

## ELIOT'S SACRED AND PROFANE DANCES: FOUR SEASONS OF A WIDE MIND

Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, eds. *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*. 2 vols. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.

*J.D. Garrick*

And now, as fierce men in England and the United States undertake to destroy the myth of Eliot...

—William Wasserstrom, *Sewanee Review*, Winter 1962.

In this sacred grove there grew a certain tree round which at any time of the day and probably far into the night a strange figure might be seen to prow. In his hand he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if every instant he expected to be set upon by an enemy. He was a priest and a murderer; and the man for whom he looked was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead. Such was the rule of the sanctuary.

—Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1890.

When Eliot died in 1965 much of his authority died with him.

—Edward Mendelson in *The New York Review of Books*, February 11, 2016.

Early this morning two T.S. Eliots were chasing each other round a prickly pear. It wasn't easy to see them through the fog generated by reviewers and critics; but one, dressed in a four-piece suit, was a snobby elitist whose views were fatally out of touch with the times. The other, quite naked, was a fun-loving man with a wicked sense of humor, who in the teeth of severe marital troubles and a bad case of angst made himself into one of the best poets Anglo-America ever produced. Any number of authorities will tell you about the first one; for the second, it will be helpful to consult two recent books: Robert Crawford's *Young Eliot* and now, the massive Christopher Ricks-Jim McCue edition of Eliot's poems.

The most salient quality of the Ricks-McCue, then, is its range. The traverse here—from "Little Gidding" all the way to "The Triumph of Bullshit," "Ballade pour la grosse Lulu," and the notorious "Columbo" and "King Bolo" verses—is broad enough to arouse every kind of response, awe to anger, with indifference thrown in for those immune to Eliot's persuasions. The few weeds in the garden should surprise no one familiar with the poet's background and upbringing, though the handful of attempts at softcore love poems for his second wife Valerie may seem a bit *outré* to the first-time

visitor. Persephone, Puck, and Priapus: We should have known them all already, preferably from youth, for reading Eliot with a passable degree of tolerance, indulgence, and comprehension;—worth it, given that Eliot's was not only among the most catholic but also one of the most complex, innovative, provocative, and influential minds of any century. In the words of Northrop Frye, "It is one thing to dislike his poetry or decry its reputation; it is another thing to forget it."

The two volumes, available separately, have a Laurel-and-Hardy look about them, or more accurately Hardy-and-Laurel since the first volume is twice the size of the second. In the first are Eliot's collected and uncollected poems; an extensive editorial composite of *The Waste Land*; and the editors' commentaries, bristling with quotations, along with light-casting passages from Eliot's letters and other sources. In the second are *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* with commentary, *Anabasis* with commentary, "Other Verses" (ephemera), "Improper Rhymes," and the almost complete textual histories for everything. Libraries, I should think, will universally want both unless the Improper Rhymes are judged too improper; and individual readers can naturally pick and choose. Without question the first volume is incomplete, truncated, without the second. The volumes together will take up three-and-a-half inches of bookshelf space, as opposed to nearly a foot for *My Life and Times* by Compton Mackenzie. Aside from that one can barely lift them to quote from them.

I think the great thing about the editorial work is that Ricks and McCue have divided the waters, to afford easy passage through the nearly two thousand pages; as a consequence, the texts are printed free of any scholarly machinery save for marginal numbers at intervals of five, and discreet page references at the bottom for the commentaries and textual histories. The typeface, incidentally, "a special version of Arnhem Fine" designed by Fred Smeijers, suits Eliot nicely—a typeface being a kind of companion through long sessions of reading, say, *Four Quartets*.

To show the commitment to textual fidelity the editors kept, there's the paragraph about Jean Verdenal's dates:

A striking editorial dilemma [!] is what to do about the dedication to Jean Verdenal which stands at the head of *Prufrock and Other Observations*, where the date of birth of Eliot's friend appears as 1889 rather than the historically correct 1890. The dedication has stood for almost a century and it has been thought best not to alter it.

