A craving for reality: T.S. Eliot today

by Roger Kimball

On Eliot’s reputation & influence

It is not to ring the bell backward
Nor is it an incantation
To summon the spectre of a Rose
We cannot revive old policies
Or follow an antique drum
—T. S. Eliot, Little Gidding (1942)

For the immediate future, and perhaps for a long way ahead, the continuity of our culture may have to be maintained by a very small number of people.
—T. S. Eliot, in The Criterion (1939)

It is now our unsparing obligation to disclaim the reactionary Eliot.

Misbah Eliot—he dead. This is the message that the natives are sending back about T. S. Eliot. From our vantage point at the end of the millennium (maybe it should be called our “disadvantage” point), the extraordinary literary and critical authority that Eliot once commanded is almost incomprehensible. This is not simply because Eliot no longer occupies the exalted place he once did. It is also because that exalted place is itself largely unavailable. The culture that Eliot’s authority both presupposed and helped to sustain—the culture of high modernism—seems to be everywhere out of stock, back-ordered: no longer carried because no longer called for. Today, Eliot subsists mostly as a toppled icon: the source of a handful of indelible phrases, a venerable addition to academic bibliographies, reliable sustenance for the literary jackals who practice the indelicate art of diminution-through-biography. Just so the culture that Eliot sought to salvage through his poetry and critical writings. One gets the impression that, especially for younger observers, the entire world that Eliot’s sometime authority animated is irrecoverably strange and distant. For many, Eliot’s vaunted power is little more than an occult blend of mystification and tyranny—a bit like the iron charisma exercised by Conrad’s character Kurtz, whom Eliot famously memorialized in the epigraph to “The Hollow Men” (1925). It is difficult to say what is more remarkable: the
potency of Eliot’s influence at its peak or the suddenness of its eclipse. It was not that long ago, after all, that Eliot was an inescapable presence. William Empson spoke for many when he confessed, in 1958, that “I do not know for certain how much of my own mind [Eliot] invented, let alone how much of it is a reaction against him or indeed a consequence of misreading him. He is a very penetrating influence, perhaps not unlike the east wind.” It is worth noting, too, that Eliot’s influence was many-sided as well as penetrating. It did not rest only on his achievement as a poet—though it was the poetry, I believe, that provided the ultimate imprimatur, the final sanction, for his authority. Edmund Wilson, a keen but far from uncritical admirer of Eliot’s work, noted that “his verses have an emotional vibration, a curious life of their own, that seems almost to detach them from the author.” The syllables of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915), “Gerontion” (1920), *The Waste Land* (1922), “The Hollow Men,” parts of *The Four Quartets* (1935–1942), and other poems were for many people irreplaceable mental furnishings. The realities they evoke was—is?—our reality. Consider the following medley from several poems:

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

“After such knowledge, what forgiveness?

Think now
History has many cunning passages,

contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering

ambitions,
Guides us by vanities. Think now
She gives when our attention is distracted
And what she gives, gives with such

supple confusions
That the giving famishes the craving.”
“April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.”

“Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn”

“These fragments I have shored against
my ruins.”

“This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.”

“At the still point of the turning world.”

These and other passages from Eliot’s slender body of published verse (think of Sweeney, Madame Sosostris, “the young man carbuncular”) reverberated pregnantly throughout the literary imagination of the twentieth century. They were not merely “memorable speech” (Auden’s shorthand definition of poetry): they were existential signposts, landmarks in modernity’s spiritual battle for a survivable culture.

A roster of equally memorable phrases, or nearly so, could be made from Eliot’s critical prose: “Objective correlative”; “dissociation of sensibility”; the monuments of literature forming “an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work,” the progress of the artist as “a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.” These and other famous phrases helped to inaugurate the New Criticism, an approach to literature and culture that once seemed—and perhaps still is—the most supple, serious, and responsive of any formulated in the twentieth century.

