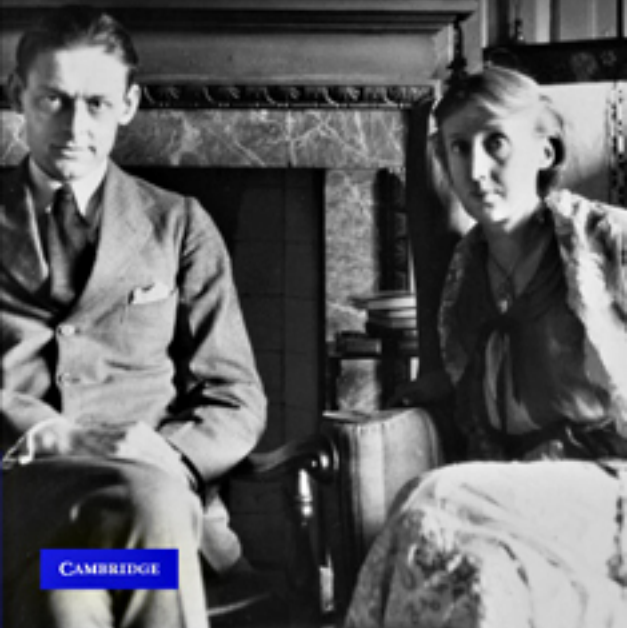


GABRIELLE MCINTIRE

# Modernism, Memory, and Desire

T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf



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## MODERNISM, MEMORY, AND DESIRE: T. S. ELIOT AND VIRGINIA WOOLF

T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf were almost exact contemporaries, readers and critics of each other's work, and friends for over twenty years. Their writings, though, have never been paired in a book-length study. *Modernism, Memory, and Desire* proposes that some striking correspondences exist in Eliot and Woolf's poetic, fictional, critical, and autobiographical texts, particularly in their recurring turn to the language of the body, desire, and sensuality to render memory's processes. The book includes extensive archival research on some mostly unknown bawdy poetry by T. S. Eliot while offering new readings of major work by both writers, including *The Waste Land*, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *Orlando*, and *To the Lighthouse*. McIntire juxtaposes Eliot and Woolf with several major modernist thinkers of memory, including Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, and Walter Benjamin, to offer compelling reconsiderations of the relation between textuality, remembrance, and the body in modernist literature.

GABRIELLE MCINTIRE is Assistant Professor of English at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.



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*For Mary Carolyn and Harley*





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## *Illustration*

T. S. Eliot, “VIVA BOLO!!” *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*,  
ed. Valerie Eliot (New York, Harcourt, 1988), vol. I, 43.

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## Introduction

### WRITING TIME

I am now & then haunted by some semi mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall all be told on one occasion; & time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past. One incident – say the fall of a flower – might contain it. My theory being that the actual event practically does not exist – nor time either.

Virginia Woolf, *Diary*, 23 November 1926<sup>1</sup>

This notion of Time embodied, of years past but not separated from us, it was now my intention to emphasize as strongly as possible in my work.

Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*<sup>2</sup>

To write of memory, time, and desire in early twentieth-century literature is to touch the place where modernism's intense concerns with its historicity and belatedness converge with the versions of temporalities and sexualities it was articulating; it is to investigate the sustained provocation of a modernist predisposition to think of the past through the language of sensuality and eros. T. S. Eliot's now well-known lines from the opening of *The Waste Land*, "April is the cruelest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain,"<sup>3</sup> capture an agonizingly raw protestation within the modernist project, offering one of those rare moments when a poetic conceit happens to express a key dilemma of the time. Eliot's terms forcefully conjoin the incommensurate temporal pulls of memory and desire while highlighting the "cruel[ty]" of such a mixing: memory is intrinsically backward looking – it casts its gaze to what is sealed off "in time," even as it insists that the rules of temporality and closure are unpredictable – while desire pushes to the future for its realization. In Eliot's poem, "April is the cruellest month" because it links what are

otherwise potently disparate (birth and death, “Memory and desire,” “dull roots” and “spring rain”) through a sudden revolution of the earth’s cycles. Fragmented psychic time meets “natural” cyclic time, and in so doing confronts the enduring enigmas of (re)birth, eros, fertility, and death. The tension in this yoking of memory and desire, I want to suggest, marks a highly charged and productive entanglement between anteriority and eros that persistently haunts modernist fiction and poetry on both sides of the Atlantic.

