

“All Aboard for Natchez, Cairo, and St. Louis”: Minstrelsy and Conversion in T.S. Eliot’s *Ash-Wednesday*

Joseph Pizza

Belmont Abbey College

An important inspiration for T.S. Eliot’s Ash-Wednesday is the minstrel comedy of The Two Black Crows. Both puzzling and obscure, this inspiration has not yet received the critical attention it deserves. By reading Eliot’s interest in minstrel comedy alongside his concurrent religious conversion and change of citizenship, a fuller understanding of the poet’s attempt to transform earlier influences into a new, Christian identity can emerge. In this way, minstrelsy proves to be an essential source of inspiration for both his early, pre-conversion writing, as others have shown, as well as for his later work as a conservative polemicist and religious poet.

Keywords: poetics / modernism / T.S. Eliot / *Ash-Wednesday* / Christianity / minstrelsy / conversion

For some time scholars have known that the working title for T.S. Eliot’s *Ash-Wednesday* was borrowed from a blackface comedy duo, though the rationale for this remains largely unexplained.¹ Little, it would seem, can be made of the conjunction of minstrelsy and religious conversion. No doubt the confusion has resulted, as least in part, from the difficulty in obtaining Eliot’s unpublished and uncollected writings from the period. Thanks to the recent publication of his letters from the late 1920s and early 1930s—the period of the poem’s composition and publication—as well as the uncollected prose, and Christopher Ricks’s and Jim McCue’s exhaustive commentaries in the new *Poems of T.S. Eliot*, these

JOSEPH PIZZA (josephpizza@bac.edu) is associate professor of English at Belmont Abbey College, where he teaches courses in modern and contemporary literature, African American studies, and composition and rhetoric. In addition to work on T.S. Eliot, he has also published recently on the poetry of Robert Creeley, Jayne Cortez, and Nathaniel Mackey.

materials have, for the first time, been made available to a larger audience. The resulting context provides a much clearer picture of Eliot's related concerns while drafting the poem that would become *Ash-Wednesday*, as well as a better indication of the possible intentions he had for employing the working title, "All Aboard for Natchez, Cairo, and St. Louis."

To begin to address the subject requires taking into account not only the poem's published, 1930 text, but also its development amid Eliot's competing and interrelated contextual interests in the late 1920s. Among those, a clear set of relations emerges between the poet's growing religious concerns, his developing understanding of racial identity, and his ongoing engagement with a metaphorical performance of blackface evident in his pre-conversion work, as previous commentators from Michael North to David Chinitz demonstrate.² Indeed, while revising and augmenting the separate poems and drafts of what would become *Ash-Wednesday*, Eliot engaged in a lengthy correspondence with Bonamy Dobrée in which he shared a host of new poems on the imaginary "King Bolo," with mock-anthropological commentary on his people's customs and religion. He pursued this at roughly the same time as his conversion to the Anglican Church and naturalization as a British citizen, and alongside his composition of *Journey of the Magi*, *For Lancelot Andrews*, and *Dante*.

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to examine the interrelationships of each of these works, the timing of their composition should make clear that this later period in Eliot's career witnessed an interweaving of concerns regarding religion, race, and identity. In fact, I want to argue here that his ambivalent attitudes toward race not only played a central role in incubating the high modernism of his youth, but, as I will be arguing here, new combinations of those attitudes inspired Eliot's post-conversion poetry as well. Looking closely at *Ash-Wednesday*, and in particular the significance of its working title, reveals much of this process in action.

While the poem's journey certainly mimics aspects of the *Vita Nuova* and of Dantean exile, read in the light of the Two Black Crows' blackface comedy, "All Aboard for Natchez, Cairo, and St. Louis" reveals the ambition for a parallel journey, one moving steadily from South to North, along the path traveled by many African Americans during the first wave of the Great Migration. Moreover, the burnt cork worn on the faces of the racist comedians portraying the stereotypical African American characters of the title's source has its own parallel in the cross that is traditionally traced in black ashes on the forehead of Christians on Ash Wednesday. Such corollaries suggest, on the surface at least, an overlapping in Eliot's imagination between the journey of the Christian convert and that of the African American migrant.

By engaging in such parallels, the poem originally begun as "All Aboard for Natchez, Cairo, and St. Louis" takes its inspiration from Eliot's attempt to read the Ash Wednesday ritual as another kind of minstrel performance, one where racist comedy works both to challenge and, paradoxically, to reassert the desire for a stable, white identity. For Eliot, in fact, a similar desire for stability appeared

in the form of Anglo-Catholicism, of a return to European traditions via not simply Dante, but Eliot's reading of Dantean poetics combined with the conservative comedy of minstrel performance. As an examination of *Ash-Wednesday*, read alongside the Two Black Crows' minstrel performance, will show, the hinge linking Eliot's parallel interests in this period turns on his ambivalence over identity, over the attempt to graph his American experiences onto a seemingly stable, English persona. In exploring the contradictions inherent in that move here, not only can a rationale for the working title of the poem emerge, but so too will a deeper understanding of the complex identity mediated by Eliot's racial imagination.

