
Part I
Influences

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The Poet and the Pressure Chamber: Eliot's Life

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Over the course of his long career, T. S. Eliot preferred to think about poetry not as the communication of ideas but as a means of emotional relief for the artist, a momentary release of psychological pressure, a balm for the agitated imagination. In 1919, he called poetic composition an “escape from emotion”; in 1953, a “relief from acute discomfort” (*SE* 10; *OPP* 98). At first, poetry alleviated for him the mundane pressures of a bank clerk who lived hand-to-mouth, caring for his sick wife during the day and writing for the *Times Literary Supplement* at night; later, it lightened the spiritual pressures of a holy man in a desert of solitude with the devils conniving at his back. Most frequently, though, it eased the pressure of an artist doubting his talent, an acclaimed poet who wrote more criticism than poetry, ever fearful that the fickle Muse had permanently left him. The most intensely creative stages of Eliot's life often coincided with the periods in which he faced the most intense personal disturbances and upheavals.

But where do we, as students of Eliot, begin to account for that pressure? “The pressure,” as he himself called it, “under which the fusion takes place” and from which the work of art emerges (*SE* 8)? We could begin with the bare facts. Eliot was the youngest of seven children, born on September 26, 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri. His family traced its roots to the early colonies in New England, and his grandfather, a Unitarian minister, moved the family from Boston to St. Louis in 1834 and founded the Church of the Messiah, the first Unitarian church west of the Mississippi. Eliot's father, Henry Ware Eliot, chose to diverge from his own father's footsteps in the ministry and pursued a career as president of the Hydraulic-Press Brick Company, while his mother, Charlotte Champe Eliot (a teacher, social worker, and writer) introduced the children to art and culture. But where among these facts, which are barely even “memories draped by the beneficent spider,” does the author of *The Waste Land* begin to emerge (*CPP* 49)?

Maybe it's better to begin in two places at once. For 14 years while Eliot was young, his family divided its time between St. Louis and coastal New England,

spending summers near Gloucester, a deep-sea fishing port in Massachusetts where his father eventually built a summer cottage. The yellow fog that winds through “Prufrock” and the brown river-god of “The Dry Salvages” both reflect the time he spent as a boy in the industrialized city of St. Louis. The urban imagery of his early poems, he admitted much later, “was that of St. Louis, upon which that of Paris and London have been superimposed” (“Influence” 422). The peaceful sailing scenes and serene coastal imagery of poems like “Marina” and *Ash-Wednesday*, on the other hand, arise from his summers in Gloucester, where he learned to sail with his brother. This is where the pressures of Eliot’s creative life seem to begin: somewhere between the hard, claustrophobic inwardness of the city and the open, romantic expanses of the New England shores.

Boston and the Mind of Europe, 1906–1915

Eliot attended private academies as a young man – Smith Academy in St. Louis and then Milton, just south of Boston – before entering Harvard in 1906. Though a lackluster student at first, he joined the editorial board of the Harvard literary magazine, the *Advocate*, and became increasingly fascinated with literature and philosophy. After three years he went on to pursue graduate work in philosophy, apprenticing himself to influential American intellectuals at Harvard. Josiah Royce, Irving Babbitt, and George Santayana were all among the renowned professors who offered the young student not only footholds in the Western intellectual tradition but also invaluable models of the kind of public intellectual he would eventually strive to become.

Every writer feels the need to tell a conversion narrative, a story that distinguishes “the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast” (in W. B. Yeats’s words) from the artist he or she has become. Eliot was fortunate enough to have two: one literary, the other, religious. The first revolves around a fortuitous discovery at Harvard in December 1908, when he apparently stumbled upon a copy of Arthur Symons’s slim introduction to the nineteenth-century French literary tradition, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), a book that profoundly changed the direction of Eliot’s creative energies. Before then he had read the odes of Keats and Shelley and the dramatic monologues of Browning and Tennyson, and he had imitated the amalgam of violent spiritual energy and demotic speech that he found in late Victorian English poets like John Davidson and Lionel Johnson. He showed a growing interest in Elizabethan drama and a love for Dante’s *Commedia*, which he learned to read in the original Italian and which remained an imaginative touchstone throughout his career. Under Symons’s influence, however, Eliot’s attention veered toward more recent French poets like Jules Laforgue and Charles Baudelaire, whose laconic wit, ironic pose, and fascination with urban landscapes helped him develop a wry, detached idiom to match his growing interest in philosophical skepticism.