*Modernism, Memory, and Desire* focuses on the poetic, fictional, critical, and autobiographical texts of T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf to argue that despite political, gender, religious, and national differences, and notwithstanding critical tendencies that for decades read their work as asexual and practically disembodied, representing the past was for both a sensuous endeavor that repeatedly turned to the erotic and the corporeal for some of its most authentic elaborations. That is, I want to propose that for Eliot and Woolf memory is always already invested and intertwined with writing sexuality, the body, and desire. Undoubtedly the mixing of memory and desire is in itself not specific to the modernist age. What is deeply singular, though, are the “new” ways modernist writers rendered and returned to the (convoluted) paradox involved in this “mixing.” In the modernity specific to the modernism of roughly 1890–1945,<sup>4</sup> avant-garde writers found themselves open to exploring a newly psychoanalytic body and psyche (replete with drives, desires, and an unconscious), in conjunction with shifting global and national politics, emancipatory (and queered) gender and sexual identifications, rapidly changing technologies, and a post-Nietzschean, post-Darwinian secularized skepticism. All of this contributed to a new aesthetic uninhibitedness, and to new registers for addressing what it means to inscribe remembrance and history. To write of time during the modernist era was to write of a quickly shifting world, to write the mutable and the vanishing; it was simultaneously to create a new time and to celebrate, mourn, and eulogize the passing of the old.

The choice to pair Eliot and Woolf is unusual. Eliot’s conservatism and (late) religiosity have seemed to make his corpus incompatible with the work of a feminist, atheist, and avowedly leftist writer like Virginia Woolf. Indeed, Woolf and Eliot have never before been placed side by side, in dyadic conjunction, in a book-length study. Their work and their lives, though, reveal some striking proximities. Woolf and Eliot were almost exact contemporaries (born in 1882 and 1888, respectively), professional supporters of each other’s work (Woolf’s Hogarth Press, for

example, published Eliot's second volume of poetry, *Poems*, in 1919, when he was still a relatively unknown poet, and Woolf herself set type for the Hogarth Press's 1923 edition of *The Waste Land*), and close friends for over twenty years. In 1936, in an astonishing letter to Woolf's sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, Woolf even expresses that she felt an erotic attraction to T. S. Eliot. Turning to the *memory* of a visit with Eliot through which to convey her desires, Woolf writes: "I had a visit, long long ago from Tom Eliot, whom I love, or could have loved, had we both been in the prime and not in the sere; how necessary do you think copulation is to friendship? At what point does 'love' become sexual?"<sup>5</sup> We have little other evidence of the eros of Woolf and Eliot's relation, but evidently their connection held some form of sexual charge, and I offer this as a delightful biographical fragment that supplements the contiguities in their thinking about the past. They each separately fashion a poetics of memory where translating one's experience of remembrance and historicity to textuality – what I will be calling *writing time* – occurs by concurrently exploring the erotic and the sensual. Further, just as Sigmund Freud proposes in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929) that we think of the psyche's mnemonic layering as analogous to palimpsestic, architectural remains and ruins, both writers stress that time and experience leave *material* and *retrievable* traces – not just in the mind and body but also in the physicality and designs of topography that we are then called upon to interpret. Both are far more present to each other's thinking and writing than we have yet imagined, and their texts offer deeply compelling instantiations of a modernist condensation of the bind between memory and desire. This study, then, considers especially what kinds of work memory does in Woolf and Eliot's literary experiments; how memory is constructed vis-à-vis sexual and textual forms of desire; what kinds of ethics Eliot and Woolf were developing around sites of memory and desire; and, where and why memory fails.

In Djuna Barnes's 1937 novel, *Nightwood*, Baron Felix announces that "To pay homage to our past is the only gesture that also includes the future."<sup>6</sup> Such a statement testifies to the profound complexity and convolution of a modernist predilection to express a time consciousness that looks backward *and* forward with equal, if ambivalent, intensity, all the while commemorating *and* rehabilitating the past as a necessary ingredient required to "make it new," as Ezra Pound notoriously commanded. Pushing toward imagined futures through reconfiguring memory and history was central to so many modernist projects, ranging from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922),

Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* (1925), Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (1930–69), William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels, and Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27), to name only a few era-defining texts whose authors found themselves compelled to turn to the past as their material, inspiration, and source. This was not simply because they were writing historical novels, or setting their poems in distant times. While their efforts evoke past ages, and make wide use of intertextual pastiche, for the most part modernist writers set their texts within a temporal frame that corresponds roughly with what they themselves had experienced. They shattered formal constraints, destabilized generic conventions, and relentlessly commented – both implicitly and explicitly – on the social, cultural, and political structures of their epoch.