PLAYING POSSUM

As with earlier, pre-conversion works, Eliot appears to have used the working title for *Ash-Wednesday* as a scaffold to construct the whole. The first challenge, therefore, in attempting to understand its kinship with this poem is to trace its relationship to the minstrel performance referred to by the working title. In fact, one of the earliest scholarly works on minstrelsy appeared in 1930, the same year as the completed *Ash-Wednesday*, Carl Wittke's *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage*. In it, Wittke unambiguously praised blackface performance for its ability to portray, "the pathos and humor of the Negroes, their superstitions and religious fervor, their plaintive and their hilarious melodies, their peculiarities of manner, dress and speech" (7). Wittke's enthusiasm for the racist and stereotypical comedy inherent in minstrelsy is apparent throughout, declaring that the "pioneers of the burnt cork profession" practiced a "fairly truthful imitation of Negro folkmusic [*sic*] and Negro folkways" (135). As a result, his praise of minstrelsy goes hand-in-hand with a nostalgia for the antebellum South, when "plantation owners in America kept their Negroes happy and productive" (6). In this way, as Eric Lott shows, Wittke's brand of patronizing racism reflects a tradition in such writing that celebrates, "an ideologically rigidified minstrelsy meant to counter American antislavery practice" (Lott 34).

Such practices bear obvious similarities with Eliot's blackface performance in his letters to Pound and Dobrée from roughly 1917 through the mid-1930s, especially those portraying the "pathos and humor . . . superstitions and religious fervor" of the fictional King Bolo (*Letters* 2.253–69). Eliot's apparent appreciation of minstrelsy aligns in many ways with the contradictory attitudes of several white, nineteenth-century American authors.³ In this context, Eliot's affinity for Mark Twain is worth consideration. In his 1950 introduction to *Huckleberry Finn*, Eliot praised, "the style of the book," claiming it "makes it a far more convincing indictment of slavery than the sensationalist propaganda of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (Eliot, Introduction x). Such comments could appear to mark Eliot's sensitivity to the racism of minstrel performance; however, in the same piece, he later admires the "pathos and dignity" of Huck when he recalls working up the courage to "humble myself to a nigger" (Eliot, Introduction xii). While scholars have long

accused Twain, despite his politics, of falling into familiar patterns of racism by performing an analogous form of minstrelsy in his fiction, it is instructive to observe Eliot's performances in a similar way.

Like Twain, then, Eliot's attitude toward race was ambivalent. On one hand, he could appear to support a vision of racial equity by describing Jim as "the negro fugitive," fleeing "the injustices of society" (Eliot, Introduction xi); while, on the other, he could descend to cruel stereotypes in his letters and "Blue Verses" on King Bolo. Such conflicted behavior, though, is itself a part of minstrelsy's history. As many scholars have shown, this distinctively American form of entertainment was invested by whites with ambivalence, offering such audiences images that could be read as both affirming and resisting the racial relations determined by slavery and segregation. As W.T. Lhamon, Jr., observes, minstrel performance, or what he terms "black costuming," seems to offer whites "a way of abstracting their own victimization" (277) at one moment, while at another, it can reinforce racist attitudes by representing stereotypical images of African Americans as part of the performance's "abusive travesty" (282). In this way, minstrelsy—both in its historical appearance as a form of American popular culture and in its continued, more metaphorical manifestations—can appear to erase racial boundaries while also reinforcing them. As Ralph Ellison argues, stereotypical characters such as Bolo, or even Jim, "are counterfeits" (27). They are, in Ellison's terms, part of a distinctively American performance:

Hence whatever else the Negro stereotype might be as a social instrumentality, it is also a key figure in a magic rite by which the white American seeks to resolve the dilemma arising between his democratic beliefs and certain antidemocratic practices, between his acceptance of the sacred democratic belief that all men are created equal and his treatment of every tenth man as though he were not. (Ellison 28)

To borrow Ellison's terms, then, such stereotypes afforded Eliot another form of magic, the opportunity to create an analogy between his situation as a for-eigner and that of the sufferings and strivings of African Americans, ignoring or side-stepping any potential dilemma such an identification may cause.

In this way, Eliot resorted to playing possum in his private correspondence throughout his career in England, whether in speaking as the Old Possum of *Uncle Remus* or in the sense of "playing dead"—feigning weakness as a result of his exiled position. Both permitted him the freedom to switch masks endlessly, to rove as a metic across cultural history. Consider, for example, Eliot's remarks to Herbert Read in 1928, written after his conversion and during the same period in which he was drafting sections of *Ash-Wednesday*:

Someday I want to write an essay about the point of view of an American who wasn't an American, because his America ended in 1829; and who wasn't a Yankee, because he was born in the South and went to school in New England as a small boy with a nigger drawl, but who wasn't a southerner in the South because his people were northerners in a border state and looked down on all southerners and Virginians,

and who so was never anything anywhere and who therefore felt himself to be more Frenchman than an American and more an Englishman than a Frenchman and yet felt that the U.S.A. up to a hundred years ago was a family extension. (*Letters* 4.137–8)

Here, Eliot's sense of homelessness is blended, strangely, with a homesickness, with a nostalgia for the America of "a hundred years ago." Indeed, in Eliot's reading of American history, the events of the past century—Jacksonian Democracy, Civil War, Emancipation, Reconstruction, Industrialization, Jim Crow, etc.—have destroyed any coherent sense of identity. Of course, on one level, this is pure melodrama. Only someone of Eliot's vast privilege could believe that at any time the "U.S.A." was merely "a family extension." The death of any stable sense of self in the passage, however, gives birth to an array of outsider personae: the southerner in New England, the northerner in the South, the Frenchman in England, etc. Moreover, the voice uniting these seemingly disparate and conflicting characters is presented derisively, as a kind of minstrel performer: a white American with an African American voice, "a small boy with a nigger drawl."