Indeed, if Eliot’s poetic stature loomed large, his stature as a critic—as a critic of literature, first of all, but also, more parochially, as a social, moral, and religious critic—loomed even larger. The effect of his essays on literary, religious, and educational subjects is little short of mesmerizing. Then, too, there was his work as an editor. From 1925, his position at Faber and Faber allowed him to help shape contemporary taste by publishing such figures as W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day-Lewis, Ezra Pound, Edwin Muir, Robert Lowell, Marianne Moore, Ted Hughes, and
Sylvia Plath. And as editor of *The Criterion*, the magazine he founded in 1922 and edited until its demise in 1939, Eliot helped to change the critical temper of his age. “No modern critic,” R. P. Blackmur wrote, “has had anything like the effect of Eliot on . . . literary people.” He was, Hugh Kenner affirmed, “the most gifted and most influential critic in English in the twentieth century—very likely the best since Coleridge.” Clement Greenberg—like Wilson, a distinctly qualified admirer of Eliot’s work—went even further in his praise of Eliot’s critical power. After mentioning “Aristotle, Johnson, Coleridge, Lessing, Goethe,” and other figures from the critical pantheon, Greenberg concluded that “T. S. Eliot may be the best of all literary critics.”

The mid-1970s, when I was in college, was probably the last moment when Eliot’s greatness could be taken for granted, could be felt as an ineluctable challenge. Everyone even remotely interested in literature knew his poems and essays. They were also likely to know the essentials of his biography: that he was born in St. Louis, the last of seven children, in 1888; that he studied at Harvard with people like George Santayana and Irving Babbit; that he nearly took a doctorate in philosophy with a thesis on the British idealist F. H. Bradley; but that he decided instead to transplant himself to England where for many years (until 1925) he worked at Lloyd’s Bank. In the mid-1970s, Eliot’s stature was still acknowledged, but grudgingly: it had degenerated to a matter of “Yes, but . . .” “Yes, he was an important poet, but what about his reactionary politics?” “Yes, he was a powerful critic, but what about his reactionary, hierarchical view of culture?” “Yes, he was an important cultural spokesman, but what about his reactionary allegiance to orthodox Christianity?” By 1975, the age was well advanced against T. S. Eliot and everything he stood for. Eliot had once declared himself “classical in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion.” Could his worst enemy have drawn up a more damning indictment? (Well, several enemies subsequently made vigorous attempts.) Since the mid-1960s, what the age demanded was formless subjectivity in literature, egalitarianism in politics, and low-church or no-church romanticism in religion.

Eliot won the Nobel Prize in 1948 and by the time he died, at the beginning of 1965, his reputation seemed unassailable. In fact, the seeds of its defeat were already sprouting. It is true that death is a reliable (though often temporary) depressant of reputations, especially of reputations that have enjoyed a long triumph. Among much else, death is an invitation for revisions, reconsiderations, reevaluations. The inevitable direction of those operations, it seems, is downward. Celebrations and fond recollections and Festschriften may abound: the dominant note is nevertheless usually deflationary.

Still, the fate of Eliot’s reputation cannot be explained by appealing to this process of posthumous readjustment. Other elements were and are at work. Perhaps the most important element has been the evaporation of seriousness about literature and culture. The loss of seriousness, with all its corollary diminutions, marks the divide between the strenuous modernism of figures like Eliot and Joyce and the flaccid postmodernism that has flourished in its wake. It has often been said that Eliot provided a kind of literary conscience for his age. More to the point, his example
discouraged people from neglecting their own literary consciences. If Eliot was a “literary dictator,” as was sometimes maintained, this had more to do with what, inspired by Eliot’s practice, educated people habitually required of themselves in the way of taste, judgments, and standards than with anything Eliot might have wished to require of them. It is possible—just—to imagine a lugubriously comic figure like Harold Bloom pontificating about the “anxiety of influence” and deprecating Eliot’s achievement when Eliot’s influence was still intact. But in Eliot’s heyday no one would have regarded Bloom’s blimpish Freudian melodramas with anything other than neglect or condign ridicule.

