

ELIOT BY THE POUND: TWO BIG BOOKS WORTH THE WEIGHT

Robert Crawford. *Young Eliot: From St Louis to 'The Waste Land.'* London: Jonathan Cape, 2015.

A. David Moody. *Ezra Pound, Poet: A Portrait of the Man and His Work. Volume II, The Epic Years 1921-1939.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

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How pleasant to meet Master Eliot. And it's good, on finishing Robert Crawford's avuncular new biography, to find again a tattered copy of *The Sewanee Review* for Winter 1966, their T.S. Eliot memorial issue. In it, near the end of a half-page tribute, Ezra Pound asks: "Who is there now for me to share a joke with?" And next asks, "Am I to write 'about' the poet Thomas Stearns Eliot? or my friend 'the Possum?'" Putting the question like that, Pound didn't have to answer; the answer, and the heart of his brief encomium, was in the silence.

What we might call, sharing a joke, Eliot's possumystical tendencies burst from page one of Crawford's introduction to *Young Eliot*, a title to pause over for two reasons. First, a *young* Eliot would be an unfamiliar figure to many readers today; and in fact Crawford starts the book by sportively negating his own title, writing "T.S. Eliot was never young." He finishes it that way, too: After a fine verbal image of Eliot holding a fresh copy of *The Waste Land*, his official literary name on the title page, he says echoically, "It was as if he had never been young." *In my beginning is my end.* Crawford stops in 1922, long before his subject metamorphoses into the Eliot most people know, the Grey Eminence, the Pope of Russell Square, the magisterial Dr Johnson of his century. But his readers had already met a Prufrock growing old, and Gerontion, and Tiresias.

The second reason for the title's vibrancy is that Crawford, a Scot who teaches at the University of St Andrews and writes poems himself, is the first biographer not forced to "pass over the first twenty-one years," as he says, "in twenty-one pages." Or made to paraphrase, or to suppress entirely, instead of being able to quote from letters and other material in scattered and voluminous archives. In the seventies Lyndall Gordon wrote a lively biography called *Eliot's Early Years*, but Crawford's takes precedence now and will probably be definitive for our time.

Few, if any, stop-press revelations are found in *Young Eliot*;—rather continuity, accuracy, and sometimes over-generous detail not previously forthcoming. An almost-dramatic moment comes in the first sentence of Chapter 11, where Crawford writes of Eliot's first wife, "When Vivien first slept with Bertrand Russell is uncertain." Crawford had been circling round the issue, somewhat like Faulkner's narrator in *Absalom, Absalom!*, without specifying who was doing what to whom. Whatever the specifics, Vivien—Crawford's spelling—was calling Eliot "my dearest Wonkypenky" by a certain stage of their marriage; most men wouldn't like that, and on balance she and Russell as a pair don't distinguish themselves in the book. Vivien's death years later in a mental asylum casts a deep shadow over this oddly-configured triangle, but Crawford might have noted that Eliot got his revenge on Russell in the late nineteen-forties, beating Bertie to the Nobel Prize by two years.

Otherwise, the reader might be mildly surprised to learn that for a while in 1919—Crawford doesn't make it easy to tell precisely when things happened—Eliot wore a beard. Crawford quotes Richard Aldington as saying that Eliot in "derby hat and an Uncle Sam Beard, looked perfectly awful, like one of those comic-strip caricatures of Southern hicks." But Aldington was an ex-army officer and only in no man's land might beards grow in the army. Here again, Crawford follows his strategy of undercutting, not Eliot's doomed beard, but his ossified image as The Man in the Four-Piece Suit, to steal a phrase from his friend Virginia Woolf.

For purposes already hinted at, Crawford refers to Eliot as "Tom" throughout. (Will he keep doing this, resuming his biography post-*Waste Land*, where he'll begin with Eliot in his mid-thirties and move on from there?) Quoting Crawford, who had to ask himself the same question Pound asked in *The Sewanee Review*:

...I was always impressed by the way Valerie Eliot [second wife, later flame-tender] would speak of "Tom," using his first name.... It was a way of reminding people that T.S. Eliot was a human being, rather than a remote historical monument.

