Twitter Thread by Eric Burns-White



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@demiurgent

In the spring of 2001, I was going to a meeting at the place where I worked then and still work now. Another of the people at the meeting was an academic dean of our school. She was perhaps the purest expression of academia *at* that school.

1/

That day she was literally wearing a tweed blazer. Before she'd become a dean she'd been an English teacher. Now, the epitome of English Teachers, in my brain, was and remains my father. That day she was a close second.

2/

That day I said hello and asked how she was or somesuch.

She gave me a slightly wry smile. "Oh, you know. Measuring my life in coffee spoons," she said. I chuckled, and we may have traded a couple more lines of 'Prufrock.' I'm not sure.

3/

And I've always been a fan of T.S. Eliot, so it felt natural enough to come to and fro, talking of Michelangelo, and otherwise it seemed a clever turn of phrase just before a meeting about school management systems and database development.

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It is a couple of days before 2021, and I am 20 years older, and that memory has taken on a very different shade and tenor. We have all seen too much since then, over and over again.

5/

I'm up this morning, earlier than I normally am during a vacation. I'm settling in to do some writing, but also to check on system status and other such, because I'm on vacation but the network still has to run.

6/

I'm not sure I've reached the point where I keep my trousers rolled, but still. It seems to me that Prufrock's love song applies in stages, not all at once. We do not one day wake up on the beach and hear the mermaids singing each to each.

7/

But still.

But still.

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Recently, I heard a satirical and savage review of the adaptation of "Cats," and it became clear that the reviewers vaguely knew the stage musical had been inspired by poetry, but they certainly had never read "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats," nor likely any Eliot.

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And I am not here to say anything positive about that movie, for I have eyes and ears and the capacity for rational thought, so that's not about to happen.

But those eyes seem to worsen all the time, and what I hear seems strange and incomprehensible more and more.

/10

And all the way back in 1983 or 4, I saw Cats with my father, the Professor, in a Boston Theater. Dad sat on the row, which meant at one point he got nuzzled by a woman in a bodysuit and cat makeup, and it made sense in context.

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And so did the play, adapting a book of poetry that came as close to whimsy as I think Eliot ever did. A book of poems that was