Eliot’s poetry always attracted numerous critics. At the beginning, with poems like “Prufrock,” “Preludes,” “Portrait of a Lady,” and “Morning at the Window” (“I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids/ Sprouting despondently at area gates”), Eliot introduced a new emotional register to English poetry. Modelled closely on the poetry of the ill-fated French Symbolist Jules Laforgue (1860–1887), which Eliot discovered in 1908 through Arthur Symons’s book The Symbolist Movement in Literature (1899), it was urban, urbane, ironic, full of sophisticated wearinesses (“alert, troubled, swaying, deliberately uncertain,” as Symons said of Laforgue). Predictably, Eliot’s suave, emotionally attenuated manner—he spoke of his aboulie—outraged conventional Georgian taste, which distrusted irony almost as much as it disliked urbanism.

But the critical reaction to Eliot’s early poems was nothing compared to the paroxysms of rage that greeted The Waste Land with its polyglot dyspepsia and trembling mosaic-like structure (or anti-structure, according to those who disliked it). The Waste Land was hated by all the right people. It catapulted Eliot to canonical notoriety. He was, one critic notes, “hailed as the sceptic of the hour, the spokesman for a ‘lost’ generation, venting the bitterness of its disillusion with the elders who had led them into a needless war.”
Ironically, by the time the poem was published, in October of 1922 (first in the inaugural issue of *The Criterion*, then in New York in *The Dial*), Eliot had distanced himself considerably from the poem’s powerful vision of cultural and spiritual despair. “My present ideas,” he noted in November 1922, “are very different.” Indeed, there is a sense in which his ideas had always been very different. As is well known, we owe *The Waste Land*—which Eliot had originally intended to call “He do the Police in Different Voices” (a line from Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*)—partly to the massive editorial interventions of Ezra Pound (to whom Eliot dedicated the poem with a tag from Dante: *il miglior fabbro*: “the better craftsman”). Pound cut the poem from about a thousand lines to its present 433. He supplied several important emendations of diction—e.g., he made Mr. Eugenides speak “demotic” rather than “abominable” French, and where Eliot had Lil’s husband “coming out of the Transport Corps,” Pound saw that he was “demobbed,” a great improvement. More significantly, Pound’s excisions subtly downplayed the element of religious yearning in the poem. The result, he wrote to Eliot’s New York patron John Quinn in 1922, was a “damn good poem. . . . About enough, Eliot’s poem, to make the rest of us shut up shop.”

Pound’s editorial contributions to Eliot’s poetry ended with “The Hollow Men.” The religious dimension of Eliot’s verse, and life, became more and more prominent, which is to say distinctly un-Poundian. By 1928, the year after Eliot converted to high-Church Anglicanism (and also became a British subject), an anonymous reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* was complaining that Eliot had rejected “modernism for medievalism.” This complaint was reinforced with the publication of religious poems like *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and the *Four Quartets*. In a letter to Paul Elmer More in 1929, Eliot responded that it was “rather trying to be supposed to have settled oneself in an easy chair, when one has just begun a long journey afoot.” Still, there is a sense in which he would have agreed with the *TLS* reviewer. Modernist though his later poetry is in structure, in attitude it marks a radical flight from certain modernist presuppositions. Indeed, in 1928 Eliot wrote in *The Criterion* that “modernism” (which in the context he took to be synonymous with “humanism”) “is a mental blight.” The *Four Quartets* are full of remarkable poetry. But Donald Davie was undoubtedly right when he observed, in 1956, that the response to *Four Quartets* was “flagrantly ideological”: “the religiously inclined applaud the Quartets, the more or less militantly secular and ‘humanist’ decry them. As simple as that.”

In one sense, Eliot’s poetry always presented an easy target for critics; his phrasing and poetic voice were consistently so distinctive, even mannered, that parody—unintentional as well as intentional—was irresistible. Edmund Wilson, in an essay from 1958 called “‘Miss Buttle’ and ‘Mr. Eliot,’” quotes generously from *The Sweeniad* by Myra Buttle (“My Rebuttal”), a pseudonym for the English don Victor Purcell.