Even a post-postmodernist biographer might think for a moment before calling a young Henry James "Hank"—or "dear H.J." as Pound does in the Pisans. But, seeking Eliot's

...ineffable effable
 Effanineffable
 Deep and inscrutable singular Name,

Crawford lands on “Tom” and a pioneering I-thou intimacy with his subject. This works perfectly through much of the narrative, at least until Chapter 10—more than halfway—when Tom and Vivien are starting life together. That chapter opens, “No sooner were they married than Vivien was ill.” And there, if we credit what Crawford is saying, began Tom’s strenuous climb upward from innocence. But was a certain—unspecified—incapacity on Tom’s part largely to blame? *My dearest Wonkypenky* is suggestive. Over this question Crawford speculates about an imaginable soul-or-body brotherhood with enervate Origen, about what Crawford delicately calls Eliot’s “woundedness”: “His art is made out of damage and woundedness.” This then, along with “young,” becomes one of the crucial words in the book. A link with Hemingway here: youth; the wound; maturity.

It could be that someday three psychiatrists, one of whom can write like Christopher Ricks, will cast a cold eye on the Wonkypenky business. Meanwhile, the poems themselves give clues, and more than clues: Eliot often seems to be kidding in the early poems, but he’s not.

Back to Christopher Ricks: In his review of Peter Ackroyd’s earlier *T.S. Eliot, A Life*, Ricks—whose complete edition of Eliot’s poetry is due later this year—disagrees with Ackroyd on a perceived component of Eliot’s character. In this best-of-Ricks piece, while crediting Ackroyd with being “fair-minded, broad-minded and assiduous,” he says the author misleads the reader by placing too much importance on Eliot’s “native caution.” And in short, I was afraid? Then Ricks begins listing all the emphatically un-Prufrockian, or anti-Prufrockian, decisions Eliot made while young: cutting every kind of bond of family, career, and country; choosing to be a poet, one of the toughest professions in which to make a living; following after strange companions, e.g. Pound, and strange gods—and even, in well-advanced middle age, becoming a playwright. Add to this his marrying, in wartime, a young woman he scarcely knew. That sounds more like recklessness than caution.

Like Ackroyd, Crawford makes much of Eliot’s shyness: “Though he learned to manage it through formality and occasional bluster, his shyness never left him.” But shyness is as shyness does, and whatever face Eliot showed his contemporaries; whatever possum-like gamesmanship; whatever bashful mumblings he uttered to girls, he had enough fortitude or plain chutzpah to stick with and publish the revolutionary “Prufrock”—poetry’s counterpart to *Petrushka*—and *The Waste Land*, its *Sacre du printemps*. Then to carry on under the driving hail of abuse that followed: Harold Monro of Poetry Bookshop thought “Prufrock” insane, and Charles Powell—not the Anglo-Iberian historian—wrote in the then-*Manchester Guardian*:

...we can only say that if Mr. Eliot had been pleased to write in demotic English *The Waste Land* might not have been, as it just is to all but anthropologists and *literati*, so much waste paper.

Later, what could have been seen by biographers as caution matured into humility, “the only wisdom we can hope to acquire” according to *East Coker*. This may or may not have been where Pound ended up, in his silence; although clearly he didn’t start with caution. And humility wasn’t something Eliot learned from his philosophy professors at Harvard, either—of whom Crawford gives a keenly perceptive account. At any rate he left them far behind.

On a much larger scale, the Great War should permeate Crawford’s coverage of the years 1914-1918, but doesn’t really. Crawford hardly excels in evoking the displacements, terrors, and losses the war caused; and given that this was the war to end wars, the war to make the world safe for democracy—at the cost of 17 million dead—the conflict ought at least to enshadow every page. Contrast what Jean Echenoz does with war in his astonishing short novel *14: It is black night*, or rather pastoral luminosity giving way to it, against Crawford’s light of common day.

Even though Crawford says, awkwardly but justly, that the war was “obscenely unignorable,” he mostly keeps a measure of distance from it, despite its fouling every corner of British life, killing off much of a generation of the best men, and leading to unimaginable genocide in the next one. Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*, one of the twentieth century’s basic books, gives details, as in the chilling observation that

One did not have to be a lunatic or a particularly despondent visionary to conceive quite seriously that the war would literally never end and would become the permanent condition of mankind.

