumphant affirmation:

Time past and time future
 What might have been and what has been
 Point to one end, which is always present.

My little essay, the one I said I wrote about a story called "Second Person Looking Out," did not in fact have its genesis in Eliot but in another great modern artist, the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen. Many of his finest works are also in fact slowly spiraling explorations of a field, and I have been much moved by them. But it was reading some comments Stockhausen made in an interview that sparked my story. He was talking about a recent trip he'd made to Japan, and he pointed out that the Japanese sense of time is quite different from the Western. It is both much slower and much faster. Take sumo wrestling, he says. For minutes on end nothing happens as these two enormous men seem just to be standing there sizing each other up, and then, in a flash, one of them has been hurled out of the ring and the bout is over. And think of the Japanese sense of space, says Stockhausen, think of a Japanese temple. The approach to a temple is usually tortuous and roundabout, you catch sight of it and then it vanishes, you suddenly see it much closer and it vanishes again, and all at once you find yourself inside it. And think of the windows to traditional Japanese houses: they slide so that at one moment you are facing a wall and at the next open space. Again, inner and outer, where the one starts and the other ends, are blurred. I was excited by this and felt the urge to write a story about it, a story that would itself enact this blurring. In homage to Stockhausen I described the guide who leads the protagonist toward or away from the house/temple as

a “stocky little man.” But later I came to realize that it had been Eliot as much as Stockhausen who had been my guide.



And now I come to the hardest aspect of all to describe of the effect of Eliot’s poetry on the reader—on this reader at least. One way of putting it would be this: other writers fill you with themselves and their imaginings, but Eliot brings you closer to yourself, allows you to discover things you had always dimly known but never had the imagination and the skill to bring out into the open. Again Eliot is not alone in this but one of a number of writers—Proust again, Kafka, Wallace Stevens, Virginia Woolf. Woolf herself touched on this when she wrote that while you are reading Proust you feel yourself to be more alive, more intelligent, more sensitive, than you normally are.

I have of course already touched on this when I have spoken about my feeling that while some writers were like mountains, to be admired, walked around, but always distant, others encourage a more intimate and complex response. With Eliot and Proust (among others), you discover that like you they are frail, confused, unable to say what they want, unable at times even to know what it is they want, yet filled with the hunger to speak, to make, to bring something marvelous into words, something that will, in a strange way, make everything worthwhile. I think that this very frailty, confusion, and sense of failure is also what makes their work a portal into ourselves, our fears and desires.

But I want to end by suggesting that in Eliot’s case this is also linked to a sense of his reticence, in both his life and his work. In a famous exchange with a journalist who asked him what he thought of Hugh Kenner’s *T. S. Eliot: The Invisible Poet*, he responded: “I like the title.” This is quintessential Eliot: he does not say what he thinks of the book, or even if he has read it, but he remains polite and he makes a witty point, all in four words. (It reminds me of Beckett’s two-word answer to a questioner who asked him if he was English: “Au contraire.”) We know that privately Eliot called himself and his friends called him Possum, after the animal that, when it thinks

itself attacked, plays dead, and he identified with the name enough to entitle the volume of children's verse he wrote *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. In his letters to close friends he frequently slips into different roles and voices, and we know that before he hit on the eventual title he had thought of calling what we know as *The Waste Land*, "He Do the Police in Different Voices," a quote from Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*. This suggests that from the start he saw it as the play and collision of different voices emerging from different worlds, not dissimilar, perhaps, to the collages Picasso, Braque, and Juan Gris were making at about this time.

Everyone remembers his remark, which forms the bedrock of his most famous essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, published three years before *The Waste Land*: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion. But only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to escape from these things." But what exactly is he saying?

Rather than mining the quote for meaning I want to try and show you what it might mean in practice. Eliot's first book of poetry, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, was published in 1917, right in the middle of the First World War. It carries a dedication: "For Jean Verdenal, 1889-1915 / mort aux Dardanelles." Now a dedication is a strange thing: it is both public—there in print—and private, so private that it can only be fully understood by the dedicator and the dedicatee. And in the case, such as this, where the dedication is to someone who is dead, only by the former. In keeping with this, Eliot chooses to write it in a foreign language, French, though the two words in that language are likely to be understood by most readers. Jean Verdenal, then, the dedication tells us, was a friend of the poet's who died (at the age of twenty-six) in the terrible Dardanelles campaign of 1915, one of the bloodiest and most futile of the entire war.

