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BOOKS

Borrowings of a second-rater

Bevis Hillier

T. S. ELIOT: INVENTIONS OF THE MARCH HARE, POEMS 1909-17
edited by Christopher Ricks
Faber, £30, pp. 428

Early in 1955 a weekly literary article began to appear on the books page of the *Times.* There was much speculation about the identity of the author, who signed himself Oliver Edwards. When it was finally rumbled that the articles were by the editor of the *Times*, Sir William Haley, Bernard Levin wrote in *The Spectator* (22 November 1957):

> As for me, I marvelled greatly that so much effort had been expended to prove so little. For who else could have written such rubbish? What hand but the great, dead one of Sir William Haley could have set down such thoughts, and how could work of such stupefying badness possibly have come to be printed, even in the *Times*, unless it was the work of the editor?

Haley was a fine editor. He was decisive, had good judgment and could have drawn an atlas of the moral high ground. All this was not enough for him. In his early days he had been shorthand-telephonist on the *Times*, an NCO. Now he wanted to show the 'Black Friars' of Printing House Square that he was as erudite as they, a literateur who could dash off a graceful essay on Augustine Birrell or any other forgotten figure of Eng. Lit. But Levin was right. Haley paraded learning without revealing insight. The present editor of the *Times*, Peter Stothard, has exactly the gift that Haley lacked, as shown by his recent article on Thomas Massa Alsager, the *Times* journalist who owned the copy of Chapman's *Homer* that inspired Keats's poem.

The man of real talent who longs to be acclaimed for something he is less good at, is a recurring figure. Cardinal Newman, one of the great autobiographers, tried to write novels. They are hopeless, mainly because novels need more than one character and Newman found it hard to work up an interest in anyone but himself. Conan Doyle was irritated by the success of the Sherlock Holmes stories and wanted to be remembered for his historical novels; who reads *The White Company* today? But at least Newman, Doyle and Haley achieved eminence (in Newman's case, Eminence) in something they were good at. The mischief is done when a person is taken at his own estimate of himself and admired for the wrong thing.

Mistaken vocations usually get nipped in the bud. One of Peter Cook's immortal E. L. Wisty monologues began: 'I'd 'ave been a judge, but I didn't 'ave the Latin.' If your childhood ambition is to be a general and you are weedy and cowardly, with a whispery voice and nil qualities of leadership, you are unlikely to achieve your aim. But suppose you have the mind of a profound, analytic philosopher and an acute critic, but your burning desire is to be a poet. And further suppose that you have in you hardly a hint of the poetic ichor — what Gerard Manley Hopkins called 'the strong Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame . . . The roll, the rise, the carol, the creation'. Because the criteria by which poets are recognised are much harder to define than those for the selection of generals, you will have a sporting chance of fulfilling your ambition.

Particularly was this true of the period in which this group of Eliot poems was written, 1909-17. Life was being 'fragmented', by faster trains, cars and aircraft, by cinematic images and then more literally and horribly by the first world war. Soupy sentiment and Celtic Twilightism were not fit expressions of this new world. Eliot's evil genius Ezra Pound (whose anti-Semitism and other kinds of racism he shared) encouraged him in fragmentation. If it's fixed, bust it, was the policy. Too often that involved an abdication of meaning; though Eliot's mind was of such superior metal, there is gravitas even in his gibberish.

'Oh those? Modesty forbids.'

In his play *The Confidential Clerk* (1954), in lucid prose masquerading as verse, Eliot portrayed the tycoon Sir Claude Mulhammer, a man who had realised in the nick of time that he had no vocation for the art he most wanted to practise.

> I did not want to be a financier . . .
> I wanted to be a potter . . . When I was a boy
> I loved to shape things. I loved form and colour
> And I loved the material that the potter handles.
> . . . I came to see
> That I should never have become a first-rate potter.
> I didn't have it in me. It's strange, isn't it,
> That a man should have a consuming passion
> To do something for which he lacks the capacity?
> Could a man be said to have a vocation
> To be a second-rate potter?