There has, in fact, been an ongoing (albeit quiet) battle regarding modernism's relation to the past. Indeed, part of modernism's critical inheritance has involved a decades-long disavowal of its historical dimensions, along with repeated insistences that modernist aims and ideologies signify apolitical and overly aestheticized disavowals of previous work and culture – a turning away from the past in order to “make it new.” Leo Bersani, Gregory Jay, Charles Altieri, Hayden White, and Paul de Man, for example, have each insisted on the modernist tendency to *revoke* history. Hayden White famously argues in 1978 that modernists possessed a “hostility towards history,” rejected “historical consciousness,” and held the “belief that the past was *only* a burden”;<sup>7</sup> in his 1990 study, while discussing distinctly *modernist* writers (Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, and Friedrich Nietzsche, and specifically Eliot and Joyce in this instance), Leo Bersani claims that “the modern” of a “modernistic modernity” “retains an incomparable aura: that of being spiritually stranded, uniquely special in its radical break with traditional values and modes of consciousness”;<sup>8</sup> in 1992, when Gregory Jay tries to distill what critics mean when they speak of “Modernism as a coherent event,” one of the six features he outlines as its “distinguishing characteristics” is “a sense of rupture from the past,”<sup>9</sup> and in 1995 Charles Altieri stresses modernism's “antihistoricism.”<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Andrew Miller has more recently noted that “Within certain strains of literary and cultural criticism, ‘modernism’ has come to be synonymous with a willful, even adolescent, ignorance of historical continuity in the pursuit of formal and stylistic innovation for its own sake” (2002).<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, a number of other critics – including Susan Stanford Friedman, Ronald Bush, Peter Fritzsche, Elena Gualtieri, Lawrence



Rainey, John Whittier-Ferguson, and James Longenbach, to name only a few – have directly contested arguments for modernist antagonisms to the past. Two decades ago James Longenbach pronounced that “It has long been apparent that the work of Eliot and Pound grows from an active interest in history.”<sup>12</sup> Eliot, after all, makes some of his most influential critical pronouncements in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919). Longenbach goes on, though, to point out that critics have focused preeminently on *literary* histories in Eliot and Pound’s “poems including history,” while “the question of the nature of their historicism itself has gone unanswered”;<sup>13</sup> I would argue that this remains largely true today. Susan Stanford Friedman suggests in 1993 that “it is not the erasure of history but its insistent return as nightmare and desire which marks modernity’s stance toward stories of the past,”<sup>14</sup> while Lawrence Rainey proposes in 2005 that “The modernists were obsessed with history. They mourned it and damned it, contested it as tenaciously as Jacob wrestling with the image of God.”<sup>15</sup> Clearly this is contested territory, and we can still assert, more generally, that questions about a “modernist” relation to historicity and memory continue to be underexplored.

In this book I want to think of modernism’s looking to the past as both a return *and* a departure, involving marked historiographical commitments to thinking the relations between memory, time, desire, and subjectivity, where present and past time are dialogically and endlessly engaged in a rearranging of the past’s significations. Eliot and Woolf played with the vagaries of recollection, but still proposed that the past remains a fundamentally vital, retrievable, reinscribable, and often *pleasurable* residue. As Henri Bergson argues, “Our past . . . necessarily and automatically conserves itself. It survives completely whole . . . the past makes body with the present and creates with it without ceasing.”<sup>16</sup> Evoking a bodily and material vitality of the past, where sensation and desire are at the core of memory’s inscription and then return, the past always leaves its mark and it is up to the operations of chance and desire to determine which fragments will re-emerge as memory.

Both Eliot and Woolf render recollection not simply as a nostalgic, sentimental revisitation of lost time, but as the potent and ineluctable condition of possibility for writing the present. They disclose a passionate cathection to the past’s abiding presence in part by affirming the past’s profound temporal *and* spatial proximity – and even contiguity – with the present. The rupture between then and now, and the hiatal ground that such a break engenders, is acknowledged, but traversed and

repaired – sometimes in a single gesture. In 1930 Eliot writes, “The new years walk, restoring / Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring / With a new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem / The time.”<sup>17</sup> Both writers are compelled to repeat tropes of resuscitating, restoring, and even redeeming the past, while they reveal that such efforts never signify simple mimesis or reification. The fecund work of revisitation they trace means that if history (personal, literary, cultural, and political) is severed from the present, then the cut is only partial. The connectivity that remains leaves both the room and the desire to reconstitute and reclaim the past through its most intimate signs.

