

WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

T. S. Eliot's Daughter¹

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'IDEALLY HE SHOULD LIKE to have had about ten children,' Valerie Eliot once said of her late husband. 'He was,' she added, 'suited in every way.'² I first heard these words roughly a quarter of a century ago, and they have stayed with me. They struck me as moving, and lie behind this lecture. Mrs Eliot's remarks presented someone very different from that image of an 'unpleasant to meet Mr Eliot' which the poet himself was well aware of, and which has too often calcified into gaunt caricature.³

Eliot is one of the twentieth century's great poets, perhaps its greatest. He is so especially because of the music of his words. In his verse there is an insistent, insidious and magnificent sense of poetry as language which, as C. K. Williams says poetry must, 'achieves a forcefulness far beyond that of direct prose'. Eliot's work demonstrates Williams's assertion that 'By incorporating some of the elements of music, artificial rhythms, tonal organization, repetition, harmony and dissonance, poetry touches more deeply into the ground of our mental life than other kinds of language.'⁴ Eliot is also the greatest immigrant poet in the English language; to

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² Valerie Eliot on BBC TV's 'Arena: T. S. Eliot', broadcast on 6 June 2009 (this remark was first made in a 1971 interview).

³ T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London, 1969), p. 136.

⁴ C. K. Williams, 'The music of poetry and the music of the mind', *Poetry Review*, 99:3 (Autumn 2009), 121.

describe him as such may sound patronising and peculiar, yet an awareness of cultural displacement accompanying a sense of anxious fidelity is fundamental to much of his best poetry and is part of what gives that writing a distinctive, sometimes percussive modernity. More locally, this immigrant author is the finest poet of London. He is that city's Baudelaire. Moreover, as a result of artistic shrewdness, historical accident, and personal bravery, he is a remarkable poet of the Blitz. This creator of 'hollow men', a contemporary both of J. M. Barrie and of D. H. Lawrence, is also a major poet of gender, a feeling anatomist of masculinity—and not only in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. That this same writer, like England's magnificent republican author, Milton, should be the most compelling religious poet of his age, and among the most hypnotic religious voices of his language makes Eliot all the harder to comprehend. Repeatedly readers have had to set aside that he was too the poet of *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*; to ignore that he was renowned as a popular playwright; to forget he was one of his century's best known publishers. In various ways he has been defaced or boxed in—because it is just too difficult to allow him his multiplicity, his complexity, his life.

It is an irony that T. S. Eliot, whose very name became a byword for 'difficulty' in poetry, is now so often denied his right to a sustaining complexity as a poet and as a human being. Eliot came to be regarded as an iconic poet, and he met his iconoclasts. However different from each other they may be, iconic poets commonly undergo a kind of critical mugging. Where Robert Burns has become for some a womanising, populist, sentimental 'Scotch' drunk, Eliot has been reduced on occasion to a marmoreal elitist, a poet only of the brain, a woman-hating anti-semite. The problem with these caricatures is not just that they reduce the humanity of the poet caricatured; they also come between the reader and the poem. One-note criticism and caricature masquerading as biography are reductive and damaging: they hurt our sense of the life and, through that, of the work. Techniques of literary biography and attentive criticism should work together to restore nuance both to our sense of the life that nourished the work and to the poems themselves.

Purists may think this a soiling, a violation. For some the poem must be kept uncontaminated, unsullied by the dirt of biography. A contemporary of the I. A. Richards who famously suppressed even the authors' names when he gave poems to his student guinea-pigs for the purpose of 'practical criticism', T. S. Eliot was very, very wary of biography. In *Keepers of the Flame*, his study of literary estates and the rise of biographical writing, Ian Hamilton records that 'Eliot added a memorandum to

his will: "I do not wish my executors to facilitate or countenance the writing of a biography of me."⁵ Arguably the best time for a new, full biography might be when all Eliot's poems, prose and letters are published, and when the work of his executors is over. Yet if we wish to assert or reassert the sometimes troubled, troubling humanity of this poet in a way that will win new readers, then the time for new biographical studies, and for allowing them to quote much more generously from his established and newly published works, is sooner rather than later.

In some cases—Chaucer and Shakespeare are examples—it can be easy to set aside the scanty biographical information we have. Readers may choose to accept 'the death of the author'. They can see the text, the poem, as produced through the confluence of social and linguistic networks, and only accidentally emanating from a specific individual who may at the time of writing have been feeling ill, in love, or amused. Eliot's most celebrated poem seems tailor-made for the sort of reading encouraged by Roland Barthes in *S/Z*. Surely *The Waste Land* is a work originating from a *réseau*, a network; its author is not, as Michel Foucault's famous essay has it, a 'who', but productively an impersonal 'what'.⁶ If the technologies of Eliot's day—from typewriting to telephony—encouraged a viewing of poems as part of an age of mechanical reproduction, then our own digital technologies—computers, databases, electronically searchable e-books—might seem to have separated further 'the man who suffers' from 'the mind which creates' as Eliot put it so memorably in his 1919 essay, 'Tradition and the individual talent'. That essay was just one of his early and in part defensive attempts to snip apart the printed poem from the digits that first held the pen.