Later, in the texts of the poems themselves, the reader notes the same care is taken over the letter-case questions raised by certain nouns. Christopher

Ricks's distaste for altering goes back a long way. To illustrate this: In a review of Richard Whelan's *Robert Capa: A Biography* in the *Sunday Times* for 10 November 1985, Ricks considers the matter of whether Capa's iconic photo of a falling Spanish Republican soldier was staged. In the face of the fakery issue, Whelan had claimed,

To insist upon knowing whether the photograph actually shows a man at the moment he has been hit by a bullet is both morbid and trivializing, for the picture's greatness lies in its symbolic implications, not in its literal accuracy on the death of a particular man.

Rick's reply is Johnsonian: "No, this is irresponsible and itself trivializing.... Such a photograph as Capa's moves us as it does because it is offered not as a film's fiction but as a war's fact." Not with a bang, after all; monkey tricks. And Ricks ends the review by reminding us of the saying, attributed to a U.S. senator, that the first casualty of war is the truth. *Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood*. Call him a precisian, but this is the sort of editor we need for a comprehensive Eliot.

Allied to that, also striking in its way, is the editors' unpretentiousness: Their names are printed neither on the front panels of the jackets nor on the spines, but only on the rear panels and in small type. Set it down as humility, "the only wisdom we can hope to acquire" according to *Four Quartets*—seemingly a lost virtue in the megalomaniac shouting of the current election year, but humility, Eliot tells us, is endless.

The most important part of teaching, Simone Weil said, is to teach what it is to know. But Ricks and his younger colleague McCue are such good teachers they may leave us with the illusion of knowing nearly everything about the poems and most of what needs to be known about the poet;—when in truth the reader, having worked through their nearly 2000 pages once, is likely to find fresh insights on every return to the pages. We should not, however, expect explaining and interpreting in the manner of Grover Smith, whose enormous erudition does make contributions passim. Instead of a dogged worrying of conundrums like garlic and sapphires in the mud and three white leopards under a juniper tree, we get a kind of detached cat-like observation often ending in a pounce. As the editors have written:

An effort has been made not to use the Commentary for *critical* elucidation. The frontiers are uncertain, but the principle has been to provide only notes which constitute or proceed from a point of information.

At the same time, though, we may ask, does *The Waste Land* alone really need these 160 pages of informative commentary and 56 more on the

textual history? Eliot's own notes for the poem take up only five-and-a-half pages in the Ricks-McCue edition, and they've been quirkily serviceable—something akin to good friends—through more than nine decades. We might accuse the editors of scholarly overkill, until in the course of their work they teach us what a perfect magpie Eliot was in his gatherings. As with Pound and Donne—for Donne see Eliot's essay "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca"—nobody but a Grover Smith could have known the sources of all Eliot's allusions, and in many instances the reader does need to know them. Even at the slight risk of absurdity in seeing the editors annotate Eliot's own *Waste Land* annotations.

In a passage, typically insightful, from his commonplace book *A Certain World*, W.H. Auden reminds us:

The early epic poets, composing for an audience with the same mythology, heroic legends, topography as themselves, had half their work done for them. Later, when the poet's audience became a cultured elite, their cultural background was still the same as his own: Milton, for example, could assume that any name taken from Greek and Roman mythology or from the Bible would be familiar to his readers.

And here's the contrast he draws:

A modern poet, on the other hand, can hardly use a single proper name without wondering whether he ought not to footnote it. In 1933 I wrote a poem in which the name *Garbo* appeared, assuming, I think rightly that at that time her name was a household word. When, after the War, Mr. Richard Hoggart included the poem in a selection he had made of my work, he felt it necessary to gloss the name.

*Greta Garbo*, by flesh and the devil. Won't the same thing happen to Mick Jagger, then? Elvis? Or, as Robert Aickman writes by way of a preface to one of the stories in *The Wine-Dark Sea*:

Sometimes one is amazed to discover how little that is real or true ever finds its way into general knowledge: in so far, of course, as general knowledge is still an expression with meaning.

Appreciating Eliot, as Ricks and McCue confirm, requires an uncommon amount of knowledge, general or particular, of "mythology, heroic legends, topography"; and of languages ancient and modern. Nor is the Internet sufficient; it is a wood of error. Maybe even 2000 pages of an annotated edition isn't enough: towards knowing what there is to know in the territory, a two-volume edition of Eliot's work might arguably add a supplement, examining

both the patterns of the rhythms and the phonetics of the poems.

