

BOOK REVIEW

T. S. Eliot: Poems

Edited by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue

Faber and Faber, 2015

ISBN Volume 1: 978-0-571-23870-5.

ISBN Volume 2: 978-1421420189

Each £40

Whisper Music

“Complimenti, you bitch. I am wracked by the seven jealousies,” wrote Ezra Pound to T.S Eliot with his characteristic unhinged vigour, in a letter at the end of 1921. Pound’s compliments, and his jealousy, were earned by Eliot having finished a draft of ‘The Waste Land,’ which Pound called “the longest poem in the English Langwidge”. Anyone who picks up the new two volume, 2032 page edition of Eliot’s *Poems*, edited by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, without much acquaintance with the poet’s work might be forgiven for thinking that this was literally true, rather than just Pound being Pound.

The monumentality of the new editions—with, in the first volume, almost a thousand pages of annotations to 346 pages of poems—does, however, show something of what Pound was getting at. The density of ‘The Waste Land’, its attempt to sustain a lyric compression without any transitions or expository material, much of which was ruthlessly excised by Pound himself, as well as its shoehorning in of almost the entirety of Western (and some of Eastern) civilisation, gives it the quality of a work many times its size. Cut into it almost anywhere and you will find the intensity of anthology excerpts:

—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.
...
Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair,
Spread out into fiery points
Glowed into words then would be savagely still
...
A woman drew her long black hair out tight
and fiddled whisper music on the strings...

This is just to take some lines that mention women’s hair. It is not a completely random sample; Eliot seems to be particularly excited by women’s hair. Think of the soft down of the women’s arms in ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, or the mermaids “Combing the white hair of the waves blown back”. Think, too, of the “hair over your

arms and your arms full of flowers” of ‘La Figlia Che Piange’, or the lines from ‘Ash Wednesday’: “Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown,/ Lilac and brown hair”. Laying aside, or rather embracing, the slight creepiness of Eliot’s trichological interest, you might feel the bodily jolt that I feel, what Frank Kermode called Eliot’s “shudder”.

To create so many memorable lines, especially as some of them were stolen, seems to have demanded a collector’s ear, something that can be seen in the way Eliot uses excerpts in his own criticism, and something which this edition of Eliot’s *Poems* reveals as we move from the poems themselves into the book’s vast scholarly hinterland. Each poem is given a surprisingly gripping textual history, complete with extracts of interviews and letters from Eliot and his contemporaries, such as the one from Pound quoted above. Every line in every poem is given the full Ricks (and McCue) treatment, established in the former’s edition of Tennyson, and of Eliot’s juvenilia, *Inventions of the March Hare*. Glosses are offered from statements by the poet himself in letters, criticism, and conversation, and echoes are found or suggested from a diverse body of other writers. We are even given pronunciation guides for some words based on recordings Eliot made. Thus do we find out that ‘Preludes’ was pronounced “Pree-ludes” by Eliot, and that estaminets in ‘Gerontion’ should properly be pronounced “estaminés”. Eliot’s life, from his Missouri childhood to Harvard; coming to Oxford then abandoning his thesis on the philosophy of F.H Bradley; moving to London; his unhappy marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood; his anguished conversion to the Anglican Church; his position as editor of Faber and Faber; “the pope of Russell Square”, and his final conjugal happiness with the much younger Valerie Fletcher are all worked back into this famously ‘impersonal’ poet’s verse by Ricks’ and McCue’s commentaries.

This last chapter of Eliot’s life also proves to be the source of several previously unpublished love poems. First, however, comes the expected procession through the first volume: the nervy poignancy of *Prufrock and Other Observations*, the controlled nastiness of *Poems, 1920*, the nervous devastation of *The Waste Land*, the sparse anguish of *The Hollow Men*. There are the ugly and irresistible fragments from *Sweeney Agonistes*, which have as much dramatic menace as anything by Pinter. Onward through the desperate conversion poem *Ash Wednesday*, past the *Ariel Poems* and the unlovable *Choruses from the Rock*, through to the hard-won dignity of *The Four Quartets*, where at last Eliot, who wrote so many hells and purgatories, writes his *Paradiso*

All manner of things shall be well
When the tongues of flame are enfolded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

The procession is a short one; I don’t wish to make any particular contrarian claims about it here, and when it’s finished the achievement is impossible to diminish. After this ascent to heaven, however, are the ‘new’ poems. Several of them are addressed to Valerie Eliot in the guise of ‘The Tall Girl’. We are told ‘How the Tall Girl’s Breasts are’, and ‘How The Tall Girl and I play together’. How they play together, if the poems are to be believed, is stiltedly. These have the feel of the weakest moments of the *Four*

Quartets, (memorably parodied by Henry Reed ‘As we get older we do not get any younger...’) and are, in every sense of the word, turgid:

When my beloved stands tall and naked
Proud and rejoicing, not in her own beauty
But in the knowledge of the power of her beauty
To quicken my desire (as I stand erect before her
And quiver with the swelling of my concupiscence)

The final poem of *Volume One* is however, slightly more interesting. An argument with Blake’s ‘The Clod and the Pebble’, the poem ends

Love that seeketh not to please,
And for the other has no care
But joys in taking its own ease
Builds a Heaven in Hell’s despair.