What I am describing is also not just the stance of the melancholic, where, if we follow Freud’s 1917 proposals, melancholia develops through a failure to recognize and release an attachment to a beloved object-choice after a traumatic loss, involving “an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale.”<sup>18</sup> We certainly find elements of melancholia in some of Eliot and Woolf’s dispositions to the past, but I want to insist that their engagement with the problem of anteriority is more nuanced than this, involving pleasures and pains, attachments and renunciations, and, above all, a recognition of the still-*becoming* life of the past within the present’s only partial fullness. Their affective attachments to the past are distinct from both the sentimentality of a pure nostalgia unable to release its melancholic commitments, and from those of a transcendental idealization of past time. While recent trauma studies have focused preeminently on mourning and melancholia as modern and postmodern modes of memory, I want to propose that Eliot and Woolf’s projects open up a different mnemonic record. The past in their work is a cherished, if occasionally dangerous, material that is urgently required to flesh out – sometimes in a flash – the fragile and fleeting (almost absent) fullness of the present. We find a palpable thematization of attempts to accept that, like a beloved Other, the past *cannot give itself to us* once and for all, no matter how much we might desire such a fantastic resolution. Much of their writing is driven by what it might mean to reapproach this kind of temporal alterity. For, memory, like an Other, manifests a separate and ongoing *coming-into-being* that demands a ceaseless reopening to the work of its translation and transfiguration.

For Eliot and Woolf the past also insists on a multiple rather than a singular hermeneutics. From Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” to Woolf’s *Orlando*, the past is always agitated with a slightly alienating current of the now, and simultaneously confronted with the (relatively)

limited temporal domain of the present. Eliot and Woolf may refuse dis-attachment to the past, but they do so by recognizing a *good enough* accessibility to what remains. They each write out a past that can never be mastered, that is always ajar, and open to both reinscription and reexperience – open to the supplement of a perpetual (re)turn that would find in the past an always new object to confront. To remain connected to the past so that it does not become, as in Proust’s closing vision of *Swann’s Way*, a “fugitive” – a lost image in flight without a place in the present – is, I argue, one of the principle desires in Eliot and Woolf’s oeuvre.

I divide the book into roughly two halves – the first I devote to T. S. Eliot, and the second to Virginia Woolf – to investigate, by juxtaposition, the startling correspondences in their renderings of mnemonic consciousness. In considering Eliot, I trace figures of sex, women, queerness, and desire in relation to historicity and remembrance in his canonical writings as well as in a series of bawdy poems that are still only partially published and have received very little critical notice. Nevertheless, it appears that Eliot composed this extensive body of pornotropic work over roughly fifty years. While these “Columbo and Bolo” verses may at first seem determinately at odds with Eliot’s major poetry and essays, I propose instead that they illuminate – in a kind of hyperbolic relief – Eliot’s persistent recourse to presenting the past through lenses of eros and desire. They reveal some of the excesses of his poetic imagination and ask us to take on the burden of their provocation.

After a first chapter in which I investigate the complicated signs and motivations of these poems, I turn to instances from Eliot’s pre-conversion (pre-1927) published poems and essays – from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” to “Gerontion,” “Portrait of a Lady,” “Preludes,” “Hysteria,” *The Waste Land*, and “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” among other pieces – where he conjoins memory with its sensual designations. As David Chinitz endeavors to do in *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*,<sup>19</sup> part of my task is to continue the work of exposing an “other” Eliot who reads very much against the grain of the asexual, straight, conservative, rigidly Anglo-Catholic, white, prudish “high” modernist “T. S. Eliot” we rather problematically still too often have come to “inherit” – to borrow a term Eliot disdains in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”<sup>20</sup> The Eliot I want to explore is sexy, dangerous, and crucially *uneven* in his investments and pronouncements.