Second in importance only to Symons’s book in Eliot’s early education were his courses with Irving Babbitt, the Harvard professor with whom he was to share a

lifelong intellectual kinship. Babbitt's mistrust of emotional excess and individualism turned Eliot against the romantic literary tradition and toward classicism, which espoused the need for limitations and discipline to curb the natural human appetites and inclinations. The opposition between romanticism and classicism that Eliot encountered in Babbitt's class deeply influenced his early criticism, especially once he found support for it a few years later in the forceful and uncompromising rhetoric of modernist poet and essayist T. E. Hulme, whose theories he likely first encountered in 1916. Hulme proposed a classicism based on original sin, the Christian doctrine that proposes human nature to be essentially flawed. This was a radically "new attitude of mind," Eliot wrote when he reviewed Hulme's *Speculations* in 1924, and it "should be the twentieth-century mind, if the twentieth century is to have a mind of its own" ("C [Apr. 1924]" 231).

From 1910 to 1911 Eliot spent a crucial year in Paris, studying at the Sorbonne and attending lectures by the well-known, provocative French philosopher Henri Bergson at the Collège de France. In the world of contemporary art and philosophy, he later reflected, "the predominance of Paris was incontestable" ("C [Apr. 1934]" 451). He studied French with novelist Alain-Fournier, plunged into the chilling fiction of Dostoevsky in translation, and wrote poetry that drew from his reading in the social realism of Charles-Louis Philippe (especially *Bubu de Montparnasse*) and the psychological realism of Henry James (as in *Portrait of a Lady*). He also met and nurtured a close friendship with a fellow lodger in his Paris pension, Jean Jules Verdenal, whose death in World War I Eliot later memorialized in the dedication to his first book.

Eliot returned to Harvard in 1911 to begin a PhD in philosophy. He undertook an intense study of Eastern literary and philosophical traditions, studied primitive myth and ritual with Josiah Royce, and took a class with Bertrand Russell, a prominent British philosopher visiting at Harvard, whose skepticism and intellectual precision he admired. He began his dissertation and, in the following year, accepted a fellowship to study abroad, first at Marburg University in Germany, then at Merton College, Oxford, where he was to work one-on-one with a prominent expert on the philosophy of F. H. Bradley. Soon after he arrived in Europe, however, Germany declared war, compelling the young American to interrupt his studies and head for England early. The change of plans proved immensely fortunate.

A far more important galvanizing agent than any of the professors he encountered at Oxford was the gregarious American expatriate and avant-garde poet Ezra Pound, whom he met just before classes began in September 1914. Pound had been energetically making his presence known in London's literary circles for six years by the time the two met, and he immediately brought Eliot under his wing. His judicious eye for the most experimental, provocative literary talent soon fell upon Eliot's early poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," which he promptly sent to the prominent Chicago literary magazine, *Poetry*. "This is as good as anything I've ever seen," Pound told his new protégé (Hall 263). To Eliot, he offered the guidance and unflagging encouragement that the young poet sorely needed; to others, he sang Eliot's praises tirelessly.

Friends from this period describe Eliot as grave, bookish, and reticent – one unforgettingly labeled him “the Undertaker” – and this side of his personality does resemble the brooding, cynical personae of his early poems (Gordon 139). But we now know that Eliot was also a great lover of popular culture, and his imagination drew as much from forms of “low” culture like contemporary slang and popular music as from conventionally “high” forms like classical poetry, philosophy, and opera. In London he frequented popular locales like the Old Oxford Music Hall, where he admired the outlandish comedians’ “savage humor” and the self-assured bravado of their performances. In Eliot’s eyes, “lowbrow” entertainment was an art with explosive potential for institutional change.

Eliot’s temporary academic sojourn in Europe soon began to assume the look of permanence. The atmosphere at Oxford was stifling, he told his long-time friend Conrad Aiken, and in the midst of seeking release elsewhere he met Vivien Haigh-Wood, a spirited, adventurous, and artistic young woman six months older than he. They were married in June 1915, only a few months after their first meeting, and within the same few months, his early poems – including “Prufrock,” “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” and “Portrait of a Lady” – began to emerge in print. Eliot returned to America in 1915 to tell his family the unexpected news – not only of his marriage but also of his decision to abandon a promising academic career for the capricious whims of the literary life.