Yet the same Eliot urged we should preserve even Shakespeare's laundry bills in case eventually they might reveal something worth knowing about the making of the writer's work. Today the very ease with which crude caricatures too often pass for T. S. Eliot, for Robert Burns or for other authors shows how futile are efforts to keep poems sealed off from biographical information or misinformation about the poet. If it is still possible to read poems in blissful ignorance, it is impossible to do so for long. Our systems of knowledge soon intrude; and if they did not, reading would be rendered null. There is no such thing, Wittgenstein pointed

⁵ Ian Hamilton, *Keepers of the Flame: Literary Estates and the Rise of Biography* (London, 1992), p. 292.

⁶ Michel Foucault, 'What is an author?', in Josue V. Harari (ed.), *Textual Strategies* (London, 1980), pp. 141–60.

out, as a wholly private language. If words were denuded of all associations, all gestures towards context, knowledge, emotions, and history, then poetry would cease. To accept the possibilities of poetry, it is necessary to take on board that, whatever the enabling fictions of poets, poetry does not operate in a hermetically sealed realm, cut off from the world and the life of the author as if locked away in a fridge.

Caricature supplies that dangerous thing: a little knowledge. Literary biography risks supplying too much. But it is for readers to filter out the irrelevant, not to pretend that knowledge about a poet is automatically useless. Biographical study fights caricature by contributing to a rich interpretative context. Indeed a biographical study of a poet must not be 'biography' as the *OED* so nakedly defines the term: 'a written record of the life of an individual'. Instead, it will draw on life-writing as well as on critical and interpretative skills to suggest how the life conditioned the poetry and why the poetry matters. This is what I want to do in this lecture on Eliot when it comes to reading 'Marina', but I am arguing also that it should be done on a larger scale.

For all that in October 2009 Eliot was voted Britain's most popular poet in a BBC online poll, it *is* now necessary to point out afresh why his poetry matters—why it might count for all readers, not just aficionados of online poetry polls or professors or graduate-school elites. Eliot has suffered much from glib assumptions, from rumours of suppressed secrets, from a kind of dismemberment—part happenstance, part anxious guardianship—which has kept his writings scattered without any sort of collected edition. It is precisely because of these things that, as his letters begin to appear in their full form, as his voluminous prose is gathered, and as for the first time his collected poetry is to be afforded a full scholarly edition, we are nearing the moment for a new biographical study of Eliot. Such a book should be allowed to let readers—not least readers unlikely to work their way through all of this poet's letters and published prose—hear Eliot's own nuanced words as part of a twenty-first-century crafted narrative, rather than having to rely almost exclusively on paraphrasing and hearsay. A good biographical study needs a fine and shifting balance between intimacy and critical distance. So far this has been very difficult for Eliot's biographers to achieve, and it may be that sometimes the result has been to make him seem all the more removed, reinforcing a lingering suspicion of rebarbative inhumanity.

Eliot should not be presented as a saint. The more some of his defenders treat him as such, as if he were a man without worrying prejudices, blind-spots, or issues, the more they play into the hands of caricaturists.

It is simply misguided to argue, for instance, that the poet of the privately circulated 'King Bolo' poems was untouched by sexism or racism:

King Bolo's big black bassturd kween
 Was awf'ly sweet and pure
 She interrupted prayers one day
 With a shout of Pig's Manure.
 K. B. b. b. b. k.
 Was aw'fly sweet and pure
 She said "I don't know what you mean!"
 When the chaplain whistled to her⁷

Whether in the Bolo poems or 'The Hippopotamus', in his criticism of *Hamlet* or of Scottish literature, or in *After Strange Gods*, Eliot scandalised. And sometimes he got things wrong. His letters, such as those to Bonamy Dobrée, now in the Brotherton Library at Leeds University, can be disturbing and offensive as well as revealing and funny. It is right to acknowledge that troubling references to Jews, black people and others could be part of Eliot's private scurrility and, on occasion, of his public discourse. Rather than trying to argue with teetering sophistication that Eliot was everywhere pure as the driven snow, it may be more effective to make clear that the man who wrote the 'King Bolo' poems was also the publisher whose support for Amos Tutuola marked him out as a pioneering London publisher of black African writing; while the man who in 1934 published (then soon suppressed) *After Strange Gods* was also the dramatist who wrote for George Bell—a churchman notable for his outspoken criticism of the Nazi treatment of Jews in the 1930s—that 1935 play which invites a critique of state-sponsored 'necessary' killing, *Murder in the Cathedral*. The Bolo poems should be quoted. So should the letters to Dobrée and the references to Jews in *After Strange Gods* and elsewhere. Yet to see them as the focal point of Eliot's work is misguidedly reductive, and it would be foolish to insist that Eliot's writing would have been improved by perpetual moderation. Poetry depends on measure. However, no human being is always a creature of measure. To avoid either crucifying or beatifying the Pope of Russell Square is the best way to restore to the man and his poetry their deep, troubled and so acoustically insistent music of humanity.