Between the mystification
And the deception
Between the multiplication
And the division
Falls the Tower of London

Many Nouns in is we find
To the Masculine assigned
Amnis, axis, caulis, collis,
Clunis, crinis, fascis, follis . . . .
Take away the number you first thought of . . .
Stop breeding . . .
Stop breathing . . .

Pop!

All very amusing, that (though not as amusing as Mr. Purcell’s “serious” verse, snatches of which Wilson quotes). Such parodies are in the end a kind of unintended homage, betraying the strength and ubiquity of the original. What makes “Miss Buttle’s” effort funny is that we instantly recognize the strains of “The Hollow Men” behind it.

The philistine attack on Eliot was one thing. Far more damaging is the absorption of philistinism by the literary elite. That, too, is a feature of our postmodern condition. When Harold Bloom tells us that John Ashbery is a “stronger” poet than Eliot, our first reaction is to feel sorry for the generations of Yale students Bloom has inflicted himself on. But when a gifted and sensitive writer like Cynthia Ozick attacks Eliot as the epitome of a reactionary high culture whose time has passed, the result is far more shocking. In “T. S. Eliot at 101,” a long and bitter article published in The New Yorker in 1989, Miss Ozick combined ad hominem venom and fashionable cultural populism to assault both Eliot and the demanding vision of high art that he articulated. Eliot himself she castigated as an “autocratic,” “inhibited,” “narrow-minded,” and “considerably bigoted fake Englishman,” while at the same time rejecting the culture of high modernism he represented as otiose. “High art,” Miss Ozick concluded, “is dead.”

One of the things that made Cynthia Ozick’s performance so dispiriting was the fact that she had previously arrayed herself, if not on the side of Eliot, exactly, then at least on the side of the kind of seriousness about art and culture that Eliot stood for. She presented her essay as an exercise in “nostalgia.” In fact, it was a form of valedictory defection. Lyndall Gordon’s new biography of Eliot leaves one with a similar feeling.

I say “new biography,” but in fact T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life is a compilation and expansion of Gordon’s two early volumes about Eliot, Eliot’s Early Years (1977) and Eliot’s New Life (1988). In her foreword to the new volume, Gordon says that the rewriting and changes she made “go beyond revision.” This is true. The earlier volumes constituted a somewhat pedestrian but workmanlike biography of Eliot—with Peter Ackroyd’s T. S. Eliot: A Life (1984), among the first. But Gordon’s new book qualifies as an attack. She was never burdened with a gift for narrative, but in her original volumes she presented the paraphernalia of Eliot’s life and career clearly and succinctly. The new book introduces a thick patina of animus. Gordon tells us that her aim was not
to demystify Eliot but “to follow the trials of a searcher whose flaws and doubts speak to all of us whose lives are imperfect.” In fact, she never misses an opportunity to highlight Eliot’s failings. It is almost comical to compare her new volume with its predecessors: everywhere she has turned up the volume of criticism.

The difference between the early volumes and the present offering is epitomized by a rubric in Gordon’s index. In the original volumes, under “Eliot, Thomas Stearns,” one finds the category “Opinions.” In the new book, that is recast as “Opinions and Prejudices.” In the original biography, Gordon dilated at times on Eliot’s “misogyny.” There is a lot more of that now. She describes the mildly obscene sports that Eliot sent to friends in letters as “loathsome things”: “There’s sick fury here,” Gordon writes in one typical addition, “an obsessional hatred of women and sex, punitive in its virulence.”[1]

In the new book, Gordon also predictably expatiates on Eliot’s anti-Semitism—a growth industry these days—going so far as to say that “he did not hold back from the mass-prejudice that played a part in the largest atrocity of the century.” Meaning what? That Eliot was some sort of covert Nazi? Eliot was undoubtedly anti-Semitic. Critics long ago pointed out the handful of anti-Semitic lines in Eliot’s poetry (“And the jew squats on the window sill,” “Rachel née Rabinowitz,” etc.). And the comment he made in a 1933 series of lectures—published as After Strange Gods, a book he never reprinted—that “reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable” quickly became notorious.