Toward *The Waste Land*, 1916–1921

Eliot’s return from America marked the beginning of a low, dark period of his life. He soon learned of Vivien’s lifelong battles with chronic physical and mental illness. His new wife could be vibrant and wildly creative, but she was also prey to nervous collapses, bouts of migraine and exhaustion, prescription-drug addictions, even suicide attempts, all of which grew increasingly severe. Exhausted physically and intellectually from caring for her and teaching a number of ill-paid, evening extension classes (for “continuing education” students, as we would call them), Eliot himself began to sink into depression and physical enervation. His mentor Bertrand Russell, the philosopher whom he met at Harvard and caricatured in “Mr. Apollinax,” had returned to Cambridge and befriended the struggling couple soon after their marriage. When he learned of their financial worries, he offered them a room in his London flat, where in the coming months the notorious womanizer began a sexual affair with Vivien that would continue for four years. Eliot’s discovery of it, likely sometime in 1917, was crushing. It was a double betrayal – by his new wife and his trusted teacher, who treated Eliot “as if he were my son” (Bell 313) – and it exacerbated the disgust and revulsion toward sex and the spirit of savage, biting satire that together pervade the poems composed during this period.

Eliot took a position in the Colonial and Foreign Department at Lloyds Bank, then the second largest bank in England, in March 1917 in the hopes of gaining a degree

of economic stability. In addition to continuing his evening lectures, he oversaw the publication of his first book, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), and assumed an assistant editorship at *The Egoist*, an avant-garde literary magazine. He worked late into the evenings composing dozens of iconoclastic reviews and essays that aimed at revolutionizing the Victorian and Georgian ideals of artistic decorum and propriety that still dominated the literary establishment. The contentious and authoritative tone of these essays reflects the young American's desire to break into the "safe" (as he put it) of the insular London literary world (*Letters* 392). Through his connections with Pound and others in London, Eliot met Leonard and Virginia Woolf, W. B. Yeats, Wyndham Lewis, Aldous Huxley, James Joyce, and other literary giants of early modernism. In 1920, the appearance of his second volume of poetry (published as *Ara Vos Prec* in England; as *Poems* in America) and a collection of critical essays, *The Sacred Wood*, had firmly secured him a reputation as both a radical innovator in poetry and a voice of piercing critical acumen.

As his creative life was coming together, however, his personal life was rapidly falling apart. With their cycles of debilitating illness, Eliot and his wife struggled as if they were locked in a cage together, each feeding off of the other's physical and nervous ailments in an alarming downward spiral. The roles were often reversed: Vivien cared for Eliot when he was ill and wrote letters on his behalf. "We feel sometimes," he wrote to his mother in 1918, "as if we were going to pieces and just being patched up from time to time" (*Letters* 235). The makeshift patchwork came apart in 1921 after a strenuous visit from his family, when Eliot suffered something like a nervous breakdown and was forced to take three months' sick leave from the bank for psychiatric treatment. He went first to rest at Margate, a tranquil seaside town in southern England, and then to a clinic in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he sought the help of renowned psychologist Roger Vittoz.

It was during this period of collapse and convalescence that he began to assemble fragments of old poems and to compose new segments that would eventually coalesce to become *The Waste Land*. Despite its elliptical allusions and apparent detachment, *The Waste Land* is a profoundly personal poem. One of his close friends who read the manuscript soon after its completion called it "Tom's autobiography" (Gordon 147). This is surely an overstatement, but the poem's tapestry of classical allusions does align startlingly well with the intricate, tangled patterns of Eliot's personal distress. From the lascivious "cauldron of unholy loves" implied in the quotation from St. Augustine ("To Carthage then I came" [*CPP* 53]), to the wind-tossed lovers Paolo and Francesca trapped in Dante's inferno for eternity ("What is the wind doing? / Carrying / Away the little light dead people" [*WLF* 13]), many of the poem's spiritually vacuous personae are chilling echoes of Eliot's personal nightmare.

On his way home from Switzerland, Eliot stopped in Paris and met up with Pound, who undertook a massive revision of the unwieldy manuscript. He cut long sections, questioned the unity of others, and (along with Vivien, who also read the drafts) recommended additions and revisions. There followed months of anticipation, during which time publishers offered enormous payments for rights to a manuscript they

hadn't yet seen. When *The Waste Land* was published in its final form in 1922 (first in the *Dial* and the newly launched *Criterion*, then in book form by Boni and Liveright), it was half its original length and twice as fragmented, condensed, and lyrically daring.