Eternal war for eternal peace, or maybe just for its own sake.

One of the best passages in Crawford, however, is his account of Eliot’s Kafkaesque efforts to join, first one of the armed forces, then another and another;—all futile, because stymied by what later generations know as Catch-22. He quotes, too, a repellent paragraph from a letter written by Vivien’s brother Maurice, a young survivor of combat. Eliot, showing the darker side of the Possum and some courage, had sent the letter to an anti-war publication, naming no names. Anti-war material was not well liked then.

(Postscript here. Under the rubric of twentieth-century mass slaughter, Crawford—in his treatment of Eliot’s onomastic Sweeney obsession—misses

a Kubrickian point of irony that popped up at the end of World War II: It was a Major Sweeney who commanded Bockscar, the B-29 that dropped Fat Man on Nagasaki. The name's a coincidence, but when we find out that the clamps securing Fat Man inside the aircraft were made in a factory owned by Zeppo Marx, we begin to see what Faulkner meant by the prime maniacal risibility.)

Eliot said that growing up "beside the big river," the Finn-haunted Mississippi that runs by St Louis, gave him his poetic roots. "It is self-evident," he wrote in 1930, "that St Louis affected me more deeply than any other environment has ever done." Crawford, though he pays a brief homage to the river's power, directs the reader instead to the many summers Eliot spent on the coast of Massachusetts, living in a 5,619-square-foot "cottage" that the T.S. Eliot Foundation has just bought for \$1.3 million. Apparently people in Gloucester don't know about Eliot, according to a recent article by Joann Mackenzie in the *Gloucester Daily Times*; but as Crawford sees it, "From childhood onward, Gloucester shaped him as a poet." Something wrong here: Surely he ought to have written, "helped shape him as a poet"? That much is true; for a small instance, see the opening lines of "Marina," recording what Eliot saw from the summer house.

Then, too, after noting the veneration shown Eliot forebearers by the living members of the family, Crawford writes, oddly, "Being a little boy in Gloucester was not all ancestor worship." No, it wasn't, since in these waters Eliot's became a hand expert with sail and oar, as he came to love the alternate reality of the sea.

Crawford often draws connections between events (and non-events) in Eliot's early years and passages in his poems. Often these are helpful; sometimes the reader will say, "Yes, but..." as when the author suggests that a tornado through St Louis in May 1896 may have influenced Part V of *The Waste Land*. While "What the Thunder Said" gives nothing less than a vision of apocalypse—"falling towers" alone is direly prophetic—the U.S.A. is a nation where violent extremes of weather are as common as computer cracking, and many of us can recall driving through the Hurricane Hazels of our youth, the rain and wind lashing the streets, the lights gone out and the trees coming down. The Eliots' four-story brick house was untouched. And the notion that Vivien—on the strength of her father's owning real estate in Ireland—may have inspired the archetypal figure of "Mein Irisch Kind" in Part I, is unconvincing. More likely Emily Hale, Eliot's first love, who sang an endearing Irish song. Crawford, wisely, doesn't try to act the therapist in trying to explain why Eliot and Emily Hale never married—even though, on the evidence, they should have. Again anyone can find hints about

this in the poems; not enough data for conclusions now, but more will be brought to light when Emily's letters from Tom, some 1,131 of them, are made public on New Year's Day 2020. That may be the next leap forward in Eliot lore, should nothing else intervene; so much material is sequestered in archives.

Showing persuasively that the instances of anti-Semitism in his early work, as in "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar," originated in familial and social prejudice, Crawford doesn't excuse Eliot's early attitudes; his devotion to "Tom" is never slavish. Whatever else can be said here, St Louis 1900 was St Louis 1900, not Paris 1925. And by the time Eliot wrote his best poetry in *Four Quartets*, the strain of ugly inhumanity was long gone from his work.

