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Eliot's Cats: Serious Play Behind the Playful Seriousness

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> I have received from whom I do not know
> These letters. Show me, light, if they make sense.
> —James Merrill

In an essay in *Children's Literature,* Marion C. Hodge charges T. S. Eliot with the offense of moralizing: "In *Prufrock,* in *The Waste Land,* in *Four Quartets,* he preaches to adults. In *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* he preaches to children (and adults)."[1] Hodge contends that these lines from "The Ad-dressing of Cats" invite us to see the book as didactic:

> You now have learned enough to see
> That Cats are much like you and me
> And other people whom we find
> Possessed of various types of mind.
> For some are sane and some are mad
> And some are good and some are bad . . .[2]

Hodge treats the cats as object lessons. The Old Gumbie Cat, for example, is "damned . . . because she does not realize the depth of man's depravity." *Practical Cats* testifies, then, to Eliot's "conviction that catkind/mankind is prone to crudity, cruelty, and violence, and is beyond reformation"; secondarily, it is a "quest for order."[3] I wish to defend *Practical Cats* against such overseriousness, and yet suggest that it is one of Eliot's serious undertakings, a book that makes sense in terms of his career as a poet.

Very few students of *Prufrock* and *The Waste Land* would argue that those poems moralize; in any case, the charge cannot be successfully prosecuted against *Practical Cats* with the lines that Hodge quotes, as the *subsequent* lines make clear: "some are better, some are worse— / *But all may be described in verse*" (*CPP,* p. 169; my italics). Old Possum here clearly disavows any intention to praise or

condemn; he has not judged but merely catalogued and marveled. We feel, moreover, no surprise when, in the book's last poem, Possum acknowledges the obvious resemblances of his cats to humans with more and less serious failings. But *Practical Cats'* "lesson" is *spiritual,* not *moral.* Cats live; this is the deepest impulse behind Eliot's writing. Vital, sassy, perseverant, wrongheaded, perverse, magical, and mysterious they are—but never indifferent, mundane, or mediocre. Their conformity to any laws religious or social is clearly irrelevant to Eliot, who seems to have chosen his genre with escape from such adult baggage specifically in mind.[4]

Eliot's cognomen, "Old Possum," which was given to him by Ezra Pound, emphasizes his desire to escape the adult responsibility to be sensible. On closer examination, *Practical Cats* comes more to look like a side of Eliot's character and poetic practice that we do not often see, but which runs deep—namely, a fascination with children's voices, "chantant dans la coupole!" (*CPP,* p. 43). Neither a sermon nor an aberration, the book expresses Eliot's love for dog-, cat-, and mankind, and his desire to keep alive in himself the irreverent child.

Eliot the reactionary, it is known, began as Eliot the rebellious son. He married against his parents' wishes and even dressed the dandy. He rehearsed at Harvard the bitter ironies of Laforguian verse. Manuscripts in the New York Public Library's Berg Collection make it clear that he excised and left unpublished much poetry dealing explicitly with sex. He guarded his privacy; there are many letters that will not be available until well into the next century. The nickname of "Old Possum" seems to fit especially well that quizzical yet flaunting attitude that Eliot took toward the somewhat dour mask he showed the world, a mask he apparently loved to remove in friendly company. He was not anxious to please those who wished to canonize him for literary posterity, and he no doubt took delight in the puzzlement with which some readers received *Practical Cats* in 1939. John Holmes, reviewer for the *Boston Evening Transcript,* thought *Practical Cats* an indiscretion: "It should have been prevented," huffed Holmes.[5]

Eliot had long been interested in children's rhymes; they played a role in *The Waste Land* ("London Bridge is falling down") and

"The Hollow Men" ("Here we go round the prickly pear") (*CPP,* pp. 50, 58). Drafts of the Sweeney play also struck such notes: "Under the bam / Under the boo / Under the bamboo tree" (*CPP,* p. 81). Eliot never leaves the child's voice far behind; it seems to call to us like Marina through the fog.[6] And the child's fascination with nonsense is Eliot's, too. In the 1930s, he began to work seriously on nonsense themes. "Five Finger Exercises," first published in *The Criterion* in January 1933, sounded muted notes that were to become the Jellicle Ball:

> Pollicle dogs and cats all must
> Jellicle cats and dogs all must
> Like undertakers, come to dust.
> Here a little dog I pause
> Heaving up my prior paws,
> Pause and sleep endlessly. [*CPP,* pp. 91–92]

The "Exercises" bow to Conan Doyle, Dodgson, and Lear, whose wistful "How Pleasant to Know Mr. Lear" becomes, in Eliot's hands, the wry and self-deprecating "How Unpleasant to Know Mr. Eliot."

