



T.S. Eliot and the Failure to Connect

Also by G. Douglas Atkins

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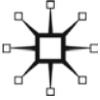
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▶ **T.S. Eliot and the
Failure to Connect:
Satire and Modern
Misunderstandings**

G. Douglas Atkins

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T.S. ELIOT AND THE FAILURE TO CONNECT

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Preface

The new reading I offer of the most famous poem in English of the past century stems from a comparatist approach that is both intra-textual and inter-textual. My focus is thus this popular and influential work, which I read differently from the way it has been read in the past. That difference derives not only from reading it comparatively but also from close attention to verbal details, a meditative point of view, and a sense of the whole of the poet's career with the accompanying recognition of the "end" that is, and is realized by, *Four Quartets*, Eliot's last major poem; there, he writes from—and I read from—the pattern revealed as "Incarnation," "the gift half understood." This close attention to verbal details leads, naturally enough, to a renewed recognition of the critical part played by tone in Eliot's poetry. Ultimately, then, with *The Waste Land* as instance, I am proposing a new approach to reading Old Possum (as Eliot's friend Ezra Pound called him).

My reading thus has a good deal in common with Eliot's own outline of "meditative reading" in the preface he wrote in 1951 to N. Gangulee's anthology *Thoughts for Meditation: A Way to Recovery from Within* as well as with Paul J. Griffith's recent book *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (1999). It most closely resembles, though, the way of reading-writing that Eliot represents as Lancelot Andrewes's in his 1928 essay titled "Lancelot Andrewes," even though it ultimately falls short of the acumen and sensitivity there magnificently displayed. Intensely verbal, and often literal, it may seem pedantic to those now unaccustomed to "tak[ing] a word

and deriv[ing] the world from it; squeezing and squeezing the word until it yields a full juice of meaning which we should never have supposed any word to possess.”

This book is, moreover, an exercise in the essayistic criticism that I have been practicing for some time now. Its manner thus differs from the usual scholarly or critical monograph, being more informal and, I hope, inviting. Yet it is not always informal, nor personal or reflective of my own engagement; there is also formal analysis aplenty buttressed and enlightened by scholarship. In various ways, then, this book instances essayistic *criticism*. As such, it would not mind intervening, if ever so humbly, in the cultural wars as an embodied argument for close reading, responsible writing, and the restoration of the humanities.

While it is also, like all essays, a trial and an attempt, it seeks what may be an “impossible union” (*Four Quartets*) of the essay and the ostensible goal of academic commentary. I define that goal as *reader-responsibility*, which I further understand as the attempt not simply to offer a reading but to express a *valid* reading that stands as implicit critique of previous misunderstandings. With Eliot’s poems, I keep trying to get it (down) right, drawn to “Prufrock,” “Gerontion,” *The Waste Land*, “The Hollow Men,” *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems*, and *Four Quartets* especially, and am met each and every time by words, Eliot’s and mine alike, that “will not stay in place, / Will not stay still.” Like prayer as Eliot has taught me to regard it, the poems place me—although this may well be none of his intention, Old Possum—face to face with words’ difficulty *and* my own various incapacities as reader and writer. Oh, how you frustrate and humble me, Thomas Stearns Eliot.

Reading I understand as the place where text and reader meet, the timeliness of the latter intersecting with the timelessness of the former. My ideal audience, accordingly, is a composite or compound of the academic and the “general,” the specialist and the nonspecialist, in short, the attentive and informed reader who has never relinquished her or his amateur status. Therefore, I have kept notes to a minimum; the bibliography contains the secondary materials that I have found particularly useful.

As the reader will immediately be aware, I eschew chronological procedure. The manner being essayistic, I *explore*, rather than be thesis-bound, and so strict linearity is avoided. I do so for purposes of elucidation, my object in this little book. Indeed, I move toward ending with a penultimate chapter on “Gerontion,” the major poem (in my judgment)

that just precedes *The Waste Land* in time. Although the book centrally concerns *The Waste Land*, I open my analyses and comparisons not with it but with another poem, “The Hollow Men,” a work that follows it rather than precedes it chronologically. Finally, after a chapter on *The Waste Land*, I turn away from that poem to *Four Quartets* (only to return to *The Waste Land* after that essay). *Four Quartets* is Eliot’s last major work and the end toward which all of his previous explorations lead and whose purpose, we might say aping Eliot in “Little Gidding,” “breaks only when it is fulfilled / If at all.”

Beginning the close textual analysis with “The Hollow Men” at once lays groundwork, opens a path, and leads, perhaps paradoxically, to a comparison with proper emphasis on the earlier poem. “Gerontion,” on the other hand, is an essential part of *The Waste Land*, even though I believe Eliot’s friend Pound was right in convincing him to exclude it from the poem as a sort of preface. This oft-neglected poem is, simply, part of the satire of which *The Waste Land* constitutes the negative side, or antithesis; while not exactly the satire’s “thesis,” “Gerontion” offers elucidation of the “hints and guesses” that the later poem provides regarding a responsible answer to wasteland conditions. It is the guide to *The Waste Land* that Eliot’s added notes could never be as part of the satirized misunderstanding. My background in eighteenth-century studies further enables my efforts, preparing me to see and to appreciate the satire at work in poem and notes alike, to realize, in fact, that *The Waste Land* is a satire (on modern failures to connect). I am developing the point in a new book project, but I will say here that satire is particularly important and functional in Eliot because, traditionally understood as holding a mirror up to one’s own nature and so, often, serving as “cure,” it participates in his widespread and frequent efforts directed at his characters’—and the reader’s—self-examination and -criticism. You must see into your own heart of darkness, suggests “The Hollow Men,” and *The Waste Land* has everything to do with the failure to face the eyes of the other. It thus joins with the failure to connect, of which it is, in some respects, a part.

The nonlinear route I take mirrors my argument regarding the fundamentally—and principled—indirect way of Eliot’s poems (as of satire itself); indirection is also “the way” of Incarnation, “the hint half guessed, the gift half understood,” that constitutes an essential dogma of Eliot’s, Lancelot Andrewes’s, and Anglo-Catholic understanding. Following “hints and guesses” about Incarnation *throughout* Eliot’s work early and

late, we may emerge with a clearer, truer understanding of the relation of Old Possum's before-conversion (that is, B.C.) and post-conversion points of view, a difference mirroring the essential pattern named by Incarnation (minus *the*).

I am pleased to be able to acknowledge my debt to the University of Kansas, my (now-former) Chair Marta Caminero-Santangelo and Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Danny Anderson and Associate Dean Ann Cudd. They made my last year before retirement—after 44 years—especially bright and delightful by assigning me a one-course teaching load in the fall and then relieving me of all teaching and service obligations during the spring, during which time I wrote the book you are now holding, gentle reader, not the one I had intended on *The Sacred Wood* (thanks to my own critical eye kicking in and preventing me): a labor of love, this one, made truly enjoyable and rewarding. Once more, I am privileged to work with Brigitte Shull, at Palgrave Macmillan, than whom a better editor (and quicker responder) is not to be found. Always making my work easier and more pleasant are the expert and gracious efforts of Pam LeRow and Lori Whitten. My personal debts are greatest to my lovely and loving wife Rebecca, enabler extraordinaire of my writing, our late loving Cavvy Millie, our children Leslie and Christopher and their spouses Craig and Sharon, and their children, our grandchildren, Kate and Oliver. Still, my greatest debt of all is to Old Possum himself: *il miglior fabbro*.