In this account, then, Eliot's adoption of a Black mask functions much like Lhamon's analysis above suggests: it provides the white performer with an opportunity to associate his own sense of victimization with that of a suffering minority. The irony, of course, is that Eliot employs this in the same sentence in which he claims racial and class superiority. If his America ended in 1829, it did so because of the election of Andrew Jackson, the Southern populist who ousted the entitled Northerner, John Quincy Adams. As Marjorie Perloff shows, though Eliot plays the victim, his elitism in the passage is undeniable: "Eliot's snobbery and sense of entitlement are very much on display here, and yet he knows only too well, that his upbringing and circumstances have left him no choice but to reinvent himself. If he is to be an Englishman, it must be one of a special and separate kind" (Perloff). This manner of playing possum, then, informs not only his early correspondence with Pound, but, as the letter to Read suggests, his deeper concerns over the instability of his own identity, of its conflicts and parallels, even at a time when he was claiming the absolute stability of a powerful white identity, of one who is "royalist in politics, classicist in literature, and Catholic in religion" (Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes* ix).

THE THIRD BLACK CROW

In this context, the Two Black Crows' performance of "All Aboard for Natchez, Cairo, and St. Louis" appears to have presented Eliot with what he saw as an image of himself. As has been shown, such a perspective belies the larger strategy of adopting blackface as a way of abstracting anxiety about modernization's threat to stable, privileged white identity. In this way, the Two Black Crows can be understood as analogous performers. Eliot, in turn, would transfigure their performance into his own quest for a new identity.

Like Eliot, Charles Mack and George Moran, the comedic duo who performed in blackface as the Two Black Crows, led somewhat itinerant lives. Both were born in Kansas, but met on the West Coast ("Mack" 25). Indeed, Mack, the group's main writer, was raised largely in Tacoma, Washington (*ibid.*). After joining a minstrel troupe in Chicago, he and Moran began to plan their own group in New York in 1921, and went on to enjoy widespread popularity, touring across the US and the UK and making several recordings and films up until Mack's death in a car accident in 1934 (*ibid.*). As Moran's obituary has it, the Two Black Crows were "one of the country's most famous comedy acts of the Twenties" ("George Moran" 19). Wittke's 1930 account bears witness to this, noting that "[f]amous comedy teams, like Moran and Mack, the 'Two Black Crows,' received extraordinarily large sums for a series of short minstrel acts presented by microphone [on radio] over a number of weeks" (Wittke 129). Such fame extended to England, where, as Ronald Schuchard notes, Eliot may well have seen them during their fourteen weeks of stage performances in London in 1927 (Schuchard 148). According to William Turner Levy, Eliot was enamored with one of their recordings in particular, the skit that begins "All Aboard for Natchez, Cairo, and St. Louis": "Tom was uproarious . . . not only in repeating the patter, but also because the Negro dialect which he thought he had mastered made him sound more like an Archbishop of Canterbury!" (Levy 107–8).

The conjunction of blackface and religion here speaks to the larger inspiration of the poem and suggests a deeper understanding belied by Levy's feigned confusion. Levy, however, was not the only friend Eliot contacted concerning the manuscript. Earlier, he had solicited comments from I.A. Richards on the drafts of what would become *Ash-Wednesday* (*Letters* 4.264, 663), and so Richards would have been immersed in the conflicts and characters of the piece and known of its roots in the comedy of Moran and Mack (*Letters* 5.283–4). Indeed, it is worth emphasizing here that, in asking for criticism of the poem, Eliot thought it necessary to demonstrate to Richards an American understanding of the Two Black Crows performance. As Richards notes, "I do not know how often we were patiently taught to say this right [i.e., 'All Aboard for Cairo, Natchez, and St. Louis']. I do not know very well that I have never got it right" (Richards, *qtd.* in Schuchard 148). Richards's double-negative here winks at his understanding. To pronounce "Cairo" as "Carro," as the performers do, is to break with standard conventions for the sake of performing a racial mask with dialectical accuracy. Mastering such inflections thus involves a certain duplicity, conjuring white racial dominance through the very act of assuming a Black mask, as both Richards's experience and the performance's dialogue attest.

In the performance, Moran and Mack take on roles familiar in minstrel routines. As a version of the interlocutor, Moran plays the straight man, attempting to reason with the seemingly ignorant Mack. Mack, in his turn, can be seen as an amalgamation of a number of minstrel figures, from Tambo and Bones in his repartee with a strait-laced interlocutor, to the trickster character who, as Lhamon observes, can at times talk "back to power" through his humor and

feigned ignorance (Lhamon 180). Indeed, in a related way, Mack's character gets the surprising last word, subverting the modern strivings of migration-era African Americans with a religious perspective that simultaneously reasserts antebellum racial hierarchies.

To begin, the scene opens with the conductor's call, "All aboard for Natchez, Cairo, and St. Louis," voiced by Moran, followed by the duo's first exchange:

Mack: Doggone look at that black smoke comin' out that chimney. I-I bet that ol' fireman is busy! Doggone seems like every time there's an excursion, I'm always broke.

Moran: Yeah, and you wouldn't be broke if you'd go to work.

Mack: I—I would work if I could find any pleasure in it.

Moran: Well I don't know anything about pleasure, but boy I always remember that the early bird catches the worm. (Moran and Mack 00:0:00-00:0:46)

The dialogue here begins with Mack's lament that he is "always broke." Moran seizes on this as an opportunity to chide him for his apparent laziness, a stereotypically racist trope, and to remind him that "the early bird catches the worm." As the dialogue develops, though, it appears that Mack espouses a quite different perspective. To work for "pleasure" is a goal beyond Moran's understanding: "I don't know anything about pleasure." Instead, work appears for him as a means to an end, and, as his chiding suggests, a moral necessity.