Real children's voices haunted Eliot, as well. He visited Burnt Norton, Gloucester, in the late summer of 1934. The house was vacant; its gardens attracted him, and he strolled there. Robert Sencourt tells us that "although he thought he was alone, some children had hidden themselves in the shrubberies; finally, they burst out laughing, so he was in pleasant company."[7] A year later, Eliot reworked discarded lines from *Murder in the Cathedral* (published in May 1935) and finished "Burnt Norton" in time for its inclusion in *Collected Poems, 1909–1935* (published in April 1936). The experience framing "Burnt Norton," and ultimately the whole of *Four Quartets,* is of children in the leaves, "hidden excitedly, containing laughter" (*CPP,* p. 118). The genesis of "Burnt Norton" coincides with that of *Practical Cats.*

Faber and Faber announced in its winter 1935–36 book advertisement that by Easter 1936 Eliot would have his book of "children's verses" ready: "several of the poems, illustrated by the author, have been given in private circulation in the Publishers' various families" already, the notice said.[8] The book would be

called "Mr. Eliot's Book of Pollicle Dogs and Jellicle Cats as Recited to Him by the Man in White Spats." Three years after the intended publication date, Old Possum stepped forward with a text that had gone to the cats, for only one dog poem was included: "Of the Awefull Battle of the Pekes and the Pollicles." A few poems that might have fit the original project were published elsewhere. Two appeared in a book intended to raise funds for medical care in the war effort, *The Queen's Book of the Red Cross:* "Billy McCaw: The Remarkable Parrot" and "The Marching Song of the Pollicle Dogs."[9] As late as 1952, Eliot contributed to the *Animals' Magazine* (a husbandry publication) "Cat Morgan's Apology," memorializing Faber and Faber's deceased mascot, reprinted in subsequent editions of *Practical Cats* as "Cat Morgan Introduces Himself."[10]

Unpublished spinoffs from *Practical Cats* exist as well. Eliot had been in the habit of meeting with friends at John ("the man in white spats") Hayward's flat in Bina Gardens. When the group appeared to be disbanding they pooled efforts and brought out a privately printed pamphlet, *Noctes Binianae,* in the summer of 1939. Eliot contributed a third of the poems, including "The O'Possum Strikes Back" and "Ode to a Roman Coot." He also left an unfinished poem, "Grizabella, The Glamour Cat," and a poem written to a little girl who had sent him a lavender bag, "The Practical Possum."[11]

This interest in children's rhymes and nonsense literature is a wide vein in Eliot's work. But is it a rich one? Only if we resist the temptation to view it from the adult side of the looking-glass. Felix Clowder, for example, claims that elaborate punning conceals "the fact that an apparently humorous book is actually a serious one." Clowder suggests, only half-facetiously, that we read the title, "Old Parson's Book of Practical Catachumens," a reading that is, though less condemnatory, still in line with Hodge's.[12] Taking a cue from "Five Finger Exercises," Clowder demonstrates Eliot's delight in the ambiguity of the "Prior's Paws" and makes a not unconvincing case for reading "Jellicle" as a foreshortening of "evangelical." Many have recognized the theological touches in the book, like the cats' trinity of names (*CPP,* p. 149). Yet Eliot is *not* writing from serious theological intentions; rather, he is having a little adult fun (per-

haps occasionally a little too much) as he writes in all seriousness for children. Rather than use the unwieldy crowbar of his adult verse on *Practical Cats*, we ought to let the children's book shed its light on the larger canon. To begin we ought to ask, What are Old Possum's operative principles?