There remain the once-suppressed Columbo and Bolo verses Eliot wrote as a Harvard undergraduate. These—described by Crawford as "sexually explicit, overtly racist, outrageously carnivalesque [good word] and taboo-breaking"—served as "part of a male-bonding routine" for a club Eliot joined. Plainly they're not Crawford's genre, but he does quote from them; the locus classicus now for anyone wishing to read them is an appendix to *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917*, edited by Christopher Ricks. As Ricks says in his (scathing) review of Sartre's *Saint Genet*: "Time soon knocks the edges off 'shocking' literature." The verses are, in a word, uninspired, by current standards dull; mute inglorious Miltons everywhere could surpass them. But they were written by T.S. Eliot and serve to show, in Crawford's words, "There was a determinedly Aristophanic side of Tom that strove to rebel against the proprieties of an upbringing soused in genteel Unitarianism." Soused indeed.

So Tom rebelled, no shyness there. But it's droll to imagine what he, as publisher and director at Faber & Faber, would have thought of his firm's issuing *The Faber Book of Blue Verse* in 1990—containing his own slightly naughty limerick and two other, more indigo, effusions.

"You want to know the art of living, my friend?" asked Henri-Frédéric Amiel. "It is contained in one phrase: Make use of suffering." And this, after tea and cakes and ices, is what Crawford's Tom had to manage. A privileged and mostly trouble-free childhood receding rapidly in the mind's eye, Eliot set out to do what many have done before and after him: Step by step walk the thousand-mile road.

A. David Moody, Professor Emeritus of the University of York, had an arguably sterner task than Crawford's in dealing with the often-quixotic, ever-controversial Pound. And mostly Moody is stern. In this, the second of a planned three-volume biography, the author—no Ezzing here—sel-

dom loosens his tie, while acquitting himself honorably in praising Pound's merits and deploring the unsavory elements of his work. These last are well known. But when Moody does relax a little, it is to refreshing effect: Just as Crawford, trying to show Eliot's true nature, offers a vignette of the aged sage "settled down to playing with his nephew's remote-controlled toy Aston Martin James Bond car," Moody gives us Pound and his daughter Mary going to see the Disney version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*—and staying to watch it again. Mary said, "I think he enjoyed the film even more than I did." Then there are Yeats and the cats: Moody quotes the Irish poet's story about his visiting Pound and going out to the garden at night with him, who then "would call the cats of Rapallo and feed them bones and pieces of meat." Yeats thought that Pound "really has no fondness for cats but feeds them out of some general pity for the outcast and oppressed"; but if that was so, why would Pound all the while "relate each one's history"? The Pisans are filled with cats, from the one "that with a well-timed leap could turn the lever-shaped door handle" to Ladro, the thieving night cat—"Prowling night-puss leave my hard squares alone";—to the mana-bearing "cat-faced eucalyptus nib" Pound used as a talisman, and the ubiquitous primal Lynx of canto 79. Granted Eliot's cats were more memorable, with their Holmesian associations, and more profitable too.

While maintaining his integrity, though, Moody might have taken Pound's advice in the *ABC of Reading*:

Gloom and solemnity are entirely out of place in even the most rigorous study of an art intended to make glad the heart of man.

That Pound often strayed from his own best precepts, or violated them, is beside the point. *Do I contradict myself...?* The precepts themselves are sound and shouldn't be neglected. And when a bad error turns up in Moody's text—the revered name of Gandhi misspelled both times it appears—his erudite scrutiny falters; Gandhi, after all, is the father of a nation of a billion and a quarter people, some of whom will be reading Moody's book with the keenest attention.

But a good biographer always makes sure the other shoe drops, and Moody is diligent about this. After he quotes Pound as saying, apparently in the summer of 1935, that "Stravinsky is the only living musician from whom I can learn my own job," the reader may ask, "What about Bartók?" And soon enough, a few pages later, Moody says of Bartók's fifth quartet that it meant much to Pound, "because he felt it to be, like his own *Cantos*, the record of a struggle and revolt against the entanglements of a civilization

in decay.” That attitude, as we know, fueled Pound’s most intense passages (along with the most wearisome) in the twenties and thirties. He was the poet who’d written of the trenches:

There died a myriad,
And of the best, among them,
For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
For a botched civilization....

The war again. As Moody observes in his preface:

Things were not so simple, politically and socially, in the 1930s; and Pound himself was not simple.... Altogether, Pound emerges in this account as a flawed idealist and a great poet caught up in the turmoil of his darkening time and struggling, often raging, against the current to be a force for enlightenment.