⁷ Eliot to Conrad Aiken, 10 Jan. 1916, in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume I, 1898–1922*, rev. edn., ed. Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton (London, 2009), p. 138. Eliot adds an asterisk after the word 'chaplain' and explains this refers to 'Charles, the Chaplain'.

If we stand back and see Eliot and his work in the round, we might realise that he was not just the most internationally influential poet of his age, impacting alike on George Seferis (who translated ‘Marina’) and the young Hugh MacDiarmid. Eliot was also—and this has sometimes bred resentment—England’s greatest ever immigrant poet. It may be easier for readers who do not feel themselves to be English to appreciate this, because they—we—do not take an assumed Englishness for granted, and because we may be particularly alert to tensions in Englishness. Cultural dislocation is hardly a new subject in literature: it is part of the *Aeneid* and *Othello*. In Scott, Byron and others it becomes an important constituent element of Romanticism, and it is a pronounced topic in American writers as different as Fenimore Cooper and Henry James. Eliot is probably the master poet of cultural displacement. As an immigrant he wrote so many poems of dislocation. ‘Marina’ is one of these, and so is *The Waste Land*. If his early masterpiece, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, is an acute, astute presentation of male sexual anxiety—every bit as telling as *Peter Pan*—then so many of Eliot’s poems also speak anxiously of displacement, *mélange*, hybridity and mix-up because this was a condition Eliot did not simply observe—it was not just the predicament of ‘Hakagawa, bowing among the Titians’—it was the ground of Eliot’s existence.⁸

He was a poet brought up with the most insistent familial ideals, yet at a crucial time in his life he was separated from his biological family by an ocean. From ‘Chicago Semite Viennese’ to ‘Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch’, his poems repeatedly worry about a sense of existential homelessness: ‘En Amérique, professeur; | En Angleterre, journaliste [. . .] En Yorkshire, conférencier; A Londres, un peu banquier . . . En Allemagne, philosophe [. . .] On montrera mon cénopathe | Aux côtes brûlantes de Mozambique.’⁹ Eliot’s work is full of displaced wanderers, ‘Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp, | Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.’ This immigrant poet displaced from Germany by war and who had not intended to come and live long-term in England, this Southern scion of Boston Brahmins who had in part reacted rebelliously against his own spiritual and intellectual heritage was both uneasily fascinated with and disturbed by those figures so long associated with wandering—displaced Jews. They epitomised what worried him about aspects of his own condition. His worry and disturbance

⁸ Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 61, 47.

are bound up with his background and are hardly admirable: they are, though, unsettlingly understandable, awkwardly fused with what makes Eliot so powerful an immigrant poet.

Eliot went on being seen as an immigrant poet for years after he became a British subject and joined the Church of England. In 1931, the year after the publication of 'Marina', Chatto and Windus brought out Thomas McGreevy's *Thomas Stearns Eliot*. This book makes no mention of 'Marina', but does insist that most of Eliot's writings 'cannot be considered as the work of an English poet'. Instead, 'it is essential that his American origin should be kept in mind'. McGreevy, who had never been to the America he called 'the most vulgar plutocracy that the modern world has seen', related Eliot's work in particular to the 'rather priggish' mind of New England, that 'well-bred maiden aunt of the United States'.¹⁰ Sometimes Eliot could use—and sometimes he could seek to counter—stereotypes, but he was also, as he has continued to be, viewed through them. What is remarkable about Eliot is not so much his immigrant status as how in *The Waste Land*, 'Marina' and elsewhere he manoeuvred within and beyond it.

If you stand outside the old Faber offices in London, at the corner of Russell Square, just opposite is a restored cabmen's shelter, erected by Sir Squire Bancroft in 1901. The cabmen then would have been riding horse-drawn vehicles, just like the ones in Sydney Paget's illustrations to Sherlock Holmes which had impressed Eliot as a boy in Missouri, long before he ever saw London. For all that *The Waste Land* has a taxi with a throbbing engine, not a horse-drawn cab, waiting for its passenger, Eliot's fog-bound London was closer than we might think to the London of Charles Dickens. Dickens's house still stands as a museum not so far from Russell Square. Only eighteen years separate the death of Dickens from the birth of the poet of 'He Do the Police in Different Voices', and if Dickens is the greatest novelist of London, T. S. Eliot, not Samuel Johnson of Lichfield or James Thomson of Port Glasgow, is London's greatest poet. Eliot's city is traceable on the map 'along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street' or 'up the hill and down King William Street'.¹¹ Yet it is also forever compacted in that 'Unreal City' all the more eerie and hallucinatory because it is not a city of dreadful night but a persistent

¹⁰ Thomas McGreevy, *Thomas Stearns Eliot, a Study* (London, 1931), pp. 3, 4. McGreevy's publisher seems to have been unsure what to call his book: on the front cover '*Thomas Stearns*' is replaced by the more familiar 'T. S.'

¹¹ Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, pp. 69, 62.

daytime phantom. It is present, but disconcertingly absent, as the seen and unseen oscillate. Again, Eliot felt this urban unreality from the inside, perhaps all the more intensely because he was an immigrant from another continent. Quoting Baudelaire's 'Fourmillante Cité, cité pleine de rêves, | Où le spectre, en plein jour, raccroche le passant!', he wrote of how he knew that phenomenon because he had 'lived it'.¹² His life, nourished by his reading and in turn nourishing his writing, made Eliot London's most haunting poetic voice.