Above all, there is that dualism with which the book began, now obscured by the insubordinate cats, who overran the ship. The inscrutable cats were to stand opposite those "simple souled" dogs (*CPP*, p. 170). What clues are left us? The dogs we glimpse in *Practical Cats* are "dour Yorkshire tykes" spoiling for a fight, or else police dogs who slip into the local pub for a drink (*CPP*, p. 159). Pugnacious he may be ("my name it is Little Tom Pollicle; / And WHA MAUN MEDDLE WI' ME?"),[13] but the dog is essentially an innocent:

> He's very easily taken in—
> Just chuck him underneath the chin . . .
>
> Again I must remind you that
> A Dog's a Dog—A CAT's A CAT. [*CPP*, p. 170]

Dogs are innocent with an adult's sort of innocence (ask any child about this!). They symbolize an established order, a routine, though not fatally dull, approach to life. No wonder Eliot found the cats more interesting! They have their "sensible everyday names" (*CPP*, p. 149). They can assert order, as the Old Gumbie Cat does in teaching mice to crochet and cockroaches to act like boy scouts. But they also have their "peculiar . . . more dignified" names—private identities and special qualities, like endurance, independence, sophistication; they can feel disdain and even exercise magical powers.

Practical Cats does not try to avoid the cliché of the cat's mysterious longevity. Old Deuteronomy is this typical indestructible cat who has lived "many lives in succession." He has, Possum tells us with pun in cheek, "buried nine wives / And more—I am tempted to say ninety-nine" (*CPP*, p. 157). The cat's prepotent powers awe local humans. If Deuteronomy falls asleep in the road, they close it. No dog could command such respect. No dog could possess such dignity.

And no dog has the sophistication to know that he is more than one individual, that the self is hetero-, not homogeneous. The cat, in contrast, requires a trinity of names: one public, one private, and one sacred. The cat never discloses the mystery of his self; he never confesses the "deep and inscrutable singular Name" upon which he meditates. One must never hope, according to Possum, to know this name. To "ad-dress" a cat, begin with the public identity and hope to earn the right to call the cat by its private name. Unlike the simple dog, the cat "resents familiarity" (*CPP,* p. 170). So proceed carefully. While the dog will answer "any hail or shout," the cat must be approached with reverence.

Practical Cats describes many cats, of course, and few are actually to be revered. Some assert social order: the Old Gumbie Cat is a do-gooder. Skimbleshanks keeps the mail on time. The Great Rumpuscat puts the fear of God in the Peks and the Pollicles. Some cats harm no one in particular: Gus, the garrulous theatre cat, is obsessed with his past. Bustopher Jones, white spats and all, gourmandizes at the garbage heaps of fashionable clubs. But then there are the magical characters, like Mr. Mistoffelees, who alters gender at will. The majority of Possum's cats seem to have "practical" ends in view that do not conduce much to social stability; they can be difficult, devious, and even dangerous. There is the Terror of the Thames, Growltiger, who intimidates the world, albeit less effectively than Rumpuscat; and those spiritual Siamese twins, Mungojerrie and Rumpelteazer, who exploit their "plausibility" to disrupt and plunder the households they invade. They feed themselves on the "Argentine joint" the family expected for Sunday dinner. They demolish without compunction the vase in the library "said to be Ming" (*CPP,* pp. 156–57). The darker side of feline magic is epitomized by Macavity, "the Napoleon of Crime," whose agents all other nimblewitted and footed cats are said to be: "He's outwardly respectable. (They say he cheats at cards.)/And his footprints are not found in any file of Scotland Yard's" (*CPP,* p. 163).[14]

The mystery seems not so impenetrable, after all. It's a simple, if delightful, exercise to fantasize through cats those things we children, of whatever age, are forbidden. Capable of anything, we become, like Macavity, responsible for nothing. We can afford

perversity like the Rum Tum Tugger's: "When you let him in, then he wants to be out; / He's always on the wrong side of every door" (*CPP,* p. 153). With a Rumpuscat glare, we scatter our foes; we steal from the larder with impunity. The parent, unable to *prove* which one of us has smashed the vase, bites his tongue in frustration. Remarkably, Eliot's cats manage to serve as alter egos without losing catness. For adults who have internalized the parent-figure, harmonies between fantasy and reality offer lovely entertainment. "Where *did* Mr. Mistoffelees get those kittens?" asks the baffled child. The portliness of Bustopher, the intractability of the Rum Tum Tugger—these are unobtrusive adult touches. They make *Practical Cats* a book with which both adults and children can grow, a book, really, about what *Four Quartets* calls the "inner / And the outer compulsion," the battle between ego and social self.