Not only the allusions, but the individual words, need to be addressed in formal commentaries. In “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service,” for example, we are first challenged by an eight-syllable word, “polyphiloprogenitive,” followed by “sapient,” “sutlers,” “superfetation,” and two words in Greek which would be Greek to most Greeks. And then there are “men-sual”; “enervate”; “Umbrian”; “gesso”; “nimbus”; “Paraclete”; “piaculative”; “staminate”; “pistilate”; “epicene”; and “polymath.” Eliot the magpie—not to diminish his absolute mastery of bricolage, the turning of any old thing at hand into art—was also a scrounging old wordhound. Someone who knew him had the effrontery to call him a sadist, but whatever the justice of that, he was often less than compassionate to the reader in his inveterate culling of dictionaries, and of literary forebearers, comprehension be hanged. “What a rum thing Time is, ain’t it Neddy?” was, according to Valerie Eliot, the original epigraph for *Four Quartets*—words which the lover of Dickens will place in *Pickwick Papers*, but will be a puzzle to anyone else. Similarly, an original heading for *The Waste Land*, HE DO THE POLICE IN DIFFERENT VOICES, came from another Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*. Ricks and McCue call our attention, all in a day’s work, to these transcendently false starts, odd for anyone but Eliot.

*It is dubious whether the purpose of poetry is to communicate anyway. Poetry ought simply to record the fusion of a number of experiences.*—Eliot at Vassar, Spring 1933. Compare Sweeney, in “Fragment of an Agon”:

But if you understand or if you don’t  
That’s nothing to me and nothing to you

and confronted by all this, does the enquiring reader need the editors’ ready arsenal of quotations or not? If there weren’t painstaking annotators, and quoters, we should have to invent them.

Eliot’s fondness for arcane words left him open for one of the unkindest cuts of negative poet-to-poet criticism the present reviewer has ever seen. It wasn’t the usual socio-political biblepounding directed at Eliot. We read in the second volume that St.-John Perse—whose long poem *Anabase* Eliot had translated from the French in the late 1920s—said in conversation with a third poet, Kathleen Raine, that

Eliot’s interest in words was literary and etymological; he learned about words from reading the Oxford dictionary; whereas my own vocabulary comes from my knowledge of many skills and crafts.

Without our weighing Perse's own experiences, his comment has serious claims on our attention; most abjectly, Eliot's occasional poems, "A Note on War Poetry" and the rest, have the musty smell of institutionalized word-hoards, with their dreary abstract language. Even throughout *Four Quartets*, containing some of the poet's most masterful passages, Eliot in effect keeps saying "I gotta use words when I talk to you," and Perse's comment nags at the reader: *A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion, Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle With words and meanings...* In any case Eliot's way, first revealed in Valerie Eliot's facsimile edition of *The Waste Land*, was not García Lorca's, whose finest work seems to draw upon some power beyond books and language:

Sevilla to wound  
Córdoba to die in

Ricks and McCue correct some small errors in—and raise a few questions about—Valerie's facsimile edition, and they are sticklers for right spacing through the many different texts of the poems. Plainly it matters which one of these we're reading, or quoting. Eliot himself, we learn, had chronic trouble with quotation marks, commas, and the like, so his work requires keen-eyed and keen-eared scholarly editors, editors who stand guard over the hyphen in *Ash-Wednesday* and insist on writing out the full title of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," to distinguish it from *Prufrock and Other Observations*, 1917. But in a letter to Colin Robinson from December 1945, we can see what a pitiless critical reader Eliot himself was:

It seems to me that you are trying to express rather difficult ideas which are just beyond your grasp, with an equipment of vocabulary and prosody which is inadequate for poetic expression.

We can give thanks for not having received *that* letter. Compare the use of "equipment" here with its employment in "East Coker," V, where the poet describes his occupation in military terms as

...a raid on the inarticulate  
With shabby equipment always deteriorating  
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,  
Undisciplined squads of emotion....

*Trying to learn to use words.*

Tussling with the heavy volumes, we learn all sorts of things along the

way. A Whitman catalog might include these: Eliot read *The Great Gatsby* three times; Eliot referred respectfully, if vaguely, to Jung; Eliot wrote “Journey of the Magi”

in three quarters of an hour... with the assistance of half a bottle of Booth’s gin.