Why did Eliot choose pottery as the art Sir Claude had wanted to shine in? Most people, in their cultural fantasies, do not aspire to be humble potters. Great painters, maybe, opera singers, composers of symphonies. It's only a hunch, but I think he may have chosen it because 'pottery' and 'poetry' are close in sound. Perhaps the fêted and garlanded Eliot (he had received an early OM in 1948) was admitting, in a coded public confessional, that he, too, knew at secret moments that he didn't have it in him. What Sir Claude does excel in is connoisseurship of pottery — in Eliot's case, read 'criticism of poetry'.

Eliot is in the highest echelon of critics, as shrewd — and pontifical — as Dr Johnson. As a philosopher he is of the stature of George Santayana. As a poet, he had a talent about equivalent to that of Edward Lear. Not a mean accomplishment, of course; but no one would class Lear with Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning or Hopkins. Eliot, too, was essentially a misanthropic nonsense-poet. He drew on Lear for some effects and seemed to align himself with the Victorian writer in a passage based on his 'How pleasant to know Mr Lear':

> How unpleasant to meet Mr Eliot
> With his features of clerical cut
> And his brow so grim
> And his mouth so prim
> And his conversation, so nicely
> Restricted to What Precisely
> And If and Perhaps and But. . .

Those lines were hardly a caricature. Lady Ottoline Morrell called Eliot 'the

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Undertaker'. When I wrote of the poetic ichor, I did not imply that a poet must gush rhapsodically and be a-bubble with ecstasy by day and night. But, with acknowledgments to Bernard Levin, you might speak of Eliot's 'great, dead hand'. Hopkins revivified English poetry by replacing Latinate words with fresh Anglo-Saxon ones — 'lovely' instead of 'beauteous'. Eliot reverses the process, for ever applying the choke rein with such ponderous words as 'inconscient', 'turpitude' and 'inanition'. (Those three occur within just six lines in one of the poems in this book.) His other habitual manner is the vacuously, reiteratively portentous.

Inventions of the March Hare, reverentially presented with all the toilsome apparatus of 'Eliot scholarship', contains poems that have never been published, as well as a few already well known. Some are the merest juvenilia; others just read like that. It must be conceded that Professor Ricks's editing is exemplary. Hats off, too, to Valerie Eliot, the poet's widow, for not censoring the ribald poems which have aroused most interest in the press. 'Such scabrous exuberances,' Ricks writes, 'may lend themselves to either the wrong kind or the wrong amount of attention.' I'll confine myself to noting that they reveal an unexpected tendency toward coprophilia.

The poems come from a leather-bound notebook which the poet started in 1909 and in which he entered all his work as he wrote it. Eliot originally gave the notebook the vivacious title *Inventions of the March Hare*, but cancelled that in favour of the archly ironic *Complete Poems of T.S. Eliot*. Ricks thinks he gave it this revised title in 1920-22. In 1916 Eliot had been teaching John Betjeman at Highgate Junior School. Betjeman recalled, in *Summoned by Bells*:

> And so I bound my verse into a book,
> *The Best of Betjeman*, and handed it
> To one who, I was told, liked poetry —
> The American master, Mr Eliot.

Philip Larkin commented on that: 'The scene is worthy of a 19th-century narrative painter: "The Infant Betjeman Offers his Verses to the Young Eliot." ' It is possible that Betjeman's cheeky title for his youthful collection may have given Eliot the idea for his title; alternatively, Eliot may have been inspired by 'Max', who in 1896 gave a precocious set of essays the title *The Works of Max Beerbohm*.

Larkin wrote severely of 'the whole industry of exegesis' based on Eliot's works. Eliot's poetry might seem arid soil for the researchers to peck around in, but in fact he is their ideal subject, for two reasons. First, he goes in for obscurity, so they can spend years figuring out what the hell he meant. It is like being handed the clues to a crossword puzzle to which no one ever knew the answers, or three jigsaw puzzles jumbled together, with half the pieces missing. Second, Eliot borrowed so much from other writers that the researcher can pass a happy lifetime detecting his 'influences'. Ricks himself is adept at this, often suggesting six or seven possible origins for a given phrase. For instance, when Eliot entitles an early poem — with his familiar arch pretension — 'First Caprice in North Cambridge', Ricks hazards that he may have got the idea of 'Caprice' from Henry James *or* Arthur Symons *or* W. D. Howells *or* Theodore de Banville *or* Verlaine *or* Bergson. (He might have added Theodore Wratislaw's 1893 book of poems, *Caprices*.)