But to insinuate, as Gordon does, a connection between Eliot’s all-too-common brand of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust is preposterous. The young Eliot may have been a modernist, but there were aspects of modernity that terrified him. The real enemies, he thought, were those aspects of modern, industrial society that encouraged social uprootedness and undermined continuity with the past. The problem, as he put it in The Idea of a Christian Society (1940), was the “tendency of unlimited industrialism . . . to create bodies of men and women . . . detached from tradition, alienated from religion, and susceptible to mass suggestion: in other words a mob. And a mob will be no less a mob if it is well fed, well clothed, well housed, and well disciplined.” Of course, Eliot’s chief claims on our attention are as a poet and a critic, not as a social or political theorist. Nevertheless, there is some irony, as Hilton Kramer observed in connection with the question of Eliot’s anti-Semitism, “that Eliot was himself an outstanding example of the deracinated cosmopolitanism he so much feared and despised. As a polyglot expatriate American who had severed his native roots in order to make his way in an alien society that was deeply opposed to the modernism he practiced as a poet, Eliot found himself as much at odds with the culture and politics of his adopted country as he believed himself to be with those of his homeland.”

None of these deeper issues is appropriately dealt with in Gordon’s biography. She is too busy looking for “strains of virulence” and “racial hatred.” This search even spills over into her comments on some figures who influenced Eliot. Thus Jules Laforgue is accused of writing
“women-riddled poetry”—unlike the other kind, I suppose. Gordon has assembled a lot of
information in her decades of work on Eliot. And she makes some memorable observations along
the way. About Eliot’s first trip to Paris in 1910, for example, she notes that where Laforgue before
him was a participant, Eliot was “an inspector of vice. . . . While Laforgue tended to reproach
women for his sense of banality, Eliot understands the banality of vice itself.” Nevertheless, it is
clear that whatever drew Gordon to Eliot to begin with was supplanted somewhere along the line
with a swarm of fashionable grievances. There is even a bit of academic social-constructivism
about sex: “Who can now determine,” she asks in a section about Eliot’s relation with his friend
Jean Verdenal (to whom Prufrock and Other Observations is dedicated), “the exact ways people of
the past bent their inclinations in order to construct gender according to the absurd models of
masculinity and femininity?” Right: “And I Tiresias . . .” Well, never mind.

In both the original biography and the new work, Gordon says that her aim is “to trace the
continuity of Eliot’s career and to see the poetry and the life as complementary parts of one
design, a consuming search for salvation.” Whether or not she succeeded, that aim was patent in
Eliot’s Early Years. In the new book, that original ambition is buried underneath recurrent litanies
about Eliot’s “trajectory” “leaving broken lives in its wake” and his “intolerance for the masses, for
women and Jews.” Gordon emits declarations of high-mindedness at regular intervals
(“biography . . . can’t reduce a man to the adversarial categories—guilty or not guilty—of the
courtroom”), but then proceeds immediately with some damning aside (“undoubtedly, an
infection is there in Eliot—hate.”) Gordon’s animus even extends to Eliot’s forebears. In her
original biography, she tells us that Andrew Eliot “was believed to have officiated at the Salem
witch trials.” In her new redaction we read instead that “he was drawn into the frenzy of the
Salem witch trials, where he condemned innocents to death.” The implication, presumably, is that
we shouldn’t be surprised that Eliot turned out to be a fanatic: after all, the man had witch-burners
in his background. Earlier quoted Edmund Wilson’s observation that Eliot’s “verses have an
emotional vibration, a curious life of their own, that seems almost to detach them from the
author.” Wilson continues: “Of no other poet, perhaps, does a bon mot of Cocteau’s seem so true:
The artist is a kind of prison from which the works of art escape.”

This is true. And it is something that requires uncommon tact and delicacy from any biographer
who wishes to present us with Eliot the artist and not a pathetic caricature. (Eliot explicitly stated
that he did not want a biography: now we know why.) Eliot is worthy of attention not because he
had certain attitudes about women or Jews or education or religion of which we disapprove today.
He is worthy of attention first of all because he wrote poetry possessed of those “vibrations,” that
“curious life,” of which Wilson spoke. Of course there is a biographical correlative to much of
Eliot’s poetry. And when we read this oft-quoted passage in The Waste Land—

“My nerves are bad to-night. 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.”