We’re told also that Eliot spoke well of both Hemingway and Duke Ellington; that he said “criticism is only valuable to an author when it is particularized”; that he mistook the hermit crab for the horseshoe crab (“The Dry Salvages”) and almost put the wrong crab in print; that the controversial sculptor Jacob Epstein made a bust of Eliot in 1951. In a not very genial letter to an Irish-named correspondent on St Valentine’s Day 1931, Eliot complained of “a gross libel” and declared roundly, “I am not an Irishman and can prove it.” Those fighting non-Irish.

Even Eliot, by 1960, had to admit he didn’t know what he’d meant in “Gerontion” by “any concitation of the backward devils.” Add this to the three white leopards, the garlic and sapphires in the mud, and yes, we do need Ricks and McCue and their stockpiles of helpful quotations for reading Eliot.

It was Helen Gardner who said, “Like *The Waste Land*, ‘The Hollow Men,’ and *Ash-Wednesday*, *Four Quartets* was not planned but grew.” And in the new edition we can follow the development of the *Quartets* from their out-of-focus, bad-prose beginnings to the completed quaternion. As in the astonishing transformation through labor of Eliot’s draft passage for “Little Gidding”:

Those who have known purgatory  
here know it hereafter—so shall you  
learn when enveloped by the coils  
of the fiery wind, in which you  
must learn to swim—

This wasn’t the first time in *Four Quartets* Eliot found a *Schwerpunkt*, a center, in dancing. Crucial are the lines in “Burnt Norton,” II—“Except for the point, the still point There would be no dance, and there is only the dance”—and in “East Coker,” I, 23-45, “The association of man and woman In daunsinge.” The words in place, the long passage set as ll. 25-96 of the second section of “Little Gidding” rivals the most assured and moving written in the twentieth century. “In the uncertain hour before the morning...” The lines even approach Dante, who inspired them. Here Eliot takes us into the numinous world of the Catholic religion: *What is divinity if it*

*can come Only in silent shadows and in dreams?*

Through the pervasive triviality of the uncollected poems we can see the genesis of finished major works like “Portrait of a Lady” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” To take two instances which might escape notice—Who wants to keep reading bad attempts at poems?—the opening lines of “The Death of Saint Narcissus” wind up almost verbatim in the first part of *The Waste Land*; and lines from the very slight “To Helen” (otherwise notable for one of the animal images Eliot loved—

Till a white rabbit hopped around the corner  
And twitched his nose toward the crumbs)—

ultimately engender other lines in a finely evocative poem, “Sweeney Among the Nightingales”:

While you were absent in the lavatory  
There came a negro with broad flat eyes  
Bringing a dish with oranges and bananas

\*\*\*\*\*

The waiter brings in oranges  
Bananas figs and hothouse grapes

as a drooping listlessness gives way to a compressed energy. This, minus the trip to the lavatory, is about as close as Eliot ever comes to García Lorca, whose work he casually disparages in a little piece from 1944 called “Kierkegaard and Rilke shouting in the lava.” The lava—lavatory?—again. Back in 1937, Eliot had written to John Hayward (the recipient of “Kierkegaard and Rilke”):

You know my aversion to Modernism in all forms, and especially in Poetry; and you know that Movements like Surrealism are things that I cannot make Head or Tail of.

Here, clearly, Eliot was indulging his fondness for being playful. But, regarding García Lorca, Eliot flatly didn’t know Spanish—so Ricks and McCue are giving us a rare instance of his making a judgment without knowing a lava from a Lagonda. I wonder how much Kierkegaard Eliot was reading; he should have been keenly interested in Kierkegaard’s dissertation on irony, since he relied so much on irony himself.