It bears mentioning here that what Mack terms an "excursion" may well be more than that for many of the passengers. The route from New Orleans to St. Louis in the 1920s, whether travelled by boat or rail, was a journey frequented by millions of African Americans fleeing the South as part of the first wave of the Great Migration. As noted earlier, this parallel would appear to be the essential connection between Eliot's religious intentions and his use of the skit for the working title of his poem. Moran's encouragement to "go to work" and save up the funds required for such a journey would thus seem sensible. Mack, however, has other plans.

As the exchange continues, Moran attempts to teach Mack the meaning of the phrase, "the early bird catches the worm." The joke would appear to be, on one level, that Mack simply cannot be taught the meaning. This, of course, serves to reinforce white stereotypes about Black laborers, opening up a divide between the enterprising Moran and the apparently shiftless Mack. In this way, the former appears to be a model of modern industry and of the hopefulness invested in the North by those eager to make the journey; meanwhile, the latter would seem to be stuck in the ignorance of the past, unable to realize himself in the modern world.

The dialogue continues with Mack complaining of his various ailments and of Moran's jazz-inflected horn playing, before the act reaches a moment of meta-performance:

Moran: I played this horn in the Metropolitan Opry Company. I was the head man in that show.

Mack: Aw, you've been in better shows than that.

Moran: Well, I hope to tell ya I's in the Neil O'Brien's Minstrels. I was the head man in that show.

Mack: Well what kind of man is a head man, what he do, carry de trunks or what?

Moran: Oh, I didn't carry de trunks. I was the head man in dat show. I was way ahead of ev'rybody. (Moran and Mack 00:2:42-00:3:02)

The pun, here, on "head man" functions like an aside. Neil O'Brien would have been recognized by white audiences as another popular blackface performer of the period, whose reputation preceded that of Moran and Mack. For Moran to have played in O'Brien's show, he, too, would have to have been a white man in blackface, and so the reality of the racial performance becomes the focal point of the dialogue here. Its "triangulated" tensions, as Eric Lott writes of minstrelsy in general, are implicit in the passage's racist comedy, where "blackface comic and white spectator share jokes about an absent third party" (Lott 142). By making this triangulation explicit, Moran's line is not merely an empty boast, but it is also a sly nod toward the audience that acknowledges the fiction of this racial performance, a performance where, as Lott explains, "Black figures were there to be looked at, shaped to the demands of desire . . . to secure the position of white spectators as superior, controlling figures" (Lott 140-1). In revealing this, Moran's character appears to be, both chronologically and figuratively, "way ahead of ev'rybody."

Ultimately, though, Mack emerges as the "head man" of this show. Moran follows the above exchange by claiming that he had the "head" role in "that sad show called *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (Moran and Mack 00:3:05-00:3:10). The irony, of course, is that as "head man" of this show, Moran is merely an "Uncle Tom," a subservient and inauthentic reflection of white desire. Though Moran misses this irony, Mack does not. First, he claims playfully never to have heard of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, then, when Moran, in frustration, exclaims, "Did you ever hear of Adam and Eve?!"—the association of slavery with original sin is here difficult to ignore—Mack concludes the dialogue abruptly by pointing out that Moran "wasn't the head man in that show" (Moran and Mack 3:14-3:26). Here, the significance of the Biblical reference seems to elude Moran, despite his apparent intellectual superiority to Mack in the dialogue. Indeed, there is the suggestion that the racial hierarchies created by slavery and segregation, much like the gendered hierarchies reinforced by the Biblical creation story, are providential, in other words, sanctioned by divine will. Consequently, the exchange can be read as portraying Moran's ambitiousness as inauthentic, perhaps even sinful, and Mack's lazy acquiescence in divine providence as proof of a larger, more authentic wisdom, one that accepts racial hierarchies as a part of God's plan, rather than striving to overthrow them.

As scholars of blackface performance show,⁴ white audiences typically revelled in portrayals such as these, precisely because the stereotype gets the best of a character who attempts to resist such images. Indeed, in this way, the skit can be seen as challenging a stereotypical, counterfeit identity only to reaffirm it. Like minstrel shows of the past, then, the Two Black Crows' performance, "All Aboard for Natchez, Cairo, and St. Louis," plies its conservative humor as a means of reasserting a nostalgia for an antebellum version of America—the America before 1829—that clearly resonated with Eliot, as his Bolo poems, letters, and enthusiasm for blackface make clear.

TURNING AND RETURNING

Just as Moran and Mack employed a more modern form of blackface humor for conservative purposes, so Eliot chose, in the years immediately following his conversion, to make similar use of his own distinctively modern poetry. Though space precludes a digression into each work here, the "Ariel" poems, *Dante*, and *For Lancelot Andrews*, all works contemporaneous with *Ash-Wednesday*, witness Eliot's conservative turn, his attempt to return, wholeheartedly and without irony, to the source texts for his allusive brand of modernism. Eliot's employment of the figure of Ariel for the title of these poems can be seen more fully in this context. In this light, the character from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* refers not only to the ethereal concerns of Christian verse, but also to a desire to retreat from Caliban and the colonial encounter back into a purely white European past.

The same desire for retreat characterizes the prose works of his conversion period, where a similar focus on European identity, with its attendant antisemitism paralleling the form of racism explored here, can be observed. Indeed, *Ash-Wednesday* is at the forefront of this project for Eliot, not only in the sense in which the piece is often read as a modern conversion poem, but also in its insistence on turning back the secular and transnational modernism he helped to create, through the deployment of allusion, quotation, and repetition, to its premodern sources. Such disillusion with modern life is at the heart of both Eliot's poem and the Two Black Crows' appeal. As a result, the poem's formal strategies for enacting such a return are its strongest link to the minstrelsy of the Two Black Crows.