—it is perhaps illuminating to know that Eliot wrote most of the poem while recuperating from a nervous breakdown in 1921 and that his first wife, Vivienne Haigh-Wood, was a drug-sodden hysterical invalid who eventually went mad. Bertrand Russell, who had an affair with Vivienne not long after she married Eliot, wrote about it to a friend: “At last I spent a night with her. It was utter hell. There was a quality of loathsome about it which I can’t describe.”

“She gave the impression of absolute terror,” another acquaintance recalled,

of a person who’s seen a hideous goblin. . . . Her face all drawn and white, with wild, frightened, angry eyes. An over-intensity over nothing, you see. Suppose you were to say to her, ‘Oh, will you have some more cake,’ she’d say ‘What’s that? What do you mean? What do you say that for?’ She was terrifying. At the end of an hour I was absolutely exhausted, sucked dry. And I said to myself: Poor Tom, this is enough! But she was his muse all the same.

Well, maybe, Vivienne undoubtedly made her contributions to Eliot’s work. (It was she, for example, who came up with the title for The Criterion: Eliot had intended to call it The London Review. But lots of people have historical half-truths.) What he wrote in his book about the first critics and the public is true for The Waste Land in that “the critics do not, and can never, make a particular work of art live. . . .” To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouch against life; it was just a piece of rhythmical grumbling.” But that is disingenuous. The grouch may have been personal and insignificant; the poem—qua poem, not biographical artifact—is neither merely personal nor insignificant. As Eliot famously noted in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919),

It is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting. His particular emotions may be simple, or crude, or flat. The emotion in his poetry will be a very complex thing, but not with the complexity of the emotions of people who have very complex or unusual emotions in life. .
For Eliot, writing *The Waste Land* may have been in part a personal catharsis. For us, it is the impersonality of the emotion that makes the poem significant. It speaks to us not of Eliot’s trauma but of a trauma inseparable from our culture.

The chaos of Eliot’s emotional life in the 1910s and 1920s did not prevent him from carefully stage-managing his literary career. As soon as he gave up on an academic career, in 1914, he threw himself into London literary life. Writing to his mother in 1919, he spoke proudly of the “privileged position” he occupied: “There is a small and select public which regards me as the best living critic, as well as the best living poet, in England. . . . I really think that I have far more influence on English letters than any other American has ever had, unless it be Henry James.” His pride was all the more justified because, as he noted in another letter, for an American, “getting recognized in English letters is like breaking open a safe.” Eliot displayed great deliberation and canniness in his pursuit of literary fame. There are, he wrote to a former teacher from Harvard in 1919, only two ways in which a writer can become important—to write a great deal, and have his writings appear everywhere, or to write very little. It is a question of temperament. I write very little, and I should not become more powerful by increasing my output. My reputation in London is built upon one small volume of verse, and is kept up by printing two or three more poems in a year. The only thing that matters is that these should be perfect in their kind, so that each should be an event.

And so it was. Eliot’s collected poems, excluding the children’s verse, runs to one-hundred-and-forty-odd pages; thirty or more of those pages are given over to “minor” or “unfinished” poems. But Eliot made up in concentration what he lacked in quantity. From *Prufrock* through the *Four Quartets*, publication of Eliot’s poems always was a galvanizing literary event, riveting attention even when it did not elicit unqualified assent.