Sometimes Moody’s ability to compress—learned from Pound, the master at this?—borders on the remarkable, as when he summarizes in a paragraph the extremely complex Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939. Hugh Thomas, the fine historian of the war in Spain, might have found it challenging to do that.

A soon-disillusioned volunteer on the Spanish Loyalist side, George Orwell—in a typically sensible statement made after Pound won the Bollingen Foundation prize for the Pisans—went along with the award, but added, “I must admit that I personally have always regarded him as an entirely spurious writer.” Different politics, to be sure, but hard words. They remind us that Pound himself could be savagely dismissive as a critic, as seen in the first paragraph of a review he gave a biography by Edmund Gosse:

Gosse’s *Life of Swinburne* is merely the attempt of a silly and pompous old man to present a man of genius, an attempt necessarily foredoomed to failure and not worth the attention of even the most cursive reviewer.

This review, chosen by Eliot for inclusion in his *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, was written in 1918, when Edmund Gosse was very much alive; seven years later he was knighted, partly for having written his much-read autobiography *Father and Son*. Even supposing Gosse was an elderly ass, anyone who comes on as strong as Pound did so often has to expect a certain measure of hostility, and Pound was already a marked man when words like “fascist” and “traitor” began to be flung his way. But restraint would have made no muse for the *Cantos*, Pound being Pound.

In Moody’s book, the *Cantos* are examined with a care matching Craw-

ford's, as in the close reading of the enigmatic canto 48—the one imagining the progress of a cat crossing two miles of rooftops in southern France. Moody goes after this one—the fascination of what's difficult—because critics tend to pass by it, as he says; George Kearns, whom he sees as “one of the most perceptive of Pound's readers,” dismissing the canto as “an annoying interruption” and “a modern babel.” Here Moody displays the cardinal virtue of fortitude, along with his usual prudence and justice, and shows why canto 48 is not a blank space between 47 and 49.

Likewise with Moody's attention to canto 51, the better-known one with the fly-tying instructions. Pound once read this on a Caedmon recording. Moody offers sharply-conflicting interpretations of it—should we look favorably on the instructions or not?—giving a small boost to the thought that the life of the mind can be worth living. Maybe Moody will do the same in Volume III for the famous canto 81, the “pull down thy vanity” canto: Is Pound addressing failed institutions, or himself? Canto 52, however, contains what Moody calls “the most disgracefully flawed page of the *Cantos*,” centering on *neschek* or usury; and Moody, making it clear he's not writing hagiography, censures both the idea and the way Pound gives it voice. But that is rogue economics, and we must move on.

As in Crawford there's a love triangle in “The Epic Years,” much longer-lived and more complicated than the Tom-Vivien-Bertie tangle. Pound, no wonkypenky, had a biological daughter (Mary) by his mistress, the violinist Olga Rudge—which daughter he couldn't legally acknowledge because he was married to someone else. A year later—in 1926—Pound's wife Dorothy gave birth to a son, Omar, probably fathered by a man she'd met in Egypt. So Pound became a *cornuto*, accepting a son not his own but denied the fatherhood of his own daughter. Such was the extended family's contribution to the Roaring Twenties, although it was people not the principals who had to push the carriages. Later Pound, Dorothy, and Olga formed an uneasy ménage-à-trois, but in his last years Dorothy left for London and he lived with Olga alone. Omar and Mary turned out all right.

What you get married for if you don't want children? Eliot is always pithy. Pound's quest to “make it new,” to apply the Confucian *paideuma*, to extol Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta the temple-builder, to save America from its anti-Americans, to fight the world, to vanquish the Dantescan monster Geryon; to spread the gospel of John Adams: Pound was an overreacher in spades, but had it not been for overreachers, history would have become an even less enticing undergraduate major and there would have been no Christopher Marlowes: no tragic sense of life, only, as Tennessee Williams put it, Loss, Loss, Loss. And in fact the third volume of Moody's biography,

due in 2016, is to be called “The Tragic Years.” A word not to be treated lightly.