In mid-February of this year, a combined review of Robert Crawford’s biography and the Ricks-McCue edition appeared in *The New York Review of Books*. Entitled “A Different T.S. Eliot” (no, in large measure it’s the same



Eliot we've been seeing ever since Ricks's *Inventions of the March Hare* was published twenty years ago), the review begins by dismissing Eliot's theory of "a dissociation of sensibility" as debunked hokum. No mention is made of better-known examples of Eliot's critical thinking, the objective correlative, say, or the eternally modern idea of the "auditory imagination" (the subconscious feeling for syllable and rhythm), which remain essential components of a liberal arts education. But the reviewer soon moves on to calling Eliot "a WASP from an old New England family" and claims that "the WASP Burbank" of Eliot's set-in-Venice poem is "Eliot's self-portrait." He shouldn't have done that; even though, in his milieu, "WASP" may be the last acceptable ethnic slur, there's no more evidence in the poem for saying Burbank is Eliot than there is for likening Eliot to Cousin Nancy. Eliot tried to keep his distance from stereotypical "Wasps," for which see "The Boston Evening Transcript" and other poems he set in New England. The *NYRB* reviewer has a human right to squawk about anything he opposes, but he gives no sign of awareness that "Wasp"—in nature a venomous insect, a pest at a picnic—means no longer what it meant in the last century, "Wealthy Anglo-Saxon Protestant." Today, one might as well write "de Gaulle was the scion of an old Frog family." In 2016 there are Wasps (the Bushes and Clintons, but only to a degree) and Wasps (the woman from Kentucky, an artist whose paintings don't sell, asking for two bucks where the boulevard meets the interstate). Unprecedented class mobility, ranging from the nouveau riche to the nouveau pauvre, makes a hash of the old social distinctions. "Wasp" now is nothing more than an acronym for "White" Anglo-Saxon Protestant. *Où sont les WASPS d'antan?* Not all the "Wasps" we know drive Beamers, or sting; and the economic 1% isn't reserved for them.

This is not to excuse to any degree Eliot's own published and long-infamous ethnic affronts, reprehensible by any standard ranging from the gentleman's code to common decency. In writing them he was acting both the snob and the fool. As a music critic wrote of Django Reinhardt, "Django had made a great many miscalculations and had to spend too much time compensating for them." Eliot did ultimately address his sins, or at least sins very much like Eliot's, in the most memorable passage of "Little Gidding": "the awareness Of things ill done and done to others' harm."

The reader—or reviewer—concerned with these questions is strongly advised to seek out Christopher Ricks's book *T.S. Eliot and Prejudice*, which contains the most searching and impartial enquiry ever made into the subject. Even the moon has two sides.

Valerie Eliot, by the way, emphatically pronounced "Bleistein" (on a BBC broadcast in 1971) as "BLEST-in," just as both she and her husband

pronounced *The Waste Land* with the stress on “land.” We learn this also from Ricks and McCue;—proof that living in England makes people talk funny.

Eliot was one of the few public figures of the twentieth century to have been awarded more than a dozen honorary doctorates from venerable universities: Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, the Sorbonne, at least nine others. How many would he be offered today, considering the unclearable minefields in several major poems; in *After Strange Gods*; and in the wildly proscribable “Columbo” and “King Bolo” verses? The question isn’t rhetorical; there would be strong objections, even demonstrations, at some if not all of these universities, if Eliot were to be honored, and even his Nobel Prize might be in jeopardy. But a more profitable question here would be, What was Eliot rebelling against, to make him write so rebelliously?

In Ricks-McCue we find this passage from a letter of March 7, 1914, written by the poet’s father Henry Ware Eliot:

I hope that a cure for Syphilis [sic] will never be discovered. It is God’s punishment for nastiness. Take it away and there will be more nastiness, and it will be necessary to emasculate our children to keep them clean.

Another modest proposal. Maybe, especially if one is being considered for the Nobel, he or she should give instructions that all compromising family letters within reach be rounded up and burned. Well short of the Aspern Papers, even a poet’s laundry lists can be hunted down as food for scandal. But, after studying the Ricks-McCue edition, we need hardly ask what precisely Eliot was rebelling *from*;—so well do the editors serve in the role of surrogate biographers. In effect, they’re Eliot’s best biographers to date; and best psychologists.