In many ways, as Schuchard has shown, the concerns of *Ash Wednesday* can be read in relation to Eliot's translation of Cavalcante's "*Perch'io non spero*" ("Because I Do Not Hope") (Schuchard 148–61). In choosing to translate the first word alternately as "Because," to begin the poem, and as "Although," to conclude it, Eliot's speaker is left to vacillate between causation and concession, between a hopelessness seemingly without cause, and one that can concede bodily loss on the way to spiritual gain. As such, the finished poem would appear to have cast off any remnant of the minstrel performance used as scaffolding in its creation.

The parallel journeys of both pieces, however, remain intact and so offer the clearest entry point for considering the Two Black Crows' influence on Eliot's piece. In fact, the ways in which the speaker's claims are undercut by the repetitive

form of section one echo this. Not only do the speaker's words return, despite their negation, "Because I do not hope to turn / Because I do not hope," but in doing so, they assert a counter narrative, one realized in the change to "Although I do not hope to turn" in the poem's concluding section (*Ash-Wednesday* I.1–2, VI.1). In this way, perhaps strangely, Eliot's speaker wears masks that parallel Mack's character in the Two Black Crows' sketch discussed above.

This pattern of repetition continues throughout. Thus, while the speaker's concerns are with aging and the finality of death, Eliot's lines are driven by a use of repetition that asserts the opposite. To take one of the leading examples, anaphora structures twenty-three of the section's forty-one lines. "Because I," alone, accounts for eleven of these (*Ash-Wednesday* 1–3, 9, 11–12, 14, 16, 23, 29, and 34). Moreover, roughly half of the lines begin with a conjunction, with an attempt to bind the fragments into a circular order. In addition to this, every stanza is also knit together with end-rhyme, "again" being the predominant one throughout. Such repetition effectually returns the speaker's fretting concerns back upon himself, much like Mack's unwelcome echoes in his dialogue with Moran.

There, a similar pattern arises, where Moran's earnest claims are reflected in the funhouse mirror of Mack's repetition and rendered ineffectual. Take for instance the sequence that begins with Moran's sincere belief that "the early bird catches the worm" (Moran and Mack 00:0:35–00:0:46). This is preceded by his disregard for Mack's desire to find "pleasure" in his work (*ibid.*), and so represents, as discussed earlier, the straight man's attempt to bring the trickster character in line with the values of the predominant, white middle-class work ethic. Such reality, however, is refracted by Mack—"early bird catches what worm?"—whose feigned ignorance renders Moran's earnestness absurd: "who cares about that? . . . who wants the worm anyhow?" (Moran and Mack 00:0:47–00:1:02).

In a similar way, too, birds play a prominent role in both the sketch and the poem. While Mack appears as the bird who is either too lazy or too clever to chase the worm, Eliot's "aged eagle" declares laconically that it no longer needs to "stretch its wings," no longer, like Mack's character, desires "this man's gift and that man's scope" (*Ash-Wednesday* I.6, 4). Instead, the speaker is torn throughout between this life and the next, as is suggested in the repeated lines of the "Hail Mary" that end the section: "Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death / Pray for us now and at the hour of our death" (*Ash-Wednesday* I.40–1). In Eliotic fashion, then, the dialogue of the Two Black Crows' performance is replaced by a complex dramatic monologue; the voices of allusion, and of the speaker's own mind, replacing any coherent interlocutor. In this way, section one of *Ash-Wednesday* compresses dialogue into soliloquy, with the speaker playing both straight man and comedic echo.

This complex characterization is dramatized further in section two, where the speaker of the poem interacts with his own skeleton. Ricks and McCue trace the bones of section two to a source passage from the prophet Ezekiel where the remains of many who were resurrected, as per God's instructions, compose thereby the entire tribe of Israel (739–40). In addition, they note Eliot's interest

in Nathaniel Wanley's 1678 work *The Wonders of the Little World*, which also draws on the passage from Ezekiel (740). Without denying the relevance of these sources, reading the minstrel allusion into section two adds an important biographical layer to the poem, while also accounting for the song that comprises its middle section.

Looked at in this way, Eliot's speaker can be seen as engaging in a metaphorical play with his own bones, one that is resonant of the interplay between the interlocutor and Mr. Bones in traditional minstrel performances. This suggestion is enhanced by the description of the bones' response to the speaker's fretting narration as a song sung "chirpingly," a sound resembling the distinctive clicking of bone clappers (*Ash-Wednesday* II.7, 23). In this regard, the enjambment connecting lines five and six, "Shall these bones live? shall these / Bones live?" is telling (*Ash-Wednesday* II.5–6). Quoting almost directly from Ezekiel, the lines question the possibility of a resurrection that would redeem the speaker. Meanwhile, the enjambment creates an added emphasis on the second "Bones," capitalizing the word in a typographic play that can be read as suggesting Mr. Bones's appearance on the page.

For the reader who recognizes this allusive trace, the lines do not merely repeat the same question, but layer it with the poem's American source, asking not only whether the speaker shall be redeemed, but also whether or not Eliot's own duplicitous, minstrel persona will persist with him. For their part, the bones serve to mock the speaker's pretension to eternal life through their address to the lady in a white gown, herself a symbolic representation of the Christian spirit as the Bride of Christ (*Ash-Wednesday* II.8–11, 25–47). In the alternation between body and spirit, the bones serve to remind the speaker of mortality, of the "End of the endless / Journey to no end" (*Ash-Wednesday* II.39–40). Read, then, in light of Eliot's enthusiasm for minstrel performance, the bones communicate a sense of mortality linked to the American popular culture that shaped his personal and poetic roots, and which he attempted to resolve through his adopted British citizenship and conversion to the Anglican Church. This conflict persists throughout, though, represented by the shadow play of light against dark, which, as above, serves to graph the Christian associations of spirit and flesh, and good and evil, onto the performed understandings of whiteness and blackness inherent in Eliot's minstrel source.

