

T. S. Eliot and Me

by Calvin Trillin

For an Authors Guild benefit some years ago, four or five of us were asked to write a rejection letter turning down some classic work of literature. Garrison Keillor rejected *Walden Pond*, by Henry David Thoreau. He said that *Walden Pond* had a lot of good axioms in it but that the structure was weak. So he suggested turning it into a calendar. I rejected “The Waste Land,” by T. S. Eliot. I rejected it in iambic pentameter, of course. The last couplet of my letter was “I know this is a blow, Tom, not to worry: / You’re still the greatest poet from Missouri.” The faintness of praise in calling someone the greatest poet from Missouri can be gauged by the fact that the other poet from Missouri is me. Another way to put it is that T. S. Eliot and I comprise the Missouri school of poetry.

I know you’re thinking that there are considerable differences between T. S. Eliot and me. Yes, it’s true that he was from St. Louis, which started calling itself the Gateway to the West after Eero Saarinan’s Gateway Arch was erected, and I’m from Kansas City, where people think of St. Louis not as the Gateway to the West but as the Exit from the East. But then there are the similarities. For instance, both of us have a penchant for using foreign languages in our poetry. In fact, the rejection letter I wrote to Eliot criticized him for going overboard in that regard:

These many tongues, Tom, into which you lapse
Are foreign tongues – not spoken by our chaps.
Some French, all right, but take a word like “Shantih.”
The reader’s stumped, no matter how *avant* he
Imagines that he is (Or is that fair?
One might say Sanskrit’s truly *derriere*.)

I’ve never used Sanskrit in a poem myself. I go in more for Yiddish. I think it’s fair to say that Eliot was not partial to Yiddish. When the break-up of Yugoslavia provoked a few wars, for instance, I wrote

Croatians are the good guys now,
Although their past is somewhat shady,
So worry not that these same guys
Chased both your *bubbe* and your *zayde*.

Both of us toss in some German now and then. Eliot, of course, includes a passage from Tristan und Isolde in the opening stanza of “The Waste Land,” and I, when George W. Bush named an old family retainer as attorney general of the United States, took advantage of the fact that Alberto Gonzales rhymes with “loyal uber alles.” And we both have occasionally written about animals. Eliot famously wrote a series of poems about cats, and I have written, for example, that corgis appear to be a breed of dog assembled from the parts of other breeds of dog – and not the parts that those other breeds were all that sorry about giving up. As a matter of perspective, I should acknowledge that there has never been a long-running Broadway musical called “Corgis.”

Our paths do separate dramatically on the matter of rhyme. It isn't that Eliot shunned rhyme. I still sometimes find myself murmuring couplets from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": "Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels / And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells." But in "The Waste Land" there were so few rhymes that I said in my rejection letter, "So my advice, Tom, 'Hurry up, it's time' / For restoration of some lines that rhyme. / And when that's done, I think it might be neater / If you could sort of tidy up the meter."

I, on the other hand, have stuck stubbornly to rhyme. That might have something to do with the poetic influence of my father. He was a grocer for most of his working life, but he owned a restaurant for a while, and he treated that as an opportunity to put a rhyming couplet on the menu every day at lunch. He was devoted to rhymes, particularly rhymes about pie. He rhymed pie with "shy" and "July" and "evening is nigh" and "All right warden, I'm ready to fry. / My last request was Mrs. Trillin's pie."

The result of the separate paths T. S. Eliot and I took is simple: He is thought of as perhaps the greatest literary figure of the twentieth century, and I am a deadline poet, commenting on the events of the day in verse for a hundred dollars a shot.

Deadline poetry is a small sub-set of rhyming poetry. A very small subset. A few years ago, John Allemang, of the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, and I founded the International Deadline Poets Organization, or IDPO. We were the only members. I hasten to say that IDPO is not the only exclusive literary organization I have ever belonged to. When I was traveling the country to do regular reporting pieces for *The New Yorker*, Jules Loh was doing a similar series for the Associated Press, and we formed the American Association of American Correspondents Covering America. Our meetings were held at O'Hare Airport in Chicago. We were the only members. The American Association of American Correspondents Covering America had only one rule: You can't quote D'Tocqueville. That's how we kept the membership down.