More than that, his life in London made Eliot probably the greatest English-language poet of the Second World War. Like such notable war writers as Naomi Mitchison and Elizabeth Bowen, he was a non-combatant. Randall Jarrell's 'The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner' or Sorley Maclean's 'Ruweisat Ridge' catch the shock of combat. Alun Lewis catches the boredom, and Keith Douglas the regret. Yet it is Eliot who most convincingly and defiantly sounds the note of mustered struggle and spiritual fightback summed up in popular memory in the simplifying phrase 'the spirit of the Blitz'. He catches that spirit profoundly and enhances it with a courageously conflicted complexity in 'East Coker', 'The Dry Salvages', and 'Little Gidding'. For such a bookish person, Eliot's life and work are surprisingly dramatic. The drama is insistent in the deeply lacerating emotional fragmentation of *The Waste Land*, but it extends as well to the rooftop firewatching and Blitz conditions of *Four Quartets* where the most insistent pressure of being immured in history provides also windows beyond.

Still, rereading Eliot's poetry or re-examining his life should not levitate him into heroic remoteness. It must refuse him the chill of a plinth. The subtlest and most important work in recuperating this great poet is to restore to our sense of him and his writings their full, moving, flawed humanity. From that humanity Eliot's finest religious poetry springs; in that humanity the music of his verse was so subtly formed. To understand this, consider what Eliot withstood. Think of him in Glasgow at the height of the Second World War, just along the road from blitzed Clydebanks, delivering a lecture at Glasgow University on—of all things—'The Music of Poetry'. The pressures to pontificate, to propagandise, to preach, must have been intense. Eliot, though, withstands all those wartime pressures to focus instead on the acoustics of articulation in verse. Similarly in the *Quartets* the apparently isolated struggle of the poet to make poetry is not

¹² T. S. Eliot, 'What Dante means to me', in *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* (1965; repr. London, 1978), p. 127.

directly compared to, but is fused with the struggles of fishing communities, fighters, and others. The *Quartets* turn on themselves, sometimes with striking self-laceration, even as they move towards attunement and resolution. These are poems that do partake of the marmoreal, but have also learned to voice vulnerability.

Vulnerability was part of Eliot's articulation from the start. It is there in Prufrock's love-song. Yet Eliot's articulation was also spikily self-protective. To realise the hypnotic power of vulnerable desperation that is in his greatest work you only have to read to primary-school-age children and see them react to the obsessive, intense longing in the section of 'What the Thunder Said' which begins with 'Here there is no water but only rock' and ends,

If there were water
 And no rock
 If there were rock
 And also water
 And water
 A spring
 A pool among the rock
 If there were the sound of water only
 Not the cicada
 And dry grass singing
 But sound of water over a rock
 Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees
 Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop
 But there is no water¹³

Eliot's poetry runs the gamut from difficulty to directness. Sometimes, as here, the acoustic complexity, the clear yet magnificently clogged music of the lines, is bound up with a directness felt before fully explicable. Nowhere is this more true than in 'Marina'.

Whether writing of 'No water', of 'Nothing again nothing' or of the 'Unreal', Eliot's work is suffused with negatives, vacancies, absences. His life, too, had its profound Macavities. He had no daughter, and once said so straightforwardly to a correspondent who asked him about 'Marina'.¹⁴ T. S. Eliot might seem an unlikely candidate if one were thinking of parental poems. To some the suggestion might sound a joke, but that is where Valerie Eliot's remark that 'Ideally he should have had about ten children' might give us pause. Just as ideas of home, rootedness, and

¹³ Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, pp. 72–3.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Professor Ronald Schuchard for telling me about this as yet unpublished letter.

rootlessness obsessed Eliot, if only because he felt himself a *metoikos*, a resident alien, a displaced person, so there came a time in his life when thoughts of paternity and children meant much to him. Out of that came both 'Marina' and the poems now best known through the musical *Cats*, and originally read to children, sometimes over tea, by the Edward Lear-loving author of *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. Valerie Eliot has spoken of how 'deep in [Eliot] there was a need for family life . . . there was a little boy in him that had never been released'.¹⁵ In *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* Eliot in the 1930s attempted such a release. This took him back to his own childhood when his father had drawn pictures of cats, but it also allowed him as a childless man to connect with the children of friends.

We can tell that lines which haunted Eliot many years earlier were Sappho's marvellous fragment of attunement and maternal regard,

Hesperus, ferrying home all bright dawn scattered,
You ferry home the sheep, you ferry home the goat, you ferry the child
home to mother.¹⁶

If Eliot may incline towards Sappho's fragment in the verse of *The Waste Land*, he does so with irony:

the evening hour that strives
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,
The typist home at teatime . . .