I juxtapose these reflections on Eliot with a focus on Virginia Woolf by considering her similar explorations of the eros and desires implicit

in thinking history and memory. While Woolf's poetics and metaphors of corporeality and sexuality are still surprisingly underexplored in criticism, I suggest that some of Woolf's most erotic expositions occur in conjunction with her representations of recollection.<sup>21</sup> I emphasize her own preoccupations with rewriting and revisiting the eros of the past while she offers critiques of the political, cultural, and personal climates of her present. Indeed, I want to urge us to think of Woolf not only as a major modernist writer and feminist critic, but also as a complicated thinker of memory and history. To understand her better we would do well to place her ruminations on the past in dialogue with those of some of her immediate precursors and contemporaries like Sigmund Freud, Henri Bergson, Marcel Proust, Walter Benjamin, and Friedrich Nietzsche – some of whom she engaged with directly, and all of whom offer serendipitous illuminations. To this end I read Woolf unconventionally as a thinker of memory and history, and take up her contentions that we pay more attention to how the ostensibly three-dimensional spatiality of “the physical” is permeated and ridden with history. By considering *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), *Between the Acts* (1941), “A Sketch of the Past” (1941), and her diaries, letters, and essays, and by placing personal memory in relation to more properly “historical” markers such as the Great War, colonialism, and the rise of Freudian psychoanalysis, I argue that Woolf discloses an intricate theory of writing the past that not only demands an ethics of remembering as necessary to modern subjectivity, but which evokes an ardent devotion to the past's materiality. Woolf repeatedly makes the (re)turn to memory emblematic of a kind of fertile desire, in part because memory stands as a replete ground of citation to which one is recalled to work through material from the past as a kind of palpable putty that is often sufficiently under the control of the conscious mind to be pleasurable.

Finally, I ask how Eliot, Woolf, and other modernists viewed and experienced historical, calendrical, personal, and epiphanic time. How did they articulate the time of memory? How does writing (the signification of the letter) help engender the abstract cohesiveness of a historical or remembered actuality? How is time bounded by language and language bounded by (and bonded to) time? How does time touch the modern(ist) subject? The coupling of memory and desire links what is past to the desires of the present, and always involves at least a double yoking, putting pressure on what Bergson sees as the distinction between the objective fact of time (*temps*) and its subjective experience (*durée*). Woolf and Eliot evince self-conscious historicizing gestures, eroticize

reminiscence and its contents, and relentlessly approach the Otherness of “lost time,” expressing a conviction that through memory firmly lodged in the body the most vital aspects of time remain undispersed. As in Julia Kristeva’s reading of Proust, we find here “a new form of temporality” which “gives an X-ray image of memory, bringing to light its painful yet rapturous dependence on the senses . . . time is to be psychic time, and consequently the factor which determines our bodily life.”<sup>22</sup> In this way, “mixing / Memory and desire” is done not by foregrounding a fear of their contamination, but with an almost lustful impulse to have reminiscence correspond with its sensual corollaries, all the while exposing the unrest between these figures. A palpable desire exists in Eliot and Woolf’s work to *know* the heterogeneousness of the past. This represents not a repulsion from history, but a welcoming of its alterity as fundamentally (re)cognizable and desirable. What we find then is a copulative relation: to remember *is* to desire; to desire *is* to remember. This study considers the ways in which memory and history pressed themselves upon the minds of two exemplary figures who wrote under modernism’s conditions – making time for writing, and in the process, writing time.

CHAPTER I

*An unexpected beginning: sex, race,  
and history in T. S. Eliot's Columbo  
and Bolo poems*

I keep my countenance,  
I remain self-possessed  
Except when a street-piano, mechanical and tired  
Reiterates some worn-out common song  
With the smell of hyacinths across the garden  
Recalling things that other people have desired.  
Are these ideas right or wrong?

T. S. Eliot, "Portrait of a Lady"<sup>1</sup>

One day Columbo and the queen  
They fell into a quarrel  
Columbo showed his disrespect  
By farting in a barrel.  
The queen she called him horse's ass  
And "dirty Spanish loafer"  
They terminated the affair  
By fucking on the sofa.