Which brings us to that inevitable passage of any archetypal mythic journey, the descent into hell. The most commented on—and much the least compelling—section of the edition, the Improper Verses, contains the early “Columbo” and “King Bolo” rhymes that savvy scholars somehow knew about long before publication. What we might imagine, on the evidence, is that a young Eliot wanted to belong; he wanted to show his peers he wasn’t what would be called today a nerd, an effete non-entity, a hick from the sticks of St Louis; he had to assert his clubbability and independence at once. Better to do this by writing malodorous verses than by doing something dreadful with a shotgun. Eliot’s parents, backed by the quiet-voiced elders, “the guardians of the faith,” were inadequate guides for what Eliot later called juvencence; echoing words he gave to Sweeney in “Fragment of an Agon,” he came to regard his native Unitarianism as “a bad

preparation for brass tacks, like birth, copulation, death, hell, heaven, and insanity.” No wonder he fell under the sway of a rapscallion like Pound. For the next stops on his spiritual journey, see “The Hollow Men” and *Ash-Wednesday*, but there we’re getting ahead of ourselves.

We do have bodies, as D.H. Lawrence pointed out once or twice, and St Augustine is knowledgeable *a posteriori* on the subject. Crazy Jane had something to say from her own experience, too. But no one ever mistook T.S. Eliot for Lawrence, Crazy Jane, or even St Augustine; so the seeming incongruity of the blue stuff will always trouble readers not at home with Eternal Youth and its sins. Or with the attitudes and prejudices of boys leading sheltered lives. Mostly Eliot, who by a rough estimate was always about 24% snook-cocking child, grew out of his Columbo-Bolo period soon enough; but there must be a reason he didn’t make sure his correspondents, Pound, Aiken, Wyndham Lewis and the rest, destroyed them. “Publish and be damned”? If that’s the answer, Eliot has been damned, and will be. Those infernal private letters: The lesson is, make jokes if that’s your nature, but never write anything to a friend you wouldn’t want to see multiplied in a million mirrors. But, being human, we’ll do it anyway. Whatever the story here, Ricks and McCue stop short of theorizing, as is their custom; they’re giving us the texts and all the background they can muster, nothing more. It’s just not their department.

The Uncollected Verses, which include the very late ones to Valerie and cover more than half a century, are on the one hand a mixed bag, on the other a treasure cave of images and whole passages Eliot would work into his canonical poems. There’s no touch of poetry in “For Christ’s sake stick it up your ass” (from “The Triumph of Bullshit,” where Eliot was trying to sound like Villon), but there is in “A girl with reddish hair and faint blue eyes” (in “Paysage Triste”). In “The Triumph of Bullshit,” Eliot’s wordlust runs comically rampant: “etiolated,” “alembicated,” “orotund,” “galamattias,” “versiculous,” and more. The “Ballade pour la grosse Lulu”—Villon again?—is vulgar and racist, but has at least some energy; the Valeries are prissy, prurient, and pedantic, Possum Erect trying to play Sweeney. Then, too, a four-watt bulb of a limerick beginning “I know a nice girl named Valeria Who has a delicious posterior”—turned up in *Valerie’s Own Book*, an anthology assembled by Eliot for a highly privileged readership of one. Unseemly? A fetishistic fascination with a woman’s “posteriors” is best left to the heirs of Kraft-Ebbing, but there’s a pattern among Eliot’s unpublished or uncollected verses: “lavatory”; “posterior”; “A-scratching of her Bung Hole”; “stick it up your ass”; “Give me a hundred shits apiece From 100,000 assholes.” A quatrain’s worth of his jesting:

One day Columbo came aboard  
 With a bunch of big bananas  
 He took the chaplain by the drawers  
 And shoved one up his anus.

Then, in another part of the field, the reader can make a connection between

A lady of almost any age  
 But chiefly breast and rings

in one of the early manuscripts, and lines from a Valerie verse, “How the Tall Girl’s Breasts Are”:

And when my beloved lies upon her side  
 Her breasts are close together, one lying on the other,  
 So that when I squeeze my hand between them  
 It is caught and held  
 A happy prisoner.

This last is rather Cubist, in a properly proper fashion. In the Valeries every day is Mammarial Day. Compare what Pound wrote of the young Marcella Spann in one of the last of the Cantos, CXIII:

And to this garden, Marcella, ever seeking by petal, by leaf-vein  
 out of dark, and toward half-light...