But the "practical" value of *Cats* lies precisely in its openhanded play with these experiences, in the playground it affords for what some will misidentify as the "depravities" of human behavior. The poems may *evaluate,* but they are not monitory; indeed, they stress the value of daydreaming. The proof of this lies, I believe, in their apparent delight with themselves. Elizabeth Sewell rightly observes that one finds in them

> all the love and charity which cause Mr. Eliot, as Nonsense poet, so much trouble in the rest of his poetry, but released and reconciled. Here, too, sin is behovely ("I could mention Mungojerrie, I could mention Griddlebone") but all shall be well; and there is set moving in "The Song of the Jellicles," at long last and in spite of all impediments and far beyond any of the supposedly more poetic works, a dance so free and loving and joyful, yet quiet and half-secret, that it is a clear image of heaven and an invitation thither.[15]

Sewell sees Eliot as having worked throughout his career with classical nonsense techniques in order to dominate "potentially subversive material" without denying it ("one and one and one," as the Red Queen says).[16] I believe she is right that *Practical Cats* calmly accepts its own fascination with human imperfection, and further, that the book creates a joyful dance.

But how does it do so? We must assess the prosody of *Practical Cats*, if we are to answer this question. And we cannot really bring Old Possum's poetic practice to light unless we have dug a little way into Eliot's. The operative principle here is clearly *ritual*. "*All* art," Eliot wrote in 1923, "emulates the condition of ritual. That is what it comes from and *to that it must return for nourishment.*"[17] Eliot's fascination with nonsense and children's verse began with the ritualized forms of children's rhymes and popular song. One thinks immediately of the songs in *The Waste Land:* "Goodnight ladies"; "O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag"; Mrs. Sweeney and her daughter, who "wash their feet in soda water"; and, of course, "London Bridge is falling down." These elements are relatively diverse, of course, and they function more as background than foreground music. But they are part of a larger pattern of refrain found in all Eliot's work.

"Prufrock" marks off time with recurrent phrases: "In the room the women come and go . . ." and "How should I presume?" In *The Waste Land* Eliot's attention turns more frankly to the infrangible syllables of onomatopoeia: "Twit twit twit / Jug jug jug jug jug"; "Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop"; "Weialala leia / Wallala leialala"; "Co co rico co co rico." The adult verse often makes a pastiche of voices—one might think of Eliot as a sort of sound-mixing technician merging the drone of barroom conversation quickly with prayer:

> ". . . humble people who expect
> Nothing."
> la la
> To Carthage then I came
>
> Burning burning burning burning
> O Lord thou pluckest me out
> O Lord thou pluckest
>
> burning

Effects pioneered in *The Waste Land* recur in "The Hollow Men" ("For Thine is / Life is / For Thine is the") and "Ash Wednesday" ("Because I do not hope to turn again / Because I do not hope")

(*CPP,* pp. 59, 60). In the Sweeney fragments they take a bitter edge ("And perhaps you're alive / And perhaps you're dead / Hoo ha ha / Hoo ha ha") (*CPP,* p. 85).

But the manic dance is soothed in *Practical Cats,* where refrains are allowed to grow naturally, unchopped and unsliced by the anxious mixer sweating over his tape. Eliot came to believe that a poem begins "first as a particular rhythm," which gives birth to "the idea and the image."[18] In order to continue to create voices out of the rhythms of the unconscious, a poet must guard his flow of voice jealously. *Practical Cats,* more than any other of Eliot's works, taps the child's fountain of voice and tries to get a sense of the verbal playground into its very structures.

After 1925, Helen Gardner notes, Eliot's verse constantly recurs to the "four-stress line, with strong medial pause."[19] Northrop Frye concurs, pointing out that this four-stress line is "the bedrock of English versification: it is the rhythm of alliterative verse, of nursery rhymes and of ballads, all rhythms close to Eliot."[20] *Practical Cats* works with this tetrameter at the heart of English verse. Of the fourteen poems in the 1939 edition, seven use the four-beat line. Eliot is fondest of dactyls and anapests. Dactylic tetrameter pops up in "The Naming of Cats":

> The Naming of Cats is a difficult matter
> It isn't just one of your holiday games [*CPP,* p. 149]

and in "Deuteronomy":

> Old Deuteronomy's lived a long time [*CPP,* p. 157]

and in "Gus: The Theatre Cat":

> Gus is the Cat at the Theatre Door. [*CPP,* p. 164]

The anapestic tetrameter of the last stanza of "Song of the Jellicles" is less common:

> They are resting and saving themselves to be right.
> For the Jellicle Moon and the Jellicle Ball. [*CPP,* p. 155]