It’s hardly great stuff, but it is interesting that a poet whose best work often came out of the horror-show that self-consciousness can make of sexual relations ended his days writing about the mutual satisfaction in unheeding sexual selfishness. Considering the carnage of Eliot’s previous marriage, and his callousness at its end, Eliot’s versified happiness with a woman thirty years his junior may seem more queasy than touching, but as a narrative arc for the ‘lifework’, it feels strangely redemptive.

Whether or not the reader needs the new poems, the commentaries just about justify the price tag (£80 for the two volumes). They are a testament to the labour and erudition of both the editors and Eliot himself, even if sometimes, in the case of *Old Possum’s Book Practical Cats*, it feels as if they might be breaking a Jellicle cat upon a wheel. This dutiful completism, however, allows one to enjoy the deadpan tone of comments such as “For failure to appreciate allusiveness in T.S.E, see headnote to *Macavity, the Mystery Cat*”.

No one could accuse Ricks and McCue of failing to appreciate allusiveness in the poet. One way of reading their edition of the poems is as a lengthy critical argument about Eliot’s allusory practices. Ricks has form on this front, as the author of *Allusion to the Poets*, and here we see Eliot as Ricks sees him, in the echo chamber of poetic tradition. Ricks and McCue show that it is precisely this allusiveness that gives Eliot’s poetry much of its extraordinary power. There will always be quibbles about certain echoes. I was curious as to why the notes about the Hyacinth girl point us to Poe’s Helen, with her “hyacinth hair” but not to Adam in *Paradise Lost* with his “hyacinthine locks”, though McCue and Ricks may well have a good reason. Through these annotations we can come to see part of what gives Eliot the density of which Pound was so jealous. John Berryman once remarked that modern poetry began with the third line of ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’:

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

He meant the shock of the image, deliberately and harshly unexpected. Ricks and McCue point out that it is not simply a question of being modern. They note Eliot's obvious debt to Laforgue:

Le couchant de sang est taché
Comme un tablier de boucher;
Oh! Qui veut m'écorder!
[The setting sun with blood is stained
Like a butcher's apron;
Oh! Who wants to skin me!]

But we are told, too, that in Eliot's old stomping ground of Boston there is an Ether Monument (it was here that the use of anesthetic was first pioneered), and they point out the possible wrenching effect in a deliberate mistranslation of Gautier's description of "une Aphrodite éthérée" [an ethereal Aphrodite]. Without any interpretation, or criticism as such, they suggest something of the way the lines compress tradition and personal experience into the statement of a very modern sensibility. At the same time, they show how this works at preserving a ghostly, 'ethereal' form of the softer, more 'poetic' and numinous qualities that hover over the poem. The etherized patient is sedated, yes, but she also still belongs to the ethereal realm to which poets claim special access.

The vast elucidatory apparatus may not be for everyone. Randall Jarrell famously wrote of Eliot, an assessment that was deeply sceptical of Eliot's criticism, and of Eliot criticism:

Won't the future say to us in helpless astonishment: 'But did you actually believe that all those things about objective correlations, Classicism, the tradition, applied to *his* poetry? Surely you must have seen that he was one of the most subjective and demonic poets who ever lived ... but for you of course, after the first few years his poetry existed under sea, thousands of feet below that deluge of exegesis, explication, source listing, scholarship and criticism that overwhelmed it. And yet how bravely and personally it survived, its eyes neither coral nor mother of pearl, but plainly human, full of anguish.'

This perhaps did more to legitimize the psychoanalytic concerns of America's next generation of poets than it did to shine a light on Eliot's anguished eyes. It does, however, suggest something of the way that Eliot gets under the skin of all of his readers, something which has to do with his handling of his sources, but which cannot be contained by that. If he was the consummate intellectual and craftsman, conducting what I.A. Richards called "the music of ideas", what purpose did the ideas themselves serve? After reading through the sources Ricks and McCue reveal, what strikes me is that the compression of so much learning into lines, on the edge of what Eliot himself called "a ridiculous amount of erudition", is rarely argumentative. Rather, the lines unsettle what has gone into them. They are, while clearly not less than, much thinner seeming than the sum of their parts. But it is in this way that they become so sharp.

Eliot's poetry sets ideas spinning to give us not the peace, but the disturbance that passeth understanding. This is the same thing still seen in John Ashbery's occasional burlesquing of the philosophical rhetoric of the *Four Quartets*, making erudition ridiculous, or in the stringent interrogation of the lyric form in a poet like Jorie Graham, or, of course, Geoffrey Hill. These poets, with the exception of Hill, are not 'Eliotic', but they write out of the hollows of thought that he perhaps most brilliantly articulated. Aside from providing an ideal resource for study, Ricks and McCue have proved that the "deluge of exegesis, explication, source listing, scholarship and criticism" could never even begin to bury Eliot. For this, they, and he, deserve the highest praise.

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