After The Waste Land, 1922–1930

In 1922, with the help of a wealthy patron of the arts, Lady Lillian Rothermere, Eliot founded the *Criterion*, an international periodical of literature, culture, and politics that became the staging ground for modernism's most heated debates in the coming years. He was already at work on a new creative project in 1923, an experimental verse drama called *Sweeney Agonistes*, when he sent a personally inscribed copy of his most recent volume of poems to a woman with whom he had not spoken for years. While he was still a graduate student in Boston, Eliot had met and fallen in love with Emily Hale, now a teacher of drama and literature. That she shared his feelings was uncertain to him in 1912, however, and when next he saw her, he was a married man who had settled in England. As the coming years proved, however, his early love for her held an undiminished place in his memory. By the time he reached out to reestablish contact with Hale, he had recognized that the only way out of the "chaos and torment" that he and Vivien inflicted upon one another was separation, though years passed before he acted upon this knowledge (Seymour-Jones 414). The copy of *Ara Vos Prec* that Eliot sent to Hale bore a telling inscription from Dante's *Inferno*: "keep my Treasure," the quotation reads in Italian, "where I yet live on, and I ask no more" (XV.119–20). It seemed a rich if typically cautious promise that he had not forgotten her.

The newly launched general publishing house of Faber & Gwyer (later Faber & Faber) asked Eliot to join the firm as literary editor in 1925. The position offered him a highly influential position in the London literary community and a ready forum for publishing the authors he most admired, including Joyce, Pound, and Marianne Moore. In testament to his growing prominence in literary and academic circles, Eliot was invited to give the prestigious Clark Lectures at Cambridge during the following year. Published only recently as *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* (1993), the 1926 lectures expand his preoccupations with the seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry of John Donne, George Herbert, and Richard Crashaw, tracing their imaginative lineage back to Dante and the Italian poets of the *dolce stil novo*. He discusses a "tendency toward dissolution" that first began to divide thought from feeling in the English poetry of the seventeenth century (VMP 76), and he applauds the intellectual and emotional superiority of medieval religious thinkers like Richard of St. Victor, Thomas Aquinas, and John of the Cross. In the latter half of the decade, Eliot's imagination gravitated strongly toward the intellectual structure and emotional self-scrutiny of religious thinkers like these. He held fast to the conviction that art could not be a substitute for religion, but he also came to believe that religious sentiment could be a potent catalyst for artistic and emotional forces.

Eliot's creative energies were moving steadily toward the unity of thought and feeling he found in religious writers, and his personal energies were not far behind. During a visit to Rome later in 1926, he shocked his companions by descending to his knees in front of Michelangelo's *Pietà* at St. Peter's. From a philosophical skeptic and poetic ironist, this seemed an unprecedented gesture of devotion and surrender. Perhaps, however, his companions would have been less surprised had they realized that Eliot had been on this path for some time. How could they have known that during a walking tour almost a decade before, he had startled Pound in the same way by confessing unexpectedly: "I am afraid of the life after death" (Schuchard 119)?

Eliot began to meet regularly with William Force Stead, an American chaplain at Worcester College, Oxford. In May 1927 he confided to Stead the exciting news that he had received an unexpected letter from Emily Hale, and that it had "brought back something" to him, as he put it, that he "had not known for a long time" (Gordon 234). And he turned to Stead in November 1927, in the midst of this reawakening relationship with Hale, when he decided to be confirmed into the Church of England. The baptism and confirmation were both performed with great secrecy at Eliot's request. He knew that his conversion would likely be greeted with dismay by the literary public, for whom he was still the seemingly nihilistic, iconoclastic author of "Gerontion," *The Waste Land*, and "The Hollow Men."

When he publicly declared his conversion – writing in the 1928 volume of essays, *For Lancelot Andrewes*, that he was "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion" (vii) – it was as he suspected. To many, it seemed an effortless escape from the spiritual devastation and ruins of modernity that he had once so fiercely recaptured; to him, it was the most demanding path possible, a way to face not only the ruins but the vast abyss that lies beneath them. In effect, Eliot chose to follow his beloved Arnaut Daniel, the soul in Dante's *Purgatorio* who voluntarily plunges into "the fire that refines" (XXVI.148). In his eyes, this demanded a life of sacrifice, devotion, and celibacy.