But that is not the end of it. As is sometimes the case, the dedication is followed by a quotation, this time in a slightly less familiar language, Italian, and clearly in verse. A little more private and personal then. If we are able to decipher it, we will discover that what it says is: "Now you can understand the greatness of the love that burns

in me towards you, when I forget our emptiness and treat shades as solid things.” If we know anything about Eliot, we will suspect that it comes from his favorite poet, Dante, and a quick search will tell us that it comes at a crucial moment in the *Commedia*, indeed, one of the greatest moments in that poem. It is the encounter of Virgil and Dante with the poet Statius in canto 21 of the *Purgatorio*, that is, toward the top of the great mountain of Purgatory, the climbing of which is the subject of the second section of the poem. Dante and Virgil, his guide here as in the descent into the Hell, come upon Statius, the first-century Latin poet whom Dante, for his own purposes, makes a closet Christian, and who for that reason is on his own way up the mountain while Virgil, who died before Christ’s birth, is confined forever to limbo at the entrance to Hell, bound, as he puts it, to eternal exile. Recognizing his poetic master, Statius stoops to clasp Virgil’s knees, but Virgil restrains him: “Brother, refrain, for you are a shade and a shade is what you see.” The other, standing up, speaks the lines Eliot quotes: “Now you can understand the greatness of the love that burns in me towards you, when I forget our emptiness and treat shades as solid things.”

Or puoi la quantitate
Comprender dell’amor ch’a te mi scalda
Quando dismento nostra vanitate
Trattando l’ombre come cosa salda.

I said that it was one of the great moments in the *Commedia* and I will try briefly to explain why. The poem is called a comedy but it encompasses many tragedies. Readers will remember the adulterous lovers Paolo and Francesca, consigned to Hell forever and there destined to repeat their doomed passion again and again; but the greatest tragedy involves Dante and his master and guide, Virgil. For at the end of Purgatory, at the top of the mountain, there will be the inevitable parting as Virgil returns to his assigned place in Hell and Dante is wafted up to Paradise by Beatrice. This is not only about the division between the pagan and the Christian: it is, rather, about the fact that in this life we have to accept that we will one day have to part from

those we love best, our parents, our spouses, our friends. And it is a measure of Dante's genius that he does not make a big thing of the parting of Dante and Virgil, whom he has described at various times as his teacher and master, and who has been, in the course of the poem, a substitute father *and* mother, admonishing him, yet at one point carrying him in his arms. The relationship between them has been explored at more length than any other in the poem, for the whole of sixty-three cantos. Yet at the top of Mount Purgatory Dante turns back from the shock of finding Beatrice awaiting him to find Virgil gone, and that, simply, is that. Instead he deflects the great parting onto the figures of Virgil and Statius in this scene before us. And Eliot appropriates this and by his own deft collage allows it to apply to his own tragic sundering from his friend.

How much then is said by Eliot here when he has, in reality, *said* nothing at all, only accomplished a series of actions: he has placed next to one another a name, a date, a statement of fact in two words of French, and a fragment of an ancient poem. And yet how much has been said.

Note too that the whole dedication is concerned with failure: first of all the failure of Jean Verdenal to survive; and then the failure of Statius to embrace Virgil and so of Eliot to embrace his dead friend. But failure is the wrong word. Death will come to all of us sooner or later, and however powerfully we may conjure up the dead in our imaginations, we will not bring them back to life. So this is, in one sense, a lesson in realism. But it is more than that. The recognition of the sad reality brings with it a recognition of the warmth of Statius's love for Virgil, and so of Eliot's for his dead friend, which keeps them alive in their imagination. That too, after all, is the reality.

But there is more. The words of another, which Eliot uses to express his feelings, are not a confessional outpouring, but carefully crafted verses: we can see this in the strong abab rhymes (quantitate. . .vanitate, scalda. . .salda) and we can feel it in the steady rhythm, for each of Dante's lines in his enormous poem consists of eleven syllables, making thirty-three syllables for each tercet, echoing the thirty-three cantos for each canticle, the repeated threes a tribute

to the Trinity. And the effect of all this is to make us understand, subliminally, that all language is in a sense artificial, something learned, something that allows us to communicate, but which, by that very token, cannot express what it is we each *uniquely* feel. The lines thus enact a further reality: that the deepest feelings—about death and loss, about love—cannot be directly expressed. By that very token, the recognition and enactment of these impossibilities allow us to feel the loss and the love as we never could have without Dante's poem, without Eliot's collage. How much more and how much more moving is this than those fulsome dedications that so often greet you as you open contemporary works: "To my adored wife"; "To the memory of my beloved father"; "to my amazing children X, Y, and Z, who never fail to fill me with wonder," and so on.

This, then, is the mode of Eliot's impersonality. It not only says more than could be said by more personal or, as it later came to be called, "confessional" means, it says it better. And, by recognizing that what is central to us as human beings can never be said but can be gestured toward in such a way as to make us feel its presence, it hands us the key to ourselves. A writer, Proust said, cannot lead you to the promised land but he or she can lead you to the door and hold it open. The rest is up to you. We should be grateful to those, like Proust and Eliot, who are always there, in their work, to lead us to the door and to hold it open.