IDPO hasn't needed any rules to keep the membership down. In fact, Allemang's verses no longer appear in the *Globe and Mail*, so I'd say that his membership hangs by a thread, except that saying that would constitute a metaphor and IDPO discourages metaphors. I continue to turn out a deadline poem every week for *The Nation* – or every issue, I should say, since *The Nation* publishes only every other week in the summer, even though the downtrodden are oppressed every day of the year.

It's left to me to speak up for deadline poetry against the implied sneers of people like T. S. Eliot – or what we often refer to at IDPO gatherings as "the Sanskrit crowd." It's left to me to persuade literary critics that in describing deadline poetry, the term "accessible" is preferable to the term "simple-minded." It's left to me to point out that making a deadline almost every week is something never faced by what my family has an unfortunate tendency to call "grown-up poets." Take Eliot, for instance. And I'm not here to knock the competition. But take Eliot, for instance. If he came upon a "patient etherized upon a table" and wasn't quite inspired, he could always wait for the next "patient etherized upon a table." If he wasn't turned on by those "half-deserted streets" he could wander around until he found some half deserted streets more to his liking. Eliot was under no deadline pressure.

And then there's the question of rhyming. "Real poets" – another phrase my family has an unfortunate tendency to use – can choose the words they want to rhyme. Deadline poets are stuck with writing about people in public life, and there are people who persist in going into public life despite the fact that their names are impossible to rhyme. And deadline poets have no truck with the near-rhymes that people in the trade sometimes call slant rhymes – the sort of thing occasionally used by poets like, well, T. S. Eliot, for instance. We are as strict about exact

rhyming as my father was when he wrote what was perhaps his best-known menu poem: “‘Eat your food,’ gently said mom to her little son, Roddy. / If you don’t, I will break every bone in your body.”

For uncompromising rhymers, the presidency has been a particular problem. The nice iambic candidates with strong vowels like Ross Perot and John McCain always seem to lose. For a deadline poet, November has been the cruelest month. Bush is a terrible rhyme. When George H. W. Bush left office, I wanted to write him a poem, and I had to make do with his middle names:

Adieu to you, George Herbert Walker.
Though never treasured as a talker –
Your predicates were often prone
To wander, nounless, off alone.
You did your best in your own way,
The way of Greenwich Country Day.
So just relax, and take your ease,
And never order Japanese.

Clinton was even worse. Clinton is the orange of American presidents. In his second term, right at the beginning of the . . . unpleasantness, it was said that Hillary Clinton was going on the Today Program to lead the defense. I had to use what in past days we would have called her maiden name – what would now be called maybe her name of origin, her slave name:

And so it’s up to our Ms. Rodham
To prove Bill’s White House isn’t Sodom.
It’s left to this adroit señora
To show that it is just Gomorrah.

Oddly enough, Obama, who has often mentioned having a funny name, would have been an improvement on his predecessors if only I hadn’t used up all of the relevant rhymes with Osama bin Laden – Yokohama, Cinerama, slap yo’ mama.

I’m sometimes asked if I’m ashamed of making a living by making snide and underhanded remarks about respectable public officials, and my only defense has been “It’s not much of a living.” But sometimes I do think of what might have happened if my path and T. S. Eliot’s path hadn’t diverged – if, for instance, as a boy in Kansas City I had paid a little more attention in Sanskrit class. Would I have moved to England and started talking funny? Could I have written something obscure enough to be considered profound? Or would I just get rejection letters like the one I wrote to T. S. Eliot about “The Waste Land” – a rejection letter that has as its penultimate couplet, “I’ve read it, Tom – the lines, the in-betweens. / I don’t know what the bloody hell it means.”