Eliot almost immediately turned his attention back to Dante. The medieval poet who had once provided *The Waste Land* with models for its haunting scenes of infernal torture now offered him a different set of images, one to which he had been drawn years before but had not yet fully grasped: that of spiritual purgation and self-sacrifice. In the essay "Dante" (1929), his imagination moves from the torments of *Inferno* to the strivings of *Purgatorio*, as well as to his master's earliest visionary work, sensing in the *Vita Nuova* ("New Life") the very paradigm of discipline, imaginative sublimation, and renewal that he had long sought in his own life. His immersion in Dante also helped him to map the emotional terrain for his own purgatorial poem, *Ash-Wednesday* (1930), in which he attempted to reconfigure the *Vita Nuova* for himself. Written between 1927 and 1930, *Ash-Wednesday* came together just as *The Waste Land* had, in pieces and segments that gesture separately toward the emotional consequences of surrender, sacrifice, and self-denial. If, as Lyndall Gordon suggests, "Eliot's poems of 1927–1935 move toward a pulsating moment or a vision of radiant light" (241), they do so slowly, arduously, and with the same fear and hesitation that

characterized his earliest poems of circuitous disbelief and self-torment in *Inventions of the March Hare*.

“Into the Rose-Garden,” 1932–1939

Eliot returned to the United States in 1932, for the first time since the fraught visit in 1915 on the heels of his unexpected marriage, to give the prestigious Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard. He arranged to meet Emily Hale while he was there and found tremendous relief in their long-awaited reunion. In a letter to Pound, he admitted that he now felt torn between his thriving career in England and the peaceful domestic pleasures he had rediscovered across the Atlantic.

Before Eliot came back from America, he sent Vivien a request for a formal separation, which she received with shock, desperation, and outright refusal. Friends said that he looked “10 years younger” (“hard, spry, a glorified boy scout,” Virginia Woolf observed) upon his return to England in June 1933, but in private Eliot was committing himself to an ascetic, prolonged solitude (Woolf: 178). For six months he lived in a cramped cabin outside the ramshackle farmhouse at Pike’s Farm, owned by his friend and colleague at Faber, Frank Morley. His demeanor, Morley recalled, was that of “a man who is climbing his private mountain of Purgatory” (Tate 106). Once back in London he effectively went into hiding from his wife, whose frantic pleas for his return grew steadily more public and intrusive. At St. Stephen’s Church, where he attended daily prayer services, he met and befriended Eric Cheetham, an Anglican priest who offered him a place to stay in his presbytery. The austere living conditions at 9 Grenville Place conformed to Eliot’s increasingly ascetic tastes and his desire for a chastened daily routine of reflection, prayer, and atonement. There were few visitors to entertain, the pipes froze frequently, and the walls shook when the train passed by below. He soon took up the position of Vicar’s Warden at St. Stephen’s, a post which obliged him to look after the business affairs of the parish. Emily Hale’s visit to England around this time and the pair’s walking tour of the magnificent grounds at the English manor house Burnt Norton – during which he apparently experienced a visionary sense of release and rejuvenation – only intensified the conflict and self-division that he suffered. He found himself torn between the simple, shared happiness he desired and the chastened, rarefied ideals he associated with the spiritual life.

Once again, however, Eliot released and transfigured the mounting pressures of this internal conflict by transmuting them into the desperate spiritual struggles that confront his protagonist, the medieval English Archbishop Thomas Becket, in *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935). Boldly experimental and steeped in the vocabulary of self-doubt and temptation, Eliot’s first complete play opened to unexpected and widespread acclaim. He had long been interested in Greek and Roman tragedy, in the haunting, incisive wit of the Elizabethan dramatists, and in the practical intricacies of poetic drama in general. Verse drama now offered him a new and challenging forum for the dramatic impulse that was so clearly present in such early monologues

as "Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady," and in turn, it cleared a space in his poetry for a new, more meditative and discursive style. The variegated styles of *The Waste Land* were splitting apart: the tumultuous voices of dramatic personae that echo through the poem now found a more traditional medium in actual stage characters, while the solemn voice of the thunder at its conclusion soon found its own place in the *Quartets*.