We can, if we like, read the *Cantos* for their music alone, their consonances and dissonances, their rhythms above all. *Canto*, as Moody reminds us, is a verb in Italian, “*Io canto*,” I sing, as well as a noun meaning “chant” or “song”—as in *bel canto*, beautiful song. Moody calls attention to the second canto, “as musical as words alone can be,” at one point likening the pulse to an Indian raga’s—high praise. Moody knows his rhythm, the sine qua non of a Pound critic; as Eliot wrote in “The Music of Poetry”: “I believe that the properties in which music concerns the poet most nearly, are the sense of rhythm and the sense of structure.” And Moody is a resolute guide through Pound’s opera *Le Testament* (1923), later commenting on his second opera *Cavalcanti* (1931-1933) as well. For anyone not a composer it’s essential to have the music playing along, and it can be heard on a single CD, *Ego Scriptor Cantilenae: The Music of Ezra Pound*, on the Other Minds label out of San Francisco with Robert Hughes conducting. Should the operas seem unduly exotic, the troubadour songs from Provence—as sung by the wonderful Martin Best Consort on Nimbus CD NI 5445—will give a point of reference. Otherwise the American composer Virgil Thomson has suggested a link with Satie.

As Eliot later found religion, Pound found Mussolini. Moody doesn’t try to play Freud with an unrequited love affair, but instead writes with his characteristic gravity:

The capitalist democracies...were in deep crisis, with their millions workless, their industries shut down, their markets stagnant, their farmers foreclosed upon by mortgagors.... Pound could see with blinding clarity what needed to be done, quite simply that capital, the nation’s wealth, should be made to serve the needs and interests of the whole nation.

The last part of this is what Pound thought Mussolini’s Fascism, with its “greater care for national welfare,” was achieving; and there were plenty back in the States, especially businessmen, who agreed. *Calling All Moths: Candle Dead Ahead*: As Europe started to self-destruct, with Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia and the ominous re-arming of Germany, Pound was saying that war against Hitler “would have meant war against a clean concept of money.” *You turn a blind eye to a good many things, Ezra*, Pound’s friend and fellow poet Basil Bunting had told him. But Pound’s feelings for the fallen Duce outlasted the war, as canto 74, the first of the Pisans, attests. Rightly or wrongly he would be called a mad poet, like Smart and Blake and the wounded-and-gassed World War I vet Ivor Gurney before him. By

the time he reached old age, after a lifetime of declaiming and exhorting, teaching and preaching, hitting the wall, Pound finally earned the right to remain silent. “Suffering exists in order to make people think,” he’d said to his daughter years ago; caged in Pisa, Pound suffered, and thought.

In the bars of Havana, Papa, they say the sharks are the critics. And like Hemingway’s old fisherman, Pound went out too far. His world-gospelizing was too grandiose and self-centered and he became a bore. The line of work he chose was dangerous; a much better man than Pound tried to save the world from its sins, and died as an enemy of the state, crucified between thieves. ¿*Otro loco más?* But alone in an all-too-concrete political arena, many times more vicious than Eliot’s literary London, Pound learned the meaning of a hard sentence in Conrad’s *Nostramo*:

There was something inherent in the necessities of successful action which carried with it the moral degradation of the idea.

Pound finished with a badly soiled reputation, but was born after all in a fertile land for notoriety: Billy the Kid, Bonnie and Clyde, the Manson Family. Other examples will spring to mind. Maybe they’ll make a movie or docudrama about Pound, too, as Brian Gilbert did with *Tom & Viv* in the nineties. Or maybe he’ll be seen as too highbrow, or plain untouchable. Nevertheless, pariah that he later came to be, he deserved all of the tribute Hamilton College, his alma mater, gave him;—and this is where Moody stops. Having no idea Pound would call Alexander Hamilton—for whom the college was named—“the Prime snot in ALL American history” (canto 62), and consign him with no small irony to the ninth and lowest circle of Dante’s Hell, the traitors (canto 69), Hamilton awarded him their honorary Doctor of Letters, concluding with these words:

You have ever been a generous champion of younger writers as well as of artists in other fields, and for this fine and rare human quality and for your own achievements in poetry and prose, we honor you.

The year was 1939, with another surge of the blood-dimmed tide just ahead. On the first of September Germany invaded Poland. And so on to all that, in Moody’s final volume; but already there’s a strong chance Moody’s will be the indispensable Pound biography, until someone does something horrorshow with DNA.