T. S. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare*<sup>2</sup>

One of the most striking instances of T. S. Eliot's mixing of memory and desire occurs in his rendering of the history, legacy, and cultural memory of early European colonial expansion. In the period from 1909 to 1922 when Eliot was writing and publishing poems such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Portrait of a Lady," "Preludes," and *The Waste Land* – poems that firmly established his reputation as one of the major poets of the century – he was simultaneously composing a long cycle of intensely sexual, bawdy, pornotropic, and satirical verse that has only recently come to light.<sup>3</sup> Centered on the seafaring adventures of an explorer named "Columbo" (Eliot uses an Italianate version of Christopher Columbus's name) and his encounters with two native

inhabitants of Cuba, “King Bolo and his Big Black Bassturd Kween,” these poems comically portray the history of early colonialism in the Americas as an orgy of uncontrollable desire and deviant sexuality. Columbo’s voyages and his first contacts with the King and Queen of Cuba take place by, through, and for sex, as Eliot figures sodomy, masturbation, miscegenation, scatological rituals, and rape as the *modus operandi* of imperial conquest. The poems form part of an extensive cycle that Eliot continued to write throughout his life, and shared privately – in the teens and twenties especially – with a homosocially arranged coterie of male writers, including Conrad Aiken, Clive Bell, Bonamy Dobrée, James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis, and Ezra Pound. Taken as a corpus, the poems (untitled by Eliot) allegorize a number of concerns with Eliot’s nascent reputation as a poet, his anxious desires for publicity, his exile from the United States, and his uneasy relation to race, sex, and colonialism. They explode still-prevalent myths about Eliot’s asexuality, and they demand radical rereadings of the place of sex, race, history, and desire in his poetic and critical oeuvre.

Shockingly different in form, kind, and content from Eliot’s canonical poems, the Columbo and Bolo stanzas – with sing-songy adolescent rhythms and rhyme schemes that seem more appropriate to schoolboy doggerel than to the poetry of a major literary figure – would hardly have done Eliot’s literary reputation much good in the London literary scene of the nineteen-teens and early twenties. Nevertheless, Eliot actively tried to get them published. In what appear to be two of the early stanzas – at least chronologically speaking, in terms of the New World voyage of discovery that Eliot charts – Columbo is preparing to leave Spain, under the patronage of Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, and the following scene takes place:

One day the king & queen of Spain  
 They gave a royal banquet  
 Columbo having passed away  
 Was brought in on a blanket  
 The queen she took an oyster fork  
 And pricked Columbo’s navel  
 Columbo hoisted up his ass  
 And shat upon the table.

Columbo and his merry men  
 They set sail from Genoa  
 Queen Isabella was aboard  
 That famous Spanish whore.<sup>4</sup>

The penetrating “prick” of the queen’s “oyster fork” is apparently enough to resurrect Columbo from a death-like pre-voyage unconsciousness: prodding him – marking him with the threat of rape – with her phallic utensil as she mixes sex and appetite to awaken him to his scatological act. Columbo returns the queen’s “prick” with a contrary but commensurate response by marking his departure with a gesture of anal excrement. The whole contestation foreshadows Columbus’s eventual fall from grace, and we are evidently meant to read her “prick” as phallic, since it intratextually cites a moment just seven lines earlier where Eliot writes anti-Semiticly that when Columbo went to see a doctor in Spain, “Where doctors are not many / The only doctor in his town / Was a bastard jew named Benny,” who “filled Columbo’s prick / With Muriatic Acid.”<sup>5</sup> Eliot thus begins his rendition of colonial history with a mocking critique of its origins: the signs of colonialism’s beginnings are to be found in its performance of anal fantasies, involving a non-verbal exchange between patron and subject whose signification operates as erotic tribute *and* offensive rebuke.

Indeed, anal excrement will be the great, expendable form of currency and expression in these poems, with Eliot suggesting that “shit” is the fungible substance of colonialism par excellence: it is alternately deposited at formal occasions, thrown in play, the primary colonial cargo for import to Europe, while it is proposed as both the substance of a meal and as a sexual stimulant. Further, excremental homage turns out to be one of the dominant modes of a repeated mimicry that circulates between the colonists and the colonized. Within the indigenous social structure of Cuba that Columbo encounters, the natives partake of the same carnival of excremental expression with *their* royal head of state: “King Bolo’s swarthy bodyguard / They numbered three and thirty,” and while King Bolo is lying “down in the shade / His royal breast uncovering / They mounted in a banyan tree / And shat upon their sovereign.”<sup>6</sup> Part insult, part sexual exhibitionism and even sexual flattery, the ubiquitous anal excrement of these poems asks us to rethink the relation between colonialism and waste, pillage and bodily excess. The colonial enterprise was girded with disrespect for the physical and sexual consent of others (sovereigns and colonized alike, Eliot insists), while the mockery Eliot makes of the project of discovery renders grabbing and shaming bodies as analogous to grabbing territories.