Yet Eliot's note on this passage is odd. He wrote that it 'may not appear as exact as Sappho's lines, but I had in mind the "longshore" or "dory" fisherman, who returns at nightfall'.¹⁷ Eliot fuses Sappho with Stevenson's 'Requiem', that poem which begins 'Under the wide and starry sky' and ends '*Home is the sailor, home from sea, | And the hunter home from the hill.*'¹⁸ This may be an act of poetic intuition which recognises Robert Louis Stevenson's poem of stars and homecoming as a version of Sappho's, albeit a darker interpretation of the theme, where evening brings the homecoming of death. In *The Waste Land* the fusion of Sappho with Stevenson is ironic; one more gesture towards the death-in-life that

¹⁵ See above, n. 2.

¹⁶ This translation of Sappho's fragment is from Robert Crawford, *Full Volume* (London, 2008), p. 33.

¹⁷ Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, pp. 68, 78.

¹⁸ Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Requiem', in Robert Crawford and Mick Imlah (eds.), *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* (London, 2000), p. 372.

obsesses the poem. However, in Eliot's note the apparently superfluous glance towards dory fishermen, like other passages to do with sailing or the sea in his writing, harks back to his teenage years in New England where his father and mother had their summer home in the fishing port of Gloucester, Massachusetts.

It is absolutely characteristic of Eliot as a poet to secrete personal associations under an apparently impersonal carapace, then hint at what he has done. While the linking of Sappho's homecoming lines on the evening star to experiences of his own childhood and youth is interred below irony in *The Waste Land*, the cluster of associations which Eliot here constellates around a glance at Sappho's fragment will exfoliate elsewhere in his work. That exfoliation occurs not least in *Ash-Wednesday* and in 'The Dry Salvages', but nowhere more compellingly than in 'Marina'.¹⁹

'Marina' is so striking a sound system because of the way its lines ebb and flow, flow and ebb. Most obviously this happens in the second verse paragraph when four different long lines up to fifteen syllables in length alternate with the repeated one-word monosyllabic line, 'Death'. Each line flows out only to be called back to the same place. The second verse paragraph of 'Marina' is just one example from a poem full of tidal movement. The opening lines also ebb and flow, alternating in length and letting their surprisingly unpunctuated elements float so that line breaks, guiding and guided by the syntax while themselves acting as punctuation, are crucial to the poem's acoustic. Aspects of Eliot's poem may well be ghosted by Kipling's short story of hidden children, 'They', and by Whitman's whispering sea in 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking' with its 'Death, death, death, death, death,' but 'Marina' has a soundscape of its own.

'Marina' is one of Eliot's greatest feats of what he called 'the auditory imagination'.²⁰ Its use of internal rhyme is astonishing. He rhymes not only within a line, 'By this grace dissolved in place', but also (as presently published) across the division of the verse paragraphs, so that, after the blank, across the gulf between the sections, the rhyme is picked up again, mid-line: 'What is this face, less clear and clearer.' A similar device is heard a little later:

¹⁹ All quotations from 'Marina' are taken from Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, pp. 109–10.

²⁰ T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, 2nd edn. (London, 1964), p. 118.

Whispers and small laughter between leaves and hurrying feet
Under sleep, where all the waters meet.

Bowsprit cracked with ice and paint cracked with heat.

Here the end-rhymes, which would normally be confined to one verse or verse paragraph in a poem (other than in, say, a villanelle), are continued across the verse paragraphs, bridging the separation, while the 'ee' sound of 'feet', 'meet' and 'heat' is also fleetingly present mid-line in 'between' and 'sleep'. As the divisions between verse paragraphs enact a separation, so the persistence of sound patterns articulates a joining. The acoustic of separation, apparent disjunction, that is overcome by a further act of joining—of rhyme—is paralleled by the way the separation, the loss, of forgetting is balanced against the bringing back of memory. As poetry often must, 'Marina' activates the links between recall in the sense of remembering and recall in the sense of uttering repeated sounds or calls.

Bowsprit cracked with ice and paint cracked with heat.
I made this, I have forgotten
And remember.
The rigging weak and the canvas rotten
Between one June and another September.
Made this unknowing, half conscious, unknown, my own.

The focusing and refocusing of sound in that line—from 'unknowing' through 'unknown' to 'my own'—is part of the acoustic shifting of this foggy poem whose elements keep slipping in and out of focus, just as its sounds keep slipping in and out of rhyme. Elements in 'Marina', both sounds and images, seem far off, only to emerge close up. They appear remote, then re-emerge as internal. They are islanded yet joined, scattered but netted in a pattern, lost but found. It is in his finest poetry rather than in many of his social or critical writings (which are at their finest when closest to the music and making of poetry) that T. S. Eliot best sets out his ideas of order, his sounding of a sound system.

For many first-time readers of the poem, the title 'Marina' functions principally to emphasise the marine, flotational currents of the verse, and to supply a name for the 'daughter'. Listeners aware of the allusion to Shakespeare's *Pericles* (quickenened, it seems, by the early work of G. Wilson Knight) will find confirmation that the poem is indeed about recovery, about 'recall' in the sense of memory, calling back, calling again and again.²¹ Readers ready to grasp the allusion to Seneca's *Hercules Furens*

²¹ See G. Wilson Knight, 'My romantic tendencies', *Studies in Romanticism*, 21 (1982), pp. 556–7. I am grateful to Professor John Haffenden for directing me to this article.

