

# Poems and Imitations with a Letter from T. S. Eliot

*Robert Ellrodt*

Robert Ellrodt, Professor Emeritus of English at the Sorbonne Nouvelle, is recognized internationally as one of the premier scholars of Renaissance literature during the latter half of the twentieth century. When I was a graduate student in the English Department at Yale during the early seventies, his *L'Inspiration personnelle et l'esprit du temps chez les poètes métaphysiques anglais* (1960) was required reading for Louis Martz's dissertation students, and C. S. Lewis's review of *Neoplatonism in the Poetry of Spenser* (1960) drew attention not only to Professor Ellrodt's careful scholarship, but also to his remarkable command of English. Four decades later, when I had the honor of reviewing *Seven Metaphysical Poets* (2000), I, too, was moved to take note of his strikingly clear and forceful English—superior by that time to much of what was being published by native speakers. In recent years, Professor Ellrodt's scholarly activity has continued unabated, including trenchant studies of Shakespeare, especially *King Lear*.

Given his rare competence in English, it is not surprising that Robert Ellrodt has also translated numerous works of English literature—Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, Donne's *Poems*, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, and John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but also Keats and Shelley. These translations are principally works of scholarship as well, carefully annotated and translated with the needs of French readers in mind. Professor Ellrodt's mastery of English, however, goes far beyond mere competence, as the documents that follow demonstrate. As a young man studying the English Metaphysical poets, a study that would eventually result in *L'Inspiration personnelle*, he felt challenged to emulate them—in their own language. These imitations came to the attention of T. S. Eliot, then an editor at Faber and Faber, who, like so many others, was struck by the “very exceptional degree” to which Professor Ellrodt was bilingual. While not seeing the imitations as publishable as a collection, Eliot did write, “It would be interesting to see a few of these poems published in a magazine.”

This desideratum is now realized here after more than sixty years. With Professor Ellrodt's gracious permission, we reproduce Eliot's letter, followed

by the imitations of John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, John Milton, a Cavalier poet writing in a “metaphysical vein,” and Andrew Marvell. Finally, we add a number of original poems, recently composed in English, beginning with “Mont Blanc 2008” and culminating with a recent poem to his wife Suzanne, which provide a sense of Robert Ellrodt’s *inspiration personnelle* as a poet. Each of these documents possesses an intrinsic interest and claim on our attention. Together they exemplify an ideal of linguistic and literary culture that is in grave peril of disappearing. At a time when the teaching of foreign languages in this country is sadly neglected, and a vulgar variety of English, debased by advertising and Internet jargon, is rapidly becoming the *lingua franca* of the Global Village, Robert Ellrodt’s commitment to strengthening the ties between his native French and English, which he handles so elegantly both in prose and verse, provides a powerful example of how a sound knowledge of another language enhances one’s grasp of his own and deepens the imagination’s resources.

We are grateful to Robert and Suzanne Ellrodt for the opportunity to publish these pieces.

—RVY

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14th July 1949.

Monsieur Robert Ellrodt,  
Fondation Thiers,  
5, Rond-Point Bugeaud,  
Paris, XVI,  
France.

My dear Sir,

Some time ago Monsieur Henri Fluchère sent me the enclosed selection of your poems. I have examined them from time to time with much interest and when I find anything of interest to me in poems submitted I usually retain them for a considerable period.

Your seventeenth century poems might certainly be a remarkable tour de force for any English poet to have produced. And still more remarkable for anyone whose native tongue is not English. You must however be bilingual to a very exceptional degree.

It is, however, the drawback of this kind of exercise in the idiom of a past age that it remains an exercise and can hardly be published except as an exhibition of virtuosity. It would be interesting to see a few of these poems published in a magazine, but I do not see what you can do at the present time with a collection of them.

Your poem in your own idiom is another matter and of that I can only say that it exhibits a great deal of skill, though I think it is too much a mixture in language of various periods. You still want to find a style of your own which will be completely modern and also arrive at a greater degree of simplification. I shall be interested to see more of your work in a year or so.

Yours sincerely,

*T.S. Eliot*

IN IMITATION OF SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY POETS

**Imitation of John Donne**

*Holy Sonnet*

This is my wealth, my store, my sum of years:  
 So many days that meant a growing death,  
 So many sighs that were but empty breath,  
 Unresting thoughts still breeding idle fears,  
 Or scum of hope soon melted into tears.  
 Nothing in me but what is not, or hath  
 Some sin in it, that's nothing. Time unsaith  
 Each minute past and void extinction nears.  
 First out of nothing man arose, and now  
 That nothing would be all, and may, since Thou,  
 World's All, didst once in nothing dwell: my fear  
 Of nothingness, then, shall to nothing fall  
 If Thou wilt take my nothing to Thine All.