In the above stanza, Eliot is also already playing with the queer valences of “queen” – as he will do elsewhere in the poems – to suggest not only that colonialism’s first conquests relied on hyperbolic registers of racist



difference, but also that imperialism operated through deviant desire. Eliot is at once homophobic and homoerotically fascinated, and the poems' homoerotic content was crucial to the impetus for their creation and subsequent circulation among a group of all-male contemporary writers. Eliot depicts Queen Isabella, Christopher Columbus's Spanish-Catholic patroness, who favored his voyage while others looked more skeptically on his prospects, as both an ambiguously female and potentially queer "queen," and as a misogynistically portrayed "whore" who acted as Columbus's envoy. Historically, her support of Columbus – who hailed originally from Italy, and who was therefore already in some senses post-national in securing Spanish patronage – allowed him to become a principal Atlantic explorer for the Spanish royalty, and the "discoverer" of the "New World." Isabella also stands as something of a foil to her great English contemporary, the "virgin" Queen Elizabeth – another prominent female ruler whose cultural iconography has insisted on naming the degree of her erotic availability. In effect, Eliot is finding himself called upon to approach what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have called the "primal scene of colonial intercourse,"<sup>7</sup> figuring history and sex, and memory and desire as inseparable, as though to write a history of New World discovery is also to write a sexuality.

To date, these Columbo and Bolo poems have received almost no critical attention. There has evidently been some temptation to leave them aside, and they have languished mostly unexamined since their respective dates of (still partial) publication in 1988, 1990, and 1996. As it now stands, with the exception of a few published reviews of Christopher Ricks's 1996 *Inventions of the March Hare*, in which the bulk of the stanzas first appeared,<sup>8</sup> and the occasional indication in biographies and critical guides that Eliot wrote some "bawdy" verses about Christopher Columbus, very few articles exist on the poems. It is, we might say, difficult to know where to begin with these bawdy verses, since they are as offensive as they are fascinating, and as dangerous as they are subversive. They play recklessly on prohibitions while offering a satirical poetics of desire and memory whose comic edge is always in danger of collapsing into the outright racism, homophobia, and misogyny that they ventriloquize, repeat, and critique.

Given Eliot's desire to publish these poems, the protracted period of their composition, and the range of issues they invoke, we cannot, though, dismiss them as "mere" juvenilia.<sup>9</sup> The Columbo and Bolo stanzas are hardly an occasional literary preoccupation, and their composition appears to have extended throughout Eliot's adult life. Eliot wrote a major part

of the poems from about 1909 to 1929, a twenty-year span that coincides with one of his most productive periods, as well as with his permanent move to England, his marriage, and his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927. And the body of work these poems represent is incredibly vast, totaling at least seventy-five stanzas in all. So far, twenty-nine of these have been published – including nearly ten in Valerie Eliot's 1988 *The Letters of T. S. Eliot: Volume One, 1898–1922*, seventeen in Christopher Ricks's 1996 *Inventions of the March Hare*, two in *The Faber Book of Blue Verse* – and many more sit unpublished in archives.<sup>10</sup>

PUBLIC DESIRES AND PRIVATE CIRCULATIONS:

ELIOT'S COTERIE

One day Columbo went below  
To see the ship's physician:  
"It's this way, doc" he said said he  
I just cant stop a-pissin" . . .

or

King Bolo's big black kukquheen  
Was fresh as ocean breezes.  
She burst aboard Columbo's ship  
With a cry of gentle Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

Who, we might ask, were Eliot's intended readers for these remarkable poems? Eliot had been writing the Columbo and Bolo verses at least since he was an undergraduate at Harvard (1906–9), and it is likely that he shared them aloud with several of his male friends from that time onward.<sup>12</sup> The earliest record we have of their circulation is from July 1914, immediately before the beginning of the Great War, when Eliot began to include them in his letters to Conrad Aiken, with whom he had worked on *The Harvard Advocate*. At the time, Eliot was studying German at a summer-language program in Marburg that would soon be cut short by Germany's declaration of war against Russia on 1 August 1914. The timing of the poems' composition and circulation is thus extraordinary: Eliot began sharing his parody of early European colonialism with others at precisely the moment when Europe was entering the Great War, a war that would, in part, mark the necessity of colonialism's demise. As such, the Columbo and Bolo verses gesture backward to relatively distant historical "origins" at the very moment when a new era of European national and international politics was unfolding.