Only one poem uses iambic tetrameter; that is "The Ad-dressing of Cats":

You've read of several kinds of Cat
And my opinion now is that . . . [*CPP*, p. 169]

Of course, Eliot teaches us how effortlessly the dactyl slips into the anapest, and vice versa, as in "The Naming of Cats":

His mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation
Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name:
His ineffable effable
Effanineffable
Deep and inscrutable singular Name. [*CPP*, p. 149]

and in "The Pekes and the Pollicles":

They will now and again join in to the fray
And they
Bark bark bark bark
Bark bark BARK BARK
Until you can hear them all over the Park. [*CPP*, p. 159]

These poems fairly waltz.

Several of the remaining seven poems, though they do not use a straight four-beat line, are nonetheless in four-beat rhythm. "The Old Gumbie Cat" is in octameter, but it rhymes across the lines at the fourth and eighth foot:

I have a Gumbie Cat in mind, her name is Jennyanydots;
Her coat is of the tabby kind, with tiger stripes and leopard spots. [*CPP*, p. 150]

And the refrain reasserts the straight tetrameter structure:

But when the day's hustle and bustle is done,
Then the Gumbie Cat's work is but hardly begun . . .

The really noticeable change, from stanza to refrain, is the shift from a two- to a three-syllable foot, not from octameter to tetrameter. "Mungojerrie and Rumpelteazer" also uses octameter stanzas and tetrameter refrains. And the poem added in the 1950s, "Cat Morgan Introduces Himself," also employs a tetrameter line with a three-syllable foot, so that, by a final reckoning, ten of *Cats*' fifteen poems use four-stress lines almost exclusively.

Yet the favored foot is always three-beat, and the meters of cats owe a secondary allegiance, as well, to trimeter. In "Growltiger" and "Macavity" Eliot works with a line that might be scanned in several ways. Strictly speaking, it is iambic heptameter:

> Growltiger was a Bravo Cat who lived upon a barge:
> In fact he was the roughest cat who ever roamed at large.
> [*CPP*, p. 151]

> Macavity's a Mystery Cat: he's called the Hidden Paw . . .
> [*CPP*, p. 163)

But at least two other possibilities present themselves. We might claim to find four stresses in the line (admittedly a strain, but possible):

> Growltiger was a Bravo Cat who lived upon a barge:

or even claim to find *five* stresses—surely there is a shift from two- to three-beat rhythm at the end of the line:

> Growltiger was a Bravo Cat who lived upon a barge:

"Growltiger" and "Macavity" may really be in strict heptameter, but they often give the effect of using a four-syllable foot.

The mixing of fours and threes becomes a line-by-line matter in "Mr. Mistoffelees":

> You ought to know Mr. Mistoffelees
> The original conjuring cat [*CPP*, p. 161]

and in "Bustopher Jones":

> Bustopher Jones is *not* skin and bones
> In fact he's remarkably fat [*CPP*, p. 166]

and in "Skimbleshanks":

> He gives one flash of his glass-green eyes
> And the signal goes "All Clear!" [*CPP*, p. 167]

But this shifting and pressing *never* comes to the sort of studied withdrawal from the implied general cadence that characterizes most of Eliot's adult verse.[21] *Practical Cats* presses the limits of rhythm only to return to home ground with evident satisfaction. Even when the even- and odd-numbered rhythms coexist in a single line, the effect is harmonious, not schizophrenic:

> Jellicle Cats are black and white
> Jellicle Cats (as I said) are small. [*CPP*, p. 155]

The cadence varies; it does not play peek-a-boo.

Practical Cats, then, uses simple materials to make sometimes elaborate ritual dances. And while the dances are mostly very regular, they do have their moments of near-disintegration, when the cadence erodes, only to re-assert itself. Those moments come exclusively in the *refrains*. But before we examine these, we must glance briefly at another key element in the joy of the dance, one not strictly speaking a "metrical" matter.