Section three, commonly read as the turning point in the poem, features the speaker climbing a staircase and leaving behind a fraught image of himself. The image is portrayed as a shadow: "At the first turning of the second stair / I turned and saw below / The same shape twisted on the banister" (*Ash-Wednesday* III.1–3). Here, the shadow self struggles with the "devil of the stairs" and is abandoned in stanza two, as the speaker ascends to a perspective above the "twisting, turning" figures below (*Ash-Wednesday* III.5, 8). In one sense, the shadow self plays into Platonic or Augustinian readings of the scene, where the spirit's ascent leaves behind a shadow world of error and sin below. Read in relation to Moran and Mack's minstrel performance, however, the passage can also be seen as another

instance of Eliot figuring himself in a kind of metaphorical blackface. Like the buried bones of section two, or even the overarching analogy suggested by the burnt cork of the working title and the ashen crosses traced on the foreheads of worshippers in the Ash Wednesday ritual, the speaker in this section appears split between the dark self wrestling with the devil below and the redeemed self ascending to a higher perspective above.

The closing of section three, however, complicates this. There, the prayer that ends the section—"Lord, I am not worthy / Lord, I am not worthy / But speak the word only" (*Ash-Wednesday* III.21-23)—has a biblical source in the healing of the centurion's servant in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, as Ricks and McCue note. However, the words are also employed as the Prayer of Humble Access in the Church of England, a prayer offered just before communion. In this context, the stylized repetition of the prayer deserves comment.

Unlike the repeated lines from the Hail Mary that conclude section one, the repetition here is answered by a third, rhyming line that continues the prayer. This forward movement reflects the change in the speaker, but it does so in a style reminiscent of the AAB shape made popular throughout the 1920s and '30s in early blues records by performers including Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. For instance, consider the famous opening of Robert Johnson's "Crossroad Blues," recorded a few years after the appearance of *Ash-Wednesday*": "I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees / I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees / Asked the Lord above, 'Have mercy, save poor Bob if you please'" (Johnson 0:0:01-0:0:45). Just as the B verse of the blues tercet offers some form of response to the troubles repeated in the A verses, so, too, does Eliot's stylization of the Prayer of Humble Access. In fact, both Eliot and Johnson seek a communion with God that spares them from the loneliness of eternal separation.

Eliot would relate these two forms of loneliness in a remark three years later, in "The Modern Mind," the closing talk of his Charles Eliot Norton lectures. There, he rebuts I.A. Richards's conception of modern loneliness by arguing that it lacks any essential context and so is meaningless:

Loneliness is known as a frequent attitude in romantic poetry, and in the form of "lonesomeness" (as I need not remind American readers) it is a frequent attitude in contemporary lyrics known as "the blues." But in what sense is Man in general isolated, and from what? And what *is* the "human situation"? I can understand the isolation of the human situation as Plato's Diotima expounds it, or in the Christian sense of the separation of Man from God; but not an isolation which is not a separation from anything in particular. (*Use of Poetry & Use of Criticism* 132)

In this passage, then, as in the closing lines of section three, mere loneliness is elevated to the existential heights of the blues singer's lonesomeness. As Eliot's use of the AAB form in the closing lines of section three suggests, for him, only communion with God can remedy such an attitude. Consequently, the appropriation of pop-culture form here resituates the speaker's plight as a kind of blues, the shadow self and the ascendant one, body and spirit, reunited here at the moment

of communion beyond the speaker's own crossroads through yet another instance of blackface performance, this time figuring the modern Christian as a double of the wandering bluesman.

The subsequent sections of the poem continue this shadow play. There, the mix of anaphora, alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme, full rhyme, and pararhyme creates a virtual echo chamber of doubt and deliberation, as the speaker shifts back and forth between images of darkness and light. In doing so, Eliot's poem extends the puzzling repetition inherent in the dialogue between Moran and Mack, where the duplicity of blackface adds its own layer of performative irony. At stake in both is the larger question of the individual's redemption, of a stability for the self—whether conceived in racial or religious terms—beyond the masks of modernity. For Moran and Mack, this is dramatized as a dialogue between the nervous ambition of Moran's character and the submissive faith of Mack's. For Eliot, sections four through six pit the "[w]hite light" of the speaker's intercessor against the "darkness" of the fallen, modern world (*Ash-Wednesday* IV.15, V.15). Section five, in particular, worries over the fate of those "who wait / In darkness," associating them with the unredeemed "children at the gate / Who will not go away and cannot pray" (*Ash-Wednesday* V.23–4, 25–6). Darkness, here, is once again aligned with doubt and sin, covering the masses of modern humanity in a rhetorical blackface that the speaker both associates with and hopes to transcend. Like the fallen Adam and Eve, Eliot figures them as "spitting from the mouth the withered apple-seed" (*Ash-Wednesday* V.35). Similar to Moran's character, for Eliot, those who "walk in darkness" suffer the consequences of the Fall while remaining largely ignorant of the redemptive faith that the speaker now aspires to and that Mack's character, however ironically, exhibits.