\*\*\*\*\*

The long flank, the firm breast...  
 and to know beauty and death and despair

That reads like love poetry, however fragmentary, and no wonder Dorothy banished her, if she did. But “The intelligent man finds almost everything ridiculous, the sensible man almost nothing”: Goethe; and we shouldn’t open fire on Eliot for letting us peep, a long time later, into deeply private endearments between man and wife, or for his losing his touch and trying to write as if he weren’t;—as Ricks did with grim effect to Hemingway in a review of the sad, defiant, unfinishable novel *Islands in the Stream*. Ricks has shown he’s the most reliable book reviewer one could imagine, but it wasn’t sporting of him to cut loose on a sick lion with a Gatling rotary cannon; and, having only learners’ licenses to read the Valeries anyway, we should leave a love-besotted Eliot alone.

Eliot had worn out the flint but kept trying to light the fire. Like

Hemingway he committed the offense of getting old and trying not to let it show, which puts a strain on people. “What I like most about Eliot,” wrote Robert Graves, “is that though one of his two hearts, the poetic one, has died and been given a separate funeral...he continues to visit the grave wistfully, and lay flowers on it.” Maybe Graves, who said once that “to write poems for other than poets is wasteful,” was only being contentious again, but there’s no surprise in the sarcasm. And yet some reviewers have made it seem that these late love verses are items of the acutest moment, because they’re mildly startling—Persephone and Puck taking five, to bring on Priapus; and it’s true that coming upon the lines in a scholarly edition is like strolling through an art gallery and suddenly noticing the bellybuttons on Adam and Eve, in a painting by Cranach the Younger. How did they get there? And what *is* the late November doing with the disturbance of the spring? Ironically, the Valerie verses read as if they’d been written by J. Alfred Prufrock himself;—as the living Prufrock would have written, had not one of the century’s great poets composed his love-singing for him. A young Eliot, speaking as the ancient Tiresias, describes sexual experience with detachment; an aged Eliot, presumably without using any narrative persona, describes it with a show of intense emotional involvement—another of the paradoxes in Eliot’s work. As he said in a newspaper interview from 1958, the second year of his second marriage (he was 70 then), “I feel younger than I did at 60,” adding that he didn’t notice “any diminution of his mental faculties.” But by then he was writing next to nothing.

Eliot’s oeuvre won’t be matched until the fairies drug the poets with magic herbs. But did the elderly Eliot really compose love poems to Marilyn Monroe and send them to her? I can’t find any reference to them in Ricks-McCue, so maybe they’re a myth. But a long piece in *Vanity Fair* for October 2008, by Sam Kastner, considers the possibility that rumored holograph items from Eliot to the film star “though missing, are genuine.” Ricks and McCue do include a skeltonic doggerel Eliot wrote to Groucho Marx late in life, evidence that the poet could communicate with Hollywood when inclined. And Monroe, of course, seems to have been plain irresistible to men less neglected by Eros than Eliot was.

So for now the Case of the Concupiscent Possum is closed. I think it may have been Auden who wrote about the distinctions among real angels, false angels, real devils, and false devils; and, having read about Eliot’s life in Robert Crawford, along with the poems and verses he wrote, we could say he was at least two of the four of these—requiring little short of a blessed rage for order to edit. Given, then, that the Ricks-McCue is one of the most remarkable accomplishments in the history of publishing, we may ask, Does

it finally add to or diminish Eliot's reputation as a poet? That depends; it proves right enough that Eliot, like Socrates, was mortal, and that unlike Paganini or Yeats he couldn't absolutely depend on inspiration divine or demonic. Some of the early—and possibly late—verses may scratch on the reader's blackboard, if the reader has sensitive ears—or an other-than-literary agenda. Otherwise, should the imagined reader have a charitable nature, he or she can forgive Eliot the lot and say, here is the complete consort dancing together—sometimes to definite false notes. Considered dispassionately, the Ricks-McCue edition is un *mélange adultère de tout*, moving all the way from *gravitas* to *levitas* and back; but it gives us the full Eliot, straight no chaser. In our fight to convince one another to save the planet, what Ricks and McCue have done here might not cut much stone. But these hardworking editors have built, in this tale of two Eliots, a shrine to intelligence, a small temple of western civilization—however uncivil some of the building blocks. On the occasion of a landmark in publishing, then, let us affirm in Eliot's memory the great words, with the urgency of October 1922:

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.  
Shantih shantih shantih