The key to much nonsense appears to lie in names—that is, in the Boojums, Jabberwockies, Pobbles, and Jellicles the nonsense poet offers us. *Practical Cats* clearly states its thematic and strategic interest in "naming," as the first and last poems of the 1939 edition prove. Possum starts us off with "Munkustrap, Quaxo, . . . Coricopat, . . . Bombalurina," and "Jellylorum." Subsequently, the narrative poems, "The Old Gumbie Cat" and "Growltiger," seem to be taking stock of names, their application and manipulation ("I have a Gumbie Cat in mind, her name is Jennyanydots"). The trick, from the versifier's point of view, is never to allow the metrical slot to cancel the name's illusion of spontaneity. Possum uses plenty of "real" names that might as well be made up, and this makes the nonsense names perhaps even more remarkably convincing. Growltiger's demise starts a global festival, and the last stanza offers a festival of names: "Oh there was joy in Wapping . . . At Maidenhead and Henley . . . at Brentford, and at Victoria Dock, / And a day of celebration was commanded in Bangkok" (*CPP*, p. 153).

In *Practical Cats* names echo constantly. We hear "Rum Tum Tugger" eight times in three stanzas (*CPP*, pp. 153–54). "The Song

of the Jellicles" hammers on the word *jellicle,* as if seeing just how far it can go before becoming an outrage. And Eliot's use of refrain is directly related to this strategy—this *naming.* At the most basic level, he works with set-phrases: "But when the day's hustle and bustle is done," in "The Old Gumbie Cat," for example; or *"Macavity's not there!"* in "Macavity"; or "Firefrorefiddle, the Fiend of the Fell," in "Gus: The Theatre Cat." But in several poems the recurrence to set-phrase becomes a much more complicated, and interesting, matter.

The Rum Tum Tugger, we learn in every single stanza, is a "Curious Cat," and the poet lets a phrase roll out that we know fascinated him once before; it is the locution of Podsnap in *Our Mutual Friend* (Bk. 1, ch. 11), which was to have stood as the title of *The Waste Land.* Speaking of Sloppy, Podsnap says, "He do the police in different voices." And the Rum Tum Tugger

> . . . will do
> As he do do
> And there's no doing anything about it! [*CPP,* p. 153]

The refrain from "Mr. Mistoffelees" is even more complex:

> Presto!
> Away we go!
> And we all say: OH!
> Well I never!
> Was there ever
> A Cat so clever
> As Magical Mr. Mistoffelees! [*CPP,* p. 161]

Eliot's refrains seem always to be exclamatory, always drawing attention to themselves. He finds a phrase and leans on it until it becomes a game, and sometimes until it seems the ritual has become a spasmodic dance:

> The Oldest Inhabitant croaks: "Well, of all . . .
> Things . . . Can it be . . . really! . . . No! . . . Yes! . . .
> Ho! hi!
> Oh, my eye!

My mind may be wandering, but I confess
I believe it is Old Deuteronomy!" [*CPP*, p. 158]

This staccato interjection, and its ultimate resolution back into tetrameter, does not just by chance happen to describe a moment of recognition, a *naming*.

To name something is to achieve a not altogether illusory power over it—just as a mastery of rhythms may help to bring out of the "order of speech . . . the beauty of incantation" [*CPP*, p. 111]. The nonsense poet at his best can achieve, I think, a sort of naming that does not accede to the illusion of a linguistic finality. As fast as the nonsense word gathers meaning to itself, it erodes that meaning, and so the "Jabberwocky" is a more or less hideous shape *always forming* in our minds, but never finally formed. And so, nonsense does specifically direct our attention to the shaping dance of the line.

That dance is also, I believe, what makes "The Song of the Jellicles" so appealing to Elizabeth Sewell and to others who have let the verbal play of *Practical Cats* have its way with them. "The Song of the Jellicles" is a ritual poem about ritual; and the Ball is a ritual dance of life, no *danse macabre*, that is so free and unpressured that its mere *anticipation* gives joy. In the relatively short space of thirty-six lines (counting the epigraph), the word "Jellicle" appears twenty-six times, nineteen times at the beginning of the line. Magically, the insistent recurrence of "Jellicle" does not seem, nor is it, redundant:

Jellicle Cats have cheerful faces
Jellicle Cats have bright black eyes
They like to practise their airs and graces
And wait for the Jellicle Moon to rise. [*CPP*, p. 155]

The poem offers us something very much like "London Bridge is falling down," but without the anxiety of *The Waste Land*. It accepts its own joy. What are the Jellicles? What is jellicle-ism? Jellicles live unreservedly and take pleasure in more than one kind of life. Perhaps they are soulful; they are certainly not interested in judgments, condemnatory or approving. Jellicles "wash behind

their ears," "dry between their toes," and know how to be seen and not heard in the morning and afternoon. But they reserve a certain field of play for themselves. And the emphasis is on the here and now: "Jellicle Cats come out tonight" (*CPP*, p. 154). Shouldn't the child grow up knowing how to survive in the adult world of dignity and routine, yet never forget to dance by the light of a Jellicle Moon?