The poem's closing section seeks to resolve these concerns through a prayer that abandons altogether any mention of darkness for the light of faith. In this way, the poem's minstrel source functions as scaffolding, providing Eliot with a familiar space to construct the piece's rhetorical conflict, and then disappearing at the construction's completion. In keeping with the biographical elements of the piece, the removal of such scaffolding works to dramatize Eliot's own engagement with his St. Louis roots in the poem. Read in this light, it is significant that the Virgin Mary is addressed as the "spirit of the river, spirit of the sea" (*Ash-Wednesday* VI.33). In this way, the litany-like prayer that ends the poem joins together the fictional journey of Moran and Mack's blackface characters up the Mississippi toward St. Louis with Eliot's journey across the Atlantic from the same city to England, graphing both onto a spiritual pilgrimage common to pre-modern Europe. Read in the light of Eliot's early affection for classic American literature like the novels of Mark Twain, and his then contemporaneous interest in early modern and medieval literature, the closing prayer of the poem also attempts to turn the American inspiration of his distinctively modern poetics back toward the pre-modern source texts that appear in his most popular early poetry.

Taken altogether, then, just as Moran and Mack's characters wish to board a steamboat north to St. Louis, as part of the Great Migration to a new life in

the North, so too does Eliot's speaker seek to embark on a ship in section VI, one where "white sails still fly seaward" toward his own *vita nuova* in the Church of England (*Ash-Wednesday* VI.9). In this way, the minstrel source of the poem reveals the ways in which the poet's conflicted, ambivalent attitudes toward race functioned as scaffolding for his post-conversion poetics.

In noting such echoes, however, it is also important to consider what has, like scaffolding, been left out. Indeed, as has been demonstrated elsewhere, this is precisely the attraction of minstrel performance for Eliot. In keeping, then, with the capacity of minstrelsy to perform white victimization while also reasserting white racial dominance, only to play possum, the poem too masks its inspiration.

By restoring the minstrel source of *Ash-Wednesday*, then, we can see clearly that Eliot's flight from modernity was inspired by, among other sources, a nostalgia for fictional blackness. The ashen-faced character stands as the avatar of this in-between reference. To be marked with ashes recalls both physical death and the burnt cork masks of minstrel performers. In yoking the two together, Eliot unites a counterfeit blackness with the irredeemable flesh of the sinner, with the material world that must be cast off in favor of a purely white tradition that offers, in his mind, the only hope of salvation.

Such inveterate Americanness lies at the heart of Eliot's religious conversion and so plays a central role in the inspiration for *Ash-Wednesday*. As a consideration of the poem's minstrel sources reveals, even in England, Eliot's practice of Anglo-Catholicism was rooted in distinctively American concerns, replete with nostalgia for a world that is more antebellum than medieval, drawing as it does on fears concerning the instability of racial identity, fears broached popularly by minstrelsy. His Old Possum alter ego should be seen in this context as well. Though often referenced in benignly avuncular terms, such "Racial Masquerade," as Michael North demonstrates, lies at the heart of Eliot's modernist practice (North 77). In doing so, it prepared the way for his later interest in the blackface comedy of Moran and Mack and, strange though it may seem, his change of citizenship and conversion to the Anglican Church, both of which occurred at roughly the same time.

His enthusiasm for the counterfeit performance of Moran and Mack, particularly at the time of his conversion and change of citizenship, is in keeping with these larger concerns. Like minstrel performers before them, Moran and Mack's blackface routine relieves fears of racial instability by using racist humor to conjure fixed, stereotypical identities. While Eliot clearly sympathized with this to a degree, his response to their humor in *Ash-Wednesday* reveals an abiding ambivalence concerning identity. There, a colloquy between spirit and flesh, black and white, and American and British persists throughout.

In a similar way, the racial comedy of blackface trades on such division, pulling, ironically, in opposing directions: both quieting and encouraging, erasing and reaffirming anxieties of identity. The Americanness of these anxieties can perhaps be seen clearer through the perspective of one of Eliot's contemporaries, writing on a transformative moment in the poet's ancestral city, Boston:

Here is another ironic fact of the old American problem of identity . . . For the ex-colonials the declaration of an American identity meant the assumption of a mask, and it imposed not only the discipline of national self-consciousness, but gave Americans an ironic awareness of the joke that always lies between appearance and reality, between the discontinuity of social tradition and that sense of the past which clings to the mind. And perhaps even an awareness of the joke that society is man's creation, not God's. Americans began their revolt from the English fatherland when they dumped the tea into the Boston Harbor masked as Indians, and the mobility of the society created in this limitless space has encouraged the use of the mask for good and evil ever since . . . that which cannot gain authority from tradition may borrow it with a mask. Masking is a play upon possibility and ours is a society in which possibilities are many. (Ellison, "Change the Joke, Slip the Yoke" 53-4)

Such plays are, to be sure, an essential element of many of Eliot's most admired and influential works, his fluency with masks evident in his ability to "do the police in other voices" (Eliot, *Poems* 1.595-6). Yet, as Ellison well knows, the power of masks works "for good and evil." As I hope to have shown, Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday* engages in both.

For all its Dantean gestures, then, the poem conjures a mix of blackface humor and medieval Christianity as a response to a distinctively modern problem: the instability of identity. Regarded as an essentially modern element in his early work, the various identities jostling for attention there are transmuted into a single speaker who desires to resolve these voices into one unified perspective in *Ash-Wednesday*. As I have attempted to demonstrate here, Eliot's early engagement with minstrelsy continued into his Christian period in precisely this way. Indeed, as I have been arguing, his religious conversion and adoption of British citizenship should be understood as a response to his very American anxieties over the instability of racial identity.