The chief reason that Eliot commanded the attention he did was doubtless the originality, power, and quality of his work. The work was the indispensable presupposition. But beyond that, Eliot animated everything he touched with a rare passion and urgency of conviction. “Culture,” he wrote in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), “may even be defined as that which makes life worth living.” And although after his conversion he always viewed culture as inseparable from religion (“if Christianity goes,” he wrote, “the whole of our culture goes”), he nonetheless communicated through his poetry and criticism a sense that matters of great, of absolute, moment were being broached. To read Eliot is an apprenticeship in seriousness about the things that require it. This is not to say that Eliot was always somber. Far from it. There is an element of impish playfulness in much of his work. W. H. Auden was right that in the household that was T. S. Eliot, a stately archdeacon lived together

. . . 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.
with a querulous old peasant woman who had experienced famines, pogroms, the lot, as well as a mischievous boy prone to practical jokes. It is not surprising that the author of The Waste Land was also the author of Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats or that he was an avid admirer of vaudeville and the Marx Brothers.[2] The great critic E. R. Curtius, who translated The Waste Land into German, recalled that when he first read the poem “it captivated me with sudden and dazzling flashes of mystery and music, with a resonant happiness.”

At first, “resonant happiness” may seem odd. After all, as Curtius went on to note, “with Eliot the depressive element predominates.” In the early poems there is often a permeating nimbus of impotence, exhaustion, dryness. Later, that texture of feeling is absorbed into an atmosphere of religious angst. And yet Curtius is right. Reading Eliot imparts a peculiar sense of buoyancy, of tensed vitality—in Edmund Wilson’s phrases, “vibrations” and “curious life.” One reason, I believe, is that Eliot is everywhere embarked on a voyage of discovery. Many critics have noted a progression in Eliot’s development from the aestheticism of Arnold and Pater through ironic despondency to resignation and, finally, Christian affirmation. I have no doubt that there is some such development in Eliot’s thought. But the leitmotif of Eliot’s journey is a craving for reality. That craving is the source of the “resonant happiness” Curtius discerned. It is the source of Eliot’s religious convictions—“Man is man,” he wrote in an essay on humanism, “because he can recognize supernatural realities, not because he can invent them.” Eliot’s craving for reality also stands behind his repeated admonitions about the perils of accepting aesthetic substitutes. “We know too much and are convinced of too little,” he warned in “A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry.” “Our literature is a substitute for religion, and so is our religion.” In The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (1933), he reflects more fully on this point.

Nothing in this world or the next is a substitute for anything else; and if you find you must do without something, such as religious faith or philosophic belief, then you must just do without it. I can persuade myself . . . that some of the things that I can hope to get are better worth having than some of the things I cannot get; or I may hope to alter myself so as to want different things; but I cannot persuade myself that it is the same desires that are satisifed, or that I have in effect the same thing under a different name. Eliot was obsessed with reality. That is the ultimate source of his power as a poet and his authority as a critic. He was everywhere engaged in a battle against ersatz: ersatz culture, ersatz religion, ersatz humanity. That, finally, is what makes even the late, religious Eliot congenial to modernism: his impatience with imposture. In “Burnt Norton,” Eliot wrote that “human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality.” It was his lonely task to remind us of this even as he set about coaxing us toward greater and greater feats of endurance.
1. Hilton Kramer discussed Cynthia Ozick’s essay in the February 1990 issue of The New Criterion; a subsequent exchange between Mr. Kramer and Miss Ozick appeared in the April 1990 issue. Go back to the text.


3. Eliot never published these poems. They, and other early poems—drafts for “Prufrock” and so on—have been collected and festooned with extensive scholarly apparatus in Inventions of the March Hare, edited by Christopher Ricks (Harcourt Brace, 1996). Go back to the text.

4. Gordon recounts the visit that Groucho Marx and his wife made to meet the Eliots in 1964. Groucho fortified himself by reading Murder in the Cathedral twice, The Waste Land three times, and brushing up on King Lear for good measure. “Well, sir,” Groucho wrote in a letter, “as the cocktails were served, there was a momentary lull. . . . So, apropos of practically nothing . . . I tossed in a quotation from The Waste Land. That, I thought, will show him I’ve read a thing or two besides my press notices from Vaudeville.

   Eliot smiled faintly—as though to say he was thoroughly familiar with his poems and didn’t need me to recite them. So I took a whack at King Lear. . . . That, too, failed to bowl over the poet. He seemed more interested in discussing Animal Crackers and A Night at the Opera. He quoted a joke—one of mine—that I had long since forgotten. Now it was my turn to smile faintly.” Go back to the text.

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