The year 1936 saw the publication of two significant collections of Eliot's mature work. *Essays Ancient and Modern* reasserted his position not only as an influential and authoritative literary critic but as a steadfast public intellectual, one whose sweeping range of interests encompassed social policy, political institutions, national education, and the uses of culture. His new collection of verse, *Collected Poems 1909–1935*, represented the concentrated poetic achievement of almost two decades and concluded with his new long poem, "Burnt Norton," in which philosophical meditations on temporality and irrevocable loss coalesced with memories of his serene visit to the manor house with Hale several years before. Eliot addresses her implicitly in the poem, questioning himself about "the passage which we did not take" and "the door we never opened," but in the end, turning away from comfort and nostalgia to plunge toward a "darkness to purify the soul" (*CPP* 117, 120).

By the summer of 1938, Vivien had grown desperate and inconsolable over Eliot's abandonment and refusal to return to her. She began to wander the streets nightly in distress, and according to her brother, was picked up by the police and committed to a sanatorium called Northumberland House soon thereafter. It seems likely that Eliot did not have a hand in her committal, but he neither prevented it nor attempted to contact her before she died there in 1947. Again Eliot felt the pressures of his personal life escalating, and again he found a release valve in the composition of his second play, *The Family Reunion* (1939). There the protagonist, Harry Lord Monchensey, returns to his ancestral home to confront his guilt over the mysterious death of his wife, for which he fears he may have been responsible. In the play's conclusion, he must decide between the comfort and reassurance offered by his newfound lover and the uncertain, lonely path of solitude and purgation offered by the ghostly Eumenides. Harry chooses the latter, claiming "I would not have chosen this way, had there been any other": "it is at once the hardest thing and the only thing possible" (*CPP* 280). Though it was not, in truth, the only one possible, Eliot made this choice as well. Over the coming years Emily Hale realized that he did not intend to marry her, and the two drifted apart.

War and the *Quartets*, 1939–1947

With his editorial energy flagging, his disappointment over *The Family Reunion's* lackluster reception, and his growing despondency over the certainty of a second world war, Eliot brought the 17-year run of the *Criterion* to an end in 1939. Despite the incipient political chaos, he capitalized on his increasingly broad appeal as public

intellectual and offered a timely series of lectures, published as *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), in which he emphasized the crucial need for religion, community, and culture in refashioning a society that might withstand the despotic aggressions of a tyrant like Hitler. It is telling that, although many of the poems in the book had already circulated privately among his friends at Faber, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* also appeared at this time. With their jovial lightness and lilting rhythms, perhaps these delightful poems (which eventually gave rise to the blockbuster musical *Cats*) were meant to signal his farewell to an era of civilization that he sensed radically threatened by the oncoming war. In Eliot's eyes, the historical and cultural richness that he had so avidly sought when he left Harvard over twenty years before – what he called then the “mind of Europe” (*SE* 6) – was coming undone.

He had yet to compose a magnum opus, a long work that would be representative of his mature creative abilities. In the strife-filled years between 1939 and 1942, when many theaters closed and public arts organizations folded, Eliot returned to poetry and to the composition of what he now envisioned would extend and complete the creative project he had undertaken four years before with “Burnt Norton.” As he now foresaw it, each new sequence would follow an identical structure, revolve around a particular, familiar locale, and expand outward from “an acute personal reminiscence” (as he put it) toward more universal meditations on time and redemption (Gardner 67). Eliot was hopeful that the poem would bring him the kind of “reconciliation and relief” that he sensed stirring in Beethoven's late Quartets: “I should like to get something like that into verse before I die,” he admitted (Spender 132–33). But he often doubted the value of his work amid such violence and chaos. “Morning after morning spent fiddling with words and rhythms,” he wrote searchingly, “often seems so pointless” (Browne 158).

During World War II Eliot enlisted as an air-raid warden in Kensington, where he would spend two sleepless nights each week watching for fires caused by German attacks. As the strain wore on him, he took to living outside of London for part of the week, commuting into the city to attend to his publishing responsibilities and assume his fire-watching duties from the roof of the Faber office building. In the midst of it all, the second volume of his long “war” poem, “East Coker,” appeared in 1940; “The Dry Salvages” in 1941; “Little Gidding” in 1942; and the *Four Quartets* as a whole, “[t]he complete consort dancing together,” later in the same year (*CPP* 144).