(from which the poem's Latin epigraph comes) will find backing for the perception that the poem is about loss, death, sundering: *Hercules Furens* features a man who has murdered his children. But these things are embodied in the poem's own sights, sounds, words, emotions. The allusions, however helpful, are less essential to the poem than its word-music. That word-music, that sound system, most fundamentally carries the meaning.

'Marina' remains one of Eliot's least discussed poems. It is, too, his most beautiful. It begins by being suspended between a stunned sense of dislocation and a longing for relationship,

What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands
 What water lapping the bow
 And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog
 What images return
 O my daughter.

Part of the poem's beauty comes to lie in its achieved hope and sense of newness, 'the hope, the new ships'; also in its confirmatory acoustic, strengthened by the rondo, the echo-sounding relocation that is the concluding verse paragraph,

What seas what shores what granite islands towards my timbers
 And woodthrush calling through the fog
 My daughter.

As in the opening of the poem, these lines have so little punctuation that their tone is hard to fathom. Yet their recovery at the end of 'Marina', and the way the poem's cumulative effect has built for the words a new context, one of new life, new hope, has a confirmatory effect. We have moved from a longing or marvelling invocation at the start of the poem, to a closer, more assured conclusion where the daughter is recalled. Though her presence may be only something called up by a thrush's song (a phenomenon associated in *The Waste Land* and 'Burnt Norton' with childhood and with hallucination or mirage), nevertheless there is also in the clear, present finality of that short, two-word last line a sense of parental closeness.

This is so strong that sometimes readers are surprised to learn T. S. Eliot had no daughter, and that the 'I' of the poem is not Eliot himself as a parent. One can feel superior in pointing this out, calling attention to theories of impersonality, the persona, allusion—but there are dangers in such superiority if it leads us too far away from the undeniable power of the word 'daughter' in the poem, and from that sense of intense, personal-sounding longing it embodies.

That sense of longing is a predominant emotion in the work of a writer so obsessed with what the Victorian poet James Thomson called 'memory and desire'.²² More specifically, biographically oriented critics in recent decades have tended to wish to relate Eliot's sense of longing in *Ash-Wednesday* and other poems of the 1930s or early 1940s to a sense of sexual sublimation associated with his relationship with Emily Hale. She was the woman Eliot seems to have been in love with before he left America in 1914, and with whom from the late 1920s, when he sent her his essay on 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', he enjoyed for many years a new, companionable relationship. This ended as Hale came to realise that, even after the death of Eliot's first wife, there would be no possibility of marriage. Eliot's relationship with Hale was so long hidden that its disclosure in print in the 1970s created a flurry of interest. Commentators like Lyndall Gordon who detect Hale somewhere in the background to 'Marina' may have a point, but also miss a point.²³ The female figure in 'Marina' is not the 'Lady' of *Ash-Wednesday*; she is specifically, as in Shakespeare's *Pericles*, a daughter.

Eliot wrote the poem in May 1930. Corresponding that July with his American friend E. McKnight Kauffer (who would illustrate 'Marina' for the Ariel Poems series), he explained that its 'theme is paternity'.²⁴ There are good reasons for thinking very seriously about why such a theme might have been important to Eliot at this time, and why the poem as a paternal poem, as well as a poem of rhyme and attunement, may be infused with such power.

'What every poet starts from is his own emotions', Eliot stated in 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca' in 1927, when he also wrote of how

I am used . . . to having my personal biography reconstructed from passages which I got out of books, or which I invented out of nothing because they sounded well; and to having my biography invariably ignored in what I *did* write from personal experience . . .²⁵

But it is striking how sheerly and surely Eliot used passages out of books to channel, fuse with, and articulate personal experience. If the young

²² See Robert Crawford, *The Savage and the City in the Work of T. S. Eliot* (Oxford, 1987), p. 37.

²³ Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot's New Life* (Oxford, 1988), gives by far the fullest account of Emily Hale and Eliot's relationship with her.

²⁴ T. S. Eliot, letter to E. McKnight Kauffer, 24 July 1930, published in James Olney (ed.), *T. S. Eliot: Essays from The Southern Review* (Oxford, 1988), p. 211.

²⁵ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 3rd enlarged edn. (London, 1951), p. 127.

poet astutely stressed impersonality, the middle-aged poet, equally rightly, could complain of the personal pain which had led to *The Waste Land*. When Eliot creates a poem about a daughter in 'Marina' and states that the theme is paternity, we might just choose to take him seriously. There is every reason to believe that the theme preoccupied him.