**Imitation of George Herbert**

*Sickness*

Lord, in my health I sinned and pin'd  
 And drew to death until thy love,  
     To mend my foolish mind,  
 Sent to me pain, thy fierce and fiery dove.

    Now agues grow in all my bones;  
 Each part in my disjointed whole  
     With broken music groans:  
 All sweet consort from me rude sickness stole.

    Repair not, Lord, a ruinous inn,  
 Nor tune again each thankless part:  
     One cankering bosom sin  
 Might shatter all, and man disgrace Thine art;

    But cure my soul: there's no more fear,  
 For I shall whole arise again.  
     Thy trump I shall not hear,  
 Nor buried bones behold thy Son, in vain.

**Imitation of Henry Vaughan**

*Love's Weight*

When shades benight the silent sphere  
I feel Thy light, Lord, from above,  
And the still music of Thy love  
Within my glowing bosom hear.

In sweet, bright air, on wings of calm,  
My hushèd heart doth lightly swim,  
And silent dew—the tears of Him  
Who healeth pain—like holy balm,

Fill this shrunk, hard and barren thing.  
My heart was light and floated free  
On froth and foam in the world's sea,  
Until Thy love did load and bring

This earthen vessel to Thine haven.  
O! let it stay and harbour there,  
Or fill it more than it can bear  
So it may sink to a strange heaven

Of peace and light in my Lord's sea,  
And turn to gold: then its own weight,  
Its weight of love, shall ne'er abate  
But grow in deep eternity.

**Imitation of Milton**

*Sonnet to the Trinity*

Thee first I name, eternal, uncreate,  
Sole fount of light among the holy Three,  
Sole being, essence undivided, Thee  
First I praise, whose unfathomed will is fate,  
Father invisible. Next consecrate  
Due worship to Thy Son, who set us free  
From primal sin and raised the blessed tree,  
Christ's cross, whereby each soul regenerate  
May climb to God again. And last invoke  
Thee, Holy Ghost, nor least though third, whose love  
Burns ever 'twixt the Father and the Son.

So burn in me, and in my bosom choke  
 Things evil, till thy undefilèd dove  
 Shine on the world and heaven and earth be one.

**In the spirit of Cavalier poetry  
 when in the Metaphysical vein**

*Love undone by love*

Ask me not, ye, lovers wise,  
                     Why I only kiss  
 Th'absent air in idler wise  
                     And seek no nearer bliss.

He who starves in plenty's store  
                     No pity shall obtain:  
 Foolish loves deserves no more  
                     That will not reap his gain.

Sweets of sense love ne'er denies  
                     And sweets on her grow rife;  
 Never tree in Paradise  
                     Bore fairer fruits of life.

Passion still pursues its good  
                     Nor ever will forgo;  
 Love had sooner found his food,  
                     Had I not loved her so.

Had I only loved her less,  
                     My love had bolder been;  
 Her body might with substance bless  
                     Mine, whom vain thoughts made lean.

Had I lov'd her not at all,  
                     Or a Summer's night,  
 Now at least I might recall  
                     The senses' short delight.

Deeper love bids me abstain  
                     From a lover's bliss;  
 Her surer love until I gain  
                     I must my heaven miss.

Love so pure may wonder breed  
And to tell you true,  
Scarce know I from what rare seed  
Nor how it ever grew.

**In the spirit of Andrew Marvell's love poems**

*Love's Ecstasy*

Oh! love me so I shall not dream  
Of other women, other joy!  
My love, in passion's white extreme,  
Will suffer no impure alloy.

Beware! the earth is crumbling fast,  
The sky is thinner grown and rare:  
Your feet a firmer shadow cast,  
Your kisses breathe diviner air.

Your own abiding presence fills  
All vacant space to brimful ease;  
Your own entrancing gesture stills  
All ruder motion till it cease.

The rifts of time you heal and make  
All expectation actual:  
Both past and future for your sake,  
Crowd all their sweets into one ball.

Begetting tears, without a noise,  
The stars are wheeling round the pole:  
Oh! let your love, in surer poise,  
My circling world of thoughts control!

All things dispersed, opaque, unknown,  
Within your eye shine one and clear;  
Each hath no being but your own;  
A denser world, a fuller sphere.

So full, so clear, so deep, no sin  
Nor fear of other's gaze, no shame  
Of self, nor shadow, steal within  
This lucid orb, for ever same.

Fair object, held in my desire,  
Yet holding all and shining free,  
Love's conquest over time entire,  
Take me to your eternity.