"The Song of the Jellicles" does not preach this gospel, however. It offers rather a lesson that seems a found quantity—the penny left on the sidewalk, the phrase running through one's mind in a moment of distraction. That is a most difficult sort of effect to achieve in verse. When James Merrill received some letters sent to him seemingly by mistake, he tried to bring to light some "sense" in the serendipity and finally wrote the beginning lines quoted as epigraph to this essay. In asking what sense the "letters" make, Merrill was also asking where poems come from. And *Practical Cats* tries to preserve as much as possible a sense of the free giving in which poetry originates. Paradoxically, it is through a simpler and more rigorous patterning that such freedom is best implied. Poetry here makes sense by laws having nothing directly to do with the common sense that parents so much want their children to display. To the poet who writes for children, the claims of these two readerships seem at first in conflict. Unless he wishes to join the Wilhelm Busch school, the artist must both remind the parent reading to his child that there is a deep practical value in free, uncensored play *and* bring the child to see that in order to control our impulses, we must recognize them, embrace them as part of us. With the gift of Old Possum and his cats, T. S. Eliot makes us see how consonant these goals truly are.

Notes

1. Marion C. Hodge, "The Sane, the Mad, the Good, the Bad: T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*," *Children's Literature*, 7 (1978), 129.

2. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1971), p. 169. Further references to this edition will appear in the text with the abbreviation *CPP*.

3. Hodge, pp. 131, 137.

4. In *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), p. 139, Eliot asserts that "any theory which relates poetry very closely to a religious

or social scheme of things aims, probably, to *explain* poetry by discovering its natural laws. . . . Poetry can recognize no such laws." We ought to distinguish, then, between Eliot making social judgments in his prose and Eliot making poetry. He does.

5. John Holmes, "Eliot on Roistering Cats," *Boston Evening Transcript,* Nov. 15, 1939, p. 15. See Eliot's piercingly ironic poem on the *Transcript, CPP,* 16–17, which was first published in 1915.

6. *CPP,* 72–73. The figure of Marina, daughter of Pericles in Shakespeare's play of that title, whom he had thought dead, symbolizes a reawakening to life.

7. Robert Sencourt, *T. S. Eliot: A Memoir* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1971), p. 187.

8. Donald Gallup, *T. S. Eliot: A Bibliography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 363.

9. *The Queen's Book of the Red Cross* (London: Hazel Watson, Viney, Ltd., 1939), pp. 51–54.

10. *The Animals' Magazine* 7 (n.s.), no. 9 (Sept. 1952), 4.

11. Only twenty-five copies of *Noctes Binianae* were printed. See Gallup, p. 124. Harvard has #10. The Bina Gardens group engaged in considerable joking about nicknames. "Grizabella" is apparently among papers Eliot left to Valerie, his widow. "The Practical Possum" is in Harvard's Eliot Collection.

12. Felix Clowder, "The Bestiary of T. S. Eliot," *Prairie Schooner,* 34 (Spring 1960), 37.

13. *The Queen's Book of the Red Cross,* p. 52.

14. A number of critics have commented on Eliot's borrowing from Conan Doyle. Priscilla Preston elucidates all the hard evidence in the case in her "A Note on T. S. Eliot and Sherlock Holmes," *Modern Language Review,* 54 (Oct. 1959), 398–99.

15. Elizabeth Sewell, "Lewis Carroll and T. S. Eliot as Nonsense Poets," in *T. S. Eliot: A Symposium for His Seventieth Birthday,* ed. Neville Braybrook (London: Hart-Davis, 1959), rpt. in Robert S. Phillips, ed., *Aspects of Alice* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1971), p. 126.

16. Ibid., p. 123.

17. T. S. Eliot, review of *Poems,* by Marianne Moore, *The Dial,* 75 (Dec. 1923), 597.

18. T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1957), p. 32.

19. Helen Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (London: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1950), p. 29.

20. Northrop Frye, *T. S. Eliot* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1966), p. 37.

21. This is the conclusion reached by Sister Mary Martin Barry in her study of Eliot's prosody, *An Analysis of the Prosodic Structure of Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1969).