Eliot wrote the poem when he was in his early forties. His father had died over a decade earlier; his artistic sister Charlotte (with whom as a boy Eliot had relished hunting for New England birds' nests) had died in 1926; his mother died in 1929, the year before the composition of 'Marina' and two years before the publication of 'Difficulties of a Statesman' with its 'What shall I cry? | Mother mother'.²⁶ In 1927, when he joined the Church of England, in conversation with Bertrand Russell Eliot had said that he would have no children; in 1928, while still living in a tormented marriage with his first wife, he had taken a vow of celibacy, putting an end to any prospect of biological fathering; though for years, as he later told John Hayward, he had felt with great acuteness the 'desire for progeny'.²⁷ Eliot never became a parent, but at the end of the 1920s he did become for the first time a godparent—a role he hugely relished, taking it both playfully and seriously; and in the 1930s, his experience as a godparent allowed his poetry to take a new direction: he devoted considerable poetic energy to writing for children, sending to his godchildren several of the poems that would become *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*.²⁸

Eliot's ability to engage with children mattered to him as a man and as a poet. Written in mid-life, when he was confronting the loss of his own parents and the painful fact that he would remain childless, but also when he was beginning to find a role as a godparent, 'Marina' articulates both a longing for paternity, for a child, and a recognition that conventional biological paternity may not be possible. The poem is suspended, like the Christian story, between the arrival and the loss of a child. Again, as in the Christian story, loss is redeemed through a sense of continuing presence, one still haunted by the fear of loss. Yet to 'Christianise' the poem too tritely is to misread it; one of the great strengths of Eliot's poetry is its resistance to religious triteness, its acceptance of religious depth. This

²⁶ Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 129.

²⁷ See Carole Seymour-Jones, *Painted Shadow: the Life of Vivienne Eliot* (London, 2002), p. 449; Seymour-Jones quotes Eliot's letter to John Hayward, 29 Nov. 1939 (Hayward Bequest, King's College, Cambridge).

²⁸ See Valerie Eliot, 'Apropos of Practical Cats', in *Cats: the Book of the Musical* (London, 1981), pp. 8–9.

is not a poem about ‘the Son’ or ‘Our Lady’; it is a poem addressed to ‘My daughter’; it is a poem involving longing for a child.

In terms of conventional assumptions, the expression of such a theme may have been associated more with women than with men. ‘Marina’ may be the first fully achieved poem by a male poet in English to articulate such a longing. There is a sense in which the poem moves beyond (some might say ‘sublimates’) this desire. Certainly Eliot in 1929 wrote of the uneasy connection between ‘higher love’ and ‘the coupling of animals’, and related Dante’s *Vita Nuova* to ‘what is now called “sublimation”’.²⁹ Eliot had an interest in the way Dante (as he put it in 1927) ‘attempts to fabricate something permanent and holy out of his personal animal feelings’.³⁰ ‘Marina’ may involve a repression of animal feelings

Those who suffer the ecstasy of the animals, meaning
Death

and the daughter of the poem may come to represent a more general, more spiritualised *vita nuova*, a new life in ‘the hope, the new ships’. However, to deny the sheer insistent longing for a child in the poem, the importance of the phrase ‘My daughter’, is to deny a source of its emotional power, one supported by the point in Eliot’s life at which it was composed. To ignore the longing for a child in ‘Marina’ is also to ignore that tidal music which is all water and boats, memory and voyaging, and which heads from the name of a daughter through the longing words ‘O my daughter’ to culminate in the words ‘My daughter’. Simply to see the poem as a spiritual quest, or a sublimated love poem, misses the longing urgency of those specific last words. The theme is not just spiritual journeying, but something more focused than that. Like Sappho’s Hesperus fragment, the poem is about an attunement with the rhythms of creation ‘more distant than stars and nearer than the eye’, but it is also about longing for a particular form of creation, one known as a parent knows, rhymes with, yet is different from, a child. To skim beyond that, or brush it aside, is to misread the ‘Marina’. The theme is not some generalised spirituality. The theme, as Eliot said it was, is paternity.

Readers often sense this. Muriel Spark, who read Eliot’s poetry with great attention, chooses a phrase from ‘Marina’ — ‘What images return’ — as the title of the brilliant short piece she wrote about her home back-

²⁹ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pp. 274, 275.

³⁰ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p. 137.

ground and her sense of exile at the time of her father's death.³¹ A feeling for Eliot's own family background, and for a vital geography from which he, like Spark, had moved away, also conditions 'Marina'. With its long and short lines and its irregularly islanded verse paragraphs, linked as an archipelago by end-rhyme, internal rhyme, enjambment and syntax, yet also distinct from each other, this poem's acoustic and its sometimes peninsular, sometimes bitten right-hand margin—its coastline if you like—is one of bays and islands. Its imagery is of grey rocks, islands, pine, woodthrush and fog, but there are no placenames. Eliot's editing of the poem, in cutting a placename, lets 'Marina' speak of the shorelines of the planet rather than of a specific site. In an earlier draft, now in the Bodleian Library, Eliot mentions Roque Island in Maine where he had sailed as a student in a small boat, risking death in the fog, but also relishing being at sea.³² The speaker's sense of being 'at sea' in more than one sense of that expression is essential to the poem.