The Smiling Public Man, 1943–1965

After the war ended Eliot returned to live full-time in London and shared a flat at 19 Carlyle Mansions with John Hayward, an avid bibliophile and exacting literary editor whose opinions he deeply valued. In the nine years they shared the flat, Eliot appreciated both the solitude and the social life that Hayward's friendship permitted. Other friends from this period recall him living between the usual extremes. At times, the 55-year-old poet was intensely solitary and reclusive, keeping to his part of the shared

flat, a sparse bedroom with a large crucifix and writing desk. At others, he was surprisingly jovial and social, giving private readings of his poetry or reciting from memory long passages from Sherlock Holmes, one of his long-time favorites.

After 1948, Eliot lived the life of a "sixty-year-old smiling public man" (as W. B. Yeats memorably referred to himself) (Yeats 216). He enjoyed a private audience with the Pope during a visit to Rome in 1947, gave national broadcasts for BBC public radio, and spent a year at the prestigious Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University. The man who had once taught evening courses for a meager living was now invited around the world to give literary lectures. In 1948 alone he lectured in Brussels, Germany, and South Africa. In the same year he was awarded both the prestigious Order of Merit in England and the Nobel Prize for Literature in recognition of "his outstanding, pioneer contribution to present-day poetry" (*Le Prix* 56). When he visited the United States he was welcomed as a celebrity and immediately greeted by the press and groups of fans. One lecture that he gave in Minneapolis, "The Frontiers of Criticism," famously drew an audience of 14,000 listeners. Despite such impressive accolades, however, he maintained regular hours at the publishing house. An interviewer in 1960 recorded his daily schedule, which seemed the routine of an anonymous office clerk: "He left his flat . . . wearing an impeccable dark blue suit and carrying a tightly rolled umbrella, walked one block to the No. 49 bus stop. When the bus came, he mounted to the upper deck, unfolded his *London Times* to the crossword puzzle, and fell to" ("Reflections" 22). From his office at Faber, Eliot the publisher turned his attention to promoting and nurturing the literary talent of young writers like W. H. Auden, Djuna Barnes, and later Ted Hughes.

Though he continued to add to his prolific critical writings, Eliot wrote little poetry after the *Quartets*. The popular stage now consumed his creative energies, even if he claimed to possess no natural talent for dramatic composition. In his later plays, he worked tirelessly to balance the formal elements of dramaturgy with the release of personal pressures that poetry had once provided. In *The Cocktail Party*, for instance, a semi-comedy which opened to great acclaim in New York in 1949, Eliot examined the kind of suffering he knew from his years of severe and self-imposed solitude: "What is hell? Hell is oneself, / Hell is alone" (*CPP* 342). The popular success of *The Cocktail Party* landed him on the cover of *Time* magazine, but he remained dissatisfied with its imperfections and soon set about trying to remedy them in *The Confidential Clerk*. In his fourth major play, he strove to achieve an even more colloquial, less "poetic" style. "Cut out the poetry," Eliot once surprisingly remarked, "That's what I've been trying to do all my life" (Matthews 159).

When his sister Margaret died suddenly in 1956, the 68-year-old poet somberly asked his friend E. F. Tomlin, "How does one set about dying?" (Gordon 500). Yet in the nine years remaining to him, he finally discovered the domestic happiness that had eluded him for so long. A few months later he proposed to Valerie Fletcher, his 30-year-old secretary at Faber, and the two were married early in the morning on January 10, 1957 in a private ceremony at St. Barnabas Church, where (as Eliot learned) Jules Laforgue had been married almost a century before. After a honeymoon

in the south of France, Eliot returned to his play-in-progress, *The Elder Statesman*, now lightening the play's darker undertones and integrating a kind of tender love poetry unknown in his work until then. He was uncharacteristically affectionate with his new wife in public: the man who had seemed to be preparing for death now told reporters that he was considering taking dancing lessons with her. Despite his continuous and increasingly severe health problems, it was a period of profound and liberating peace for Eliot.

After a series of debilitating illnesses, Eliot died of heart failure at his home in London on January 4, 1965. He entertained some remarkable visitors and correspondents during his final months – renowned composer Igor Stravinsky and nuclear physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer among them – but perhaps none so singularly entertaining as the comedian and film star Groucho Marx, with whom he drank whiskey, traded photographs, and smoked cigars. News that the famous comedian was coming to London to visit him, he later told Marx, had inestimably improved the poet's own reputation around town. "Obviously," Eliot mischievously wrote, "I am now someone of importance" (Marx 162).

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