Viewed in this regard, we can now see *Ash-Wednesday* as a form of what Toni Morrison calls "blackening up and whitening out" (87) as the exhibition of racial codes that, like the minstrelsy of Moran and Mack, could appropriate stereotypical Blackness for the seemingly paradoxical purpose of reinscribing the desire for a stable—and fictional—white identity. Though such stability lies outside of the poem that would become *Ash-Wednesday*, its working title, "All Aboard for Natchez, Cairo, and St. Louis," reveals the source of this desire. As a result, Eliot's poem can be read not simply as the expression of an Anglo-Catholic devotion, but, more accurately, of a devotion born out of an American expatriate's struggle to reconcile an identity divided against itself by his ambivalent racial imagination.

Notes

1. Though no conclusions have been drawn, a handful of scholars have noted the source. Susan Clement, for instance, first identified the source and posed the question, "how can a comedy routine be reconciled with a serious religious poem?" (58). Sean Cotter, though mistaken about the nature

of the source, similarly asks, “[w]hat are we to make of the fact that the drafts of *Ash-Wednesday* have the title of a hit minstrel song?” (75). Such questions have been addressed, partially, by Ronald Schuchard in his study *Eliot’s Dark Angel*, which acknowledges the title *en route* to an exploration of the theme of exile apparent in *Ash-Wednesday* (147–61). Schuchard’s reading of the Dantean inspiration for the poem, however, leaves behind any questions concerning its source in minstrelsy. On the role of blackface in the poem, David Chinitz notes helpfully that it shares with earlier works like *Sweeney Agonistes* a working title that reveals a fascination with popular forms such as the minstrel show (187–8). Apart from these questions and suggestions, however, readers are left to turn to studies of Eliot’s other works to piece together the relationship between minstrelsy and the poem that would become *Ash-Wednesday*.

2. For brief survey of the most significant statements concerning Eliot’s relationship with minstrelsy, in regard to this study, see for example David Chinitz’s work unpacking the muse that Eliot referred to as his “jazz-banjo,” itself “a fixture in the minstrel show” (21–2); as well as Michael North’s discussion of Eliot and Pound’s “Racial Masquerade” (77–99); and Stephen Gill’s essay on minstrelsy and Eliot’s “Bolo Poems” (65–84).

3. Take, for instance, Lott’s discussion of Margaret Fuller, Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, and others’ appreciation for what they deemed to be minstrelsy’s more or less accurate representation of African American life (See Lott, p. 20). In fact, as Lott explains, when it comes to racial stereotypes, white authors often “believe the counterfeit,” even those who supported abolition and greater racial equality (20).

4. See Lott, pp. 140–1 as well as Lhamon, pp. 277, 282.

Works Cited

- Chinitz, David E. *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*. U of Chicago P, 2003.
- Clement, Susan. “All Aboard for Natchez, Cairo, and St. Louis’: The Source of a Draft Heading of T.S. Eliot’s *Ash-Wednesday*.” *Notes and Queries*, vol. 43, no. 1, 1996, pp. 57–9.
- Cotter, Sean. “The Sacramental Dada of T.S. Eliot.” *The Comparatist*, vol. 26, 2002, pp. 69–82.
- Eliot, T.S. “The Art of Poetry, No. 1.” Interviewed with Donald Hall. *Paris Review*, no. 21, 1959. www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4738/t-s-eliot-the-art-of-poetry-no-1-t-s-eliot. Accessed 17 Dec. 2019.
- . *Ash-Wednesday*. Faber & Faber Ltd., 1930.
- . Introduction. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain. Cresset Press, 1950, pp. vii–xvi.
- . *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order*. Faber & Faber, 1928.
- . *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, vol. 3, edited by Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden. Yale UP, 2012.
- . *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, vol. 4, edited by Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden. Yale UP, 2013.
- . “Perch’io non spero.” *Commerce*, vol. 1928, pp. 5–11.
- Ellison, Ralph. “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke.” *Shadow and Act*. Vintage, 1995, pp. 45–59.
- . “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity.” *Shadow and Act*. Vintage, 1995, pp. 24–44.
- “George Moran, 67, Comedian, Is Dead.” *New York Times*, 1 Aug. 1949, Books 19.
- Gill, Stephen. “Protective Coloring: Modernism and Blackface Minstrelsy in the Bolo Poems.” *T.S. Eliot’s Orchestra: Critical Essays on Poetry and Music*, edited by John Xiros Cooper, Garland, 2000, pp. 65–84.

- Levy, William Turner, and Victor Scherle. *Affectionately, T.S. Eliot: The Story of a Friendship 1947–1965*. Lippincott, 1968.
- Lhamon, W.T., Jr. *Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*. Harvard UP, 1998.
- Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. Oxford UP, 1993.
- “Mack, Comedian, Killed in Crash.” *New York Times*, 12 January 1934, p. 19.
- Mack, Charles and George Moran. “Part 1.” *The Two Black Crows*, Columbia, 1927.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Vintage, 1992.
- North, Michael. *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature*, Oxford UP, 1994.
- Perloff, Marjorie. Review of *The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume Three: 1926–1927*, by T.S. Eliot, edited by Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden. *The Battersea Review*, 28 October 2014, www.thebatterseareview.com/critical-prose/216-eliot-s-letters-volumes-three-and-four. Accessed 15 Sept. 2019.
- Ricks, Christopher, and Jim McCue. Commentary on *Ash-Wednesday*. *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*, vol. I, by T.S. Eliot. Johns Hopkins UP, 2015, pp. 727–56.
- . Commentary on *The Waste Land*. *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*, vol. I, by T.S. Eliot. Johns Hopkins UP, 2015, pp. 587–710.
- Schuchard, Ronald. *Eliot's Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art*. Oxford UP, 1999.
- Wittke, Carl F. *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage*. Greenwood Press, 1971.

Copyright of Journal of Modern Literature is the property of Indiana University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of Journal of Modern Literature is the property of Indiana University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.