These voyages of Eliot's youth stayed with him all his life. As an old man, delighting in photographs and the log book of his sailing in Maine, he recalled (in letters now at Harvard) putting in at Jonesport and passing Roque Island.³³ He also recalled spending a night nearby aboard a small boat moored to a buoy during fog.³⁴ Roque Island with its mile-long white sands, old boatyard, sawmill, woods and associations with long-established New England families like the Peabodies was the kind of territory Eliot had relished from his youth. In a 1930 letter he describes 'Marina' as set round Casco Bay in Maine, which is in the same vicinity.³⁵ Yet the associations of this area were not bound up only with his student sailing exploits, but rather with a familial sense of north-eastern North America. It was most likely when camping with his family near Lake Memphromagog in Quebec that the teenage Eliot seems to have heard the 'water-dripping song' of the 'hermit-thrush' which so haunted his inner ear; at least as much as that of the Coleridgean owlet of 'Frost at Midnight', and more than the nightingale's, thrushes' songs spurred and

³¹ Muriel Spark, 'What images return', in Karl Miller (ed.), *Memoirs of a Modern Scotland* (London, 1970), p. 151.

³² See draft with Eliot's letter to Michael Sadler, 9 May 1930 (Bodleian Library, Oxford University).

³³ T. S. Eliot, letter to Leon Magaw Little, 11 Aug. 1956 (Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMSAm1691.4).

³⁴ T. S. Eliot, letter to Leon Magaw Little, 12 Oct. 1956 (Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMSAm1691.4).

³⁵ Eliot to Kauffer, 24 July 1930, in Olney (ed.), *T. S. Eliot*, p. 211.

schooled the twentieth century's greatest poet.³⁶ Eliot spent a lot of time at Eastern Point, Gloucester, Massachusetts, where his father had built a house in 1896, when Tom was eight. Shortly after the completion of 'Marina' in 1930, Eliot wrote to William Force Stead that he had felt a nomad even in America where, having spent his boyhood in Missouri, he was sufficiently a southerner to be something of an alien in Massachusetts, and how even when he was young the New England of his associations existed more in Maine than it did in Massachusetts.³⁷

It is Maine as the paternal geography of Eliot's associations that undergirds this great poem of paternity. 'Marina' imagines its way longingly forwards towards the image of a daughter, but also harks way back to a lost but recalled and universalised Maine which stands for the landscape of Eliot's deepest familial associations, his paternity now his parents are dead. As this paternity of past and future comes in and out of focus, is lost and found, the poem achieves its balance. It locates and enacts an attunement and momentary resolution with far and near, past and future. This is expressed in personal and impersonal terms. The personal—the daughter—becomes impersonal through the poem's allusive title, but retains surely the power of a secreted longing for paternity. The impersonal, the coastline, becomes personal through the release of familial associations, though this operates in a way that is hidden by the universalising voice. This poem's sound system is at once broken and whole, fissured in layout and lineation, yet linked through rhyme, repetition, rondo, so that its wholeness predominates, pronouncing it a sound system in both senses of that expression. Completely unconfessional, 'Marina' is nonetheless a poem born from the deepest longing for paternity, the kind of paternity which will provide a sense of home in the universe. That sense of home and attunement in this poem by an ingrained *metoikos*, is both intimate and out of reach: those two aspects of it are come to terms with in the poem as a whole, and, in miniature, in that most haunting part-line, 'more distant than stars and nearer than the eye'.

We have been cursed to live in an age not of poems but of 'texts'. It is the job of the poet to defend and reincarnate the 'sound system' of the poem so that it may both sound and be sound beyond mere textuality. The poem should work not *only* aloud; but it needs a fine sense of acoustic as well as textual life, if it is to be fully realised as a near perfect

³⁶ Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 79; Eliot, *Letters, Volume 1, 1898–1922*, p. 4.

³⁷ Eliot, letter to William Force Stead, 20 June 1930 (Stead Boxes, Osborn Shelves, Beinecke Library, Yale University).

ordering of language. In seeking the sound system, the poet aims for attunement; this attunement may be with tribe or nation, but may also, and perhaps more pressingly, be with those most intimately linked to the poet—a lover, a friend, a child, a parent—and with the wider rhythms of the cosmos. Poems from lover to lover are as old as lyric poetry, but, though there are ancient precedents, the great concentration of poems from parent to child is relatively recent. Changes in attitudes to gender have meant that in our own day there is a large number of poems addressed by parents to children. There are poems by men as well as by women about childlessness, and about parenthood. These are written out of that need for attunement with the processes of creation which, however deconstructed or derided, remains fundamental to the making of poetry, to the articulation of its sound system. This impulse goes back beyond poetry, but is part of what poetry comes out of. It articulates an impulse older than Stonehenge or Maes Howe. But in the last two centuries, in their very different and pioneering ways, no two poets have written out of such impulses in the context of paternity more eloquently than S. T. Coleridge in 'Frost at Midnight' and T. S. Eliot in 'Marina'. We can criticise these poems—not least for their seeming absence of mothers—but not for their sound systems, their music, their sense of parental longing, their deep communication of a desire for hopeful attunement with the cosmos. Biographical study confirms that in offering these things, T. S. Eliot's daughter poem does the most that poems can do. 'Marina', a poem shaped by biographical circumstances but also a crafted work of art made to resonate far beyond that experience, reminds us in our inner ears why we need the sound systems of poetry. In its rhythms, its open longing, its arresting and intimate justness, it also reminds us not only of the astonishing skill but also of the profound humanity of the poet T. S. Eliot