**Poems 2006–2009**

*Mont Blanc 2008*

dedicated to Percy Bysshe Shelley

Not in lone splendour  
but tallest of the peaks  
profiled against a wide expanse of sky  
Mont Blanc still soars,  
though half-despoiled of its snowy robe.  
Will the slow process engineered  
by nature's whim or man's profligacy  
reduce it like the neighbouring crags  
to naked rock?  
Shall the sound of waterfalls cease  
and the swooping eagle fail to spy  
on the desiccated slopes  
a living prey?  
Shall all this glassy brilliance,  
sun-lit or moon-relumed,  
melt in dark extinction?  
Shall all luxuriance of fur  
or feathered gorgeousness in beast and bird,  
all graceful flight of hare or doe,  
all flutterings of wind or dove  
in innumerable boughs,  
all sweetness of scent in flower or shrub  
give way to unrelieved greyness,  
stale uniformity?  
Shall earth, undressed, uninhabited,  
roll on in illimitable space  
for myriads of millenia to come,  
a wandering lifeless globe,  
in utter desolation ?

This is, I know, emphatic wordiness  
in this unromantic age,  
bound to remain unheeded,  
unless clamouring (not unjustly)  
against all wrongs inflicted



by economic greed  
on earth and sea and sky.  
Yet wiser policies would only win  
a respite for centuries, not cosmic eras.  
“Shoulder the sky,” a later poet said,  
“and drink your ale.” . . .  
Epicurean or Stoic attitudes  
may serve for an hour—or a life-time—  
yet cannot slake the thirst of a mind  
hoping still the mystery of things  
may clear up when we cross the door  
opening on death’s unknown wonder.

*ROCK OF AGES*

A dream

Inaccessible it seemed, cliff-edged  
and silver-streaked by the moon,  
a boulder emerging from the plain  
unmoved for ages.  
My feet had wandered round it, and only left  
their imprint on the earth at a distance,  
intricacies of spiky leaves forbidding  
closer approach—or so I imagined.  
A sudden whirl of migratory birds  
spread a feathery mantle of fluttering wings  
on the bare summit. I rushed  
with outstretched hands, found a way  
through the tangle of briars, and reached the rock  
but could not climb.  
The frightened birds flew off,  
indignant. At the base  
my blood-stained fingers caressed  
the weathered rock—  
content with the feel of dateless endurance.

*Age*

Age is stealthy creeping—welcome  
in oak or mountain peak, mellowing stone,  
burnished bronze or buried urn.  
Age cripples human limbs, yet leaves  
the heart and brain so long untouched  
birds sing in every vein, each morning  
breaks with new splendour and the winds

of Spring ruffle the thinning hair.

Age stirs cold-warm embers and glows,  
dreaming of sun-drenched youth  
and innocence of love.

*Silence*

Silence sits on the waves  
sun-drenched, fusing sea and sky.  
Silence sits on the mind  
in unfathomed vacancy.

A lone gull's cry  
tears the silken air.  
Light fingers of memory  
stir a pool of dormant thoughts.

The boy's dream of reaching heaven  
by walking on the seafloor  
to the far horizon.  
The youth's dream of embracing  
mermaids' breasts in smooth sea swell.  
The grown-up man's striving  
to spy truth in midday glare.

Age has other yearnings:  
tranquil dissolution  
in the unceasing murmur  
of waves breaking for ever  
on the proud rock's endurance.

*Evening*

The cool of the evening.  
The heated grass and leaves  
inhale the freshening air,  
closing petals enfold  
in flowery cups early drops of darkness.  
The unfevered heart is still;  
only small gnats of thought  
roam in the vacant brain:  
the day's petty concerns,  
remembered acts of love,  
frustrated fantasies.  
Up and down they dance and die,

among the untroubled boughs!  
The level field, altar-wise,  
seems to wait for some holy rite,  
the elevation of the moon,  
a lucent host in a darkling sky.

What if the world's wide stage  
in the rising tide of night  
engulfed, rose never more.  
What if this sentient form  
out of sleep never woke?  
Have we still to live on faith  
in nature's course and man's?

Ever-haunting childish fears  
of going into the dark alone  
are stilled by our deeper longing  
for the womb of night.

*On your smile*

A smile flits on your face,  
A smile known for so many years,  
And ever dear  
Since your fingers pressed on my lids  
For the first time,  
And my eyes, reopening,  
Wondered at an angel's face,  
Only known before in my dreams.

Such a smile lighted your brow  
When you agreed to link our hands  
For ever on the uncertain path  
Of life's fitful journey.

Next came the smile of motherhood  
To greet each new-born babe, and later  
The smile of welcome for children  
Coming home after straying far.

And ever the smile of delight  
When a fair sight takes your fancy,  
Or when a fragrance fills the air,  
Not sweeter than your own breath.

Or the sober pensive smile  
Sitting on your lips when you hear  
Such music as may still and soothe  
All sorrow in the listening heart.

Keep that smile when bending low  
To close my eyes with a last kiss,  
Tempering each other's grief:  
Parting then will be endured.

And if an envious fate decreed  
You should die first, though younger far,  
My kiss upon your silent lips  
Would meet, I hope, the self-same smile.