That is, they look backward while reflecting the preoccupations of the new, using a historical rendition to critique the continued operations of early twentieth-century colonialism.

Eliot gradually expanded the circle of friends with whom he shared the poems to include not just Aiken, but other major writers, ranging from Clive Bell to Bonamy Dobrée, James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis, and Ezra Pound. Although at present it is difficult to assess all of Eliot's correspondence after 1922 (which is the end point of Valerie Eliot's excellent 1988 *The Letters of T. S. Eliot: Volume One*; a second volume has not yet appeared), from smatterings of letters in archives and from correspondence sent to Eliot by these interlocutors, we know that Eliot wrote about Bolo throughout his life. In the John Davy Hayward Bequest at Cambridge University, for instance, Bolo emerges in a letter to Clive Bell in 1941, nearly fifteen years after an intense correspondence on the subject with Bonamy Dobrée reaches its peak in 1927 – astonishingly, the year of Eliot's conversion – and roughly thirty years after Bolo's first incarnation. Furthermore, Conrad Aiken indicates in December 1964, less than a month before Eliot died on 4 January 1965, that Bolo was still a topic of interest. Writing to Eliot at the time, Aiken expresses regret that this year they would not have their usual exchange of Columbo and Bolo poems: "But o dear we shall miss our annual meeting in New York and the exchange of Bolos and lime rickeys at the River Club or Vanderbilt."<sup>13</sup> Aiken's phrasing suggests that Aiken, too, might have composed Bolo verses. I have, however, been unable to find any evidence of this in Aiken's writings. Perhaps Aiken offered the lime rickeys and Eliot offered the poems. What perhaps is most astonishing about this body of work, then, is that Eliot continued to write and circulate the Columbo and Bolo verses through his whole life. Though their "temperature and ambience is callow," as Hortense Spiller suggests,<sup>14</sup> they are the verses to which he most consistently returned, and they constitute his most sustained poetic output.

The poems' circulation in these letters seems to have been initially prompted by conditions of both literary and personal history – in part by the arrival of Wyndham Lewis's first issue of *Blast* on the London literary scene in June of 1914, and in part by Eliot's growing skepticism and disillusionment with the academic establishment of which, in 1914, while still a PhD student in philosophy at Harvard, he believed he was destined to be a part. Their dissemination thus stems from overlapping public and private desires: on the one hand they evidence his wish to

participate in the public moment of *Blast*, while on the other hand they symptomatically indicate a wish to parody and distance himself from what he perceived to be a pedantic academic milieu that he was soon to leave.

The circulation of the Columbo and Bolo poems begins, importantly, with mimicry – a mode they will continue to reflect as they alternate between parody, satire, and outright repetition of racist codes and *topoi*. Deliberately echoing the “Blast Humour” from Lewis’s new journal, in which Lewis alternately mocks and praises public personalities and cultural institutions, offering an iconoclastic and impetuous genre of humor that would either “Blast” or “Bless” depending on a satirical moral judgment of the figure in question, Eliot begins his July 1914 letter to Aiken with the following heading:

### BLESS

		COLUMBO
BOLO	BLUBUNG	CUDJO
THE CHAPLAIN	BRUTUS	SQUIRTY PANSY

### BLAST

THE BOSUN	COUSIN HUGH	THE COOK
PROF. DR. KRAPP <sup>15</sup>		

A jocular letter ensues that pokes fun at academics and includes some of Eliot’s accomplished comic-like pen drawings (see Figure 1.1). In Eliot’s visual depiction of Bolo he is a large, bald man of ambiguous race, smoking a cigar, decked out with a monocle and a polka-dotted bowtie. Beneath him the subscript reads – in an imperative pastiche form that blends aspects of Latin, Italian, and Spanish – “VIVA BOLO!!”<sup>16</sup> Bolo seems rather pleased with himself, and gives the impression that he is ogling something or someone outside the frame of the drawing. Behind him is a mountain, as Eliot mixes locales as well as historical moments to place Bolo in what is probably the German landscape Eliot inhabited at the time – a mountainous landscape he again depicts a week later in a letter to his American cousin, Eleanor Hinkley.<sup>17</sup> Bolo is thus curiously *distant*, geographically and temporally speaking, and *present*: he is simultaneously the imaginary native King of Cuba from Columbus’s day, and a timeless caricature of sovereignty with infinitely changeable historical locations.