Eliot's poetry is one vast echo-chamber. All writers are derivative: we all pick up our trade by some degree of mimicry. But with Eliot, the appropriations were not just a little bit here, a little bit there. They were often barefaced cribbing, and plagiarism became an addiction — snorting East Coker, as it were. Some of the quotations, we are meant to recognise — Dante, Julian of Norwich, the literary grandees and saints. But some he slips in furtively. Even Christopher Ricks, who makes the best possible apologist's case for the borrowings, admits of those from Arthur Symons that 'the pattern and the frequency start to strain coincidence'. Sometimes Eliot got found out. In 1935, when a *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer caught him red-handed pinching a phrase from Ernest Dowson for 'The Hollow Men', Eliot airily acknowledged a fair cop: '. . . the lines he quotes have always run in my head. . . ' But he was indignant when another critic accused him of having 'shamelessly . . . pilfered' a line of Meredith in the early poem 'Cousin Nancy'. 'Of course,' Eliot later said, 'the whole point was that the reader should recognise where it came from and contrast it with the spirit and meaning of my own poem.' One cannot prove that Eliot was disingenuous when he said that. But he might have found it harder to explain away some borrowings which have come to light since his death.

One name that does not appear in the index of this book is that of Madison Cawein (1865-1914), a minor Kentucky poet who worked in a pool room and betting shop in Louisville. Last December the *TLS* reported that a Canadian academic, Robert Ian Scott, had proved that Eliot purloined both the title and some of the images of *The Waste Land* from Cawein. And in fact Eliot's debt to Cawein was far greater than Scott realised.

In 1915 *The Cup of Comus* was published, a collection of Cawein's last poems. As Cawein was now dead, Eliot may have felt he could plunder his works with relative impunity. In Cawein's poem 'On the Road', the first, fourth and twelfth lines begin with the words 'Let us. . . ' and none of the intervening lines begins thus. In Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', one of the poems in *Inventions of the March Hare*, the first, fourth and twelfth lines begin 'Let us. . . ', as does none of the intervening lines. The chances of that happening by accident must be billions to one.

Then again, Cawein's poem 'A Ghost of Yesterday' (also published in *The Cup of Comus*) contains lines about 'belle and beau'

> Who come and go
> Around its ancient portico.

The passage irresistibly suggests Eliot's lines, again in 'Prufrock' —

> In the room the women come and go
> Talking of Michelangelo.

There are many other borrowings from Cawein by Eliot that I will give besotted Eliot scholars the fun of chasing.

In October 1912 *Poetry Review*, an English magazine, published a special issue on American poetry. In it, Harold Monro — a Georgian poet and editor who rejected 'Prufrock' as 'absolutely insane' — wrote of Madison Cawein, 'To me he appears quite the biggest figure among American poets.' But in 1993 Cawein received no mention in the 894 pages of the *Columbia History of American Poetry*, edited by Jay Parini, though 23 pages were devoted to Eliot. Cawein had simply been written out of American literature. Obscurity has its privileges. None of his poems has been turned into a musical by Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber.

Perhaps it does not matter much that Eliot stole from Cawein: if the end is of little worth, who cares about the means? What does matter is that, on the evidence of this book, Eliot is still being venerated as the supreme master of 20th-century poetry. He is a false idol. His poems are interesting exercises — like word-associations on a psychoanalyst's couch or Picasso's clod-hopping variations on Velasquez's 'Las Meninas'. And the long sharp shock of Eliotism may even have done English poetry some good, rather as drastic pruning can help plants flourish. The weary conventions of the Georgian poets were secateured. New geniuses will arise in the 21st century; they always do. The words will come to them unbidden, not press-ganged from other people's works. Meanwhile, as we prepare to embark on the new millennium, let us hang round the dropsically inflated reputation of Thomas Stearns Eliot a label marked in indelible ink 'NOT WANTED ON VOYAGE.'

'I've got a reputation to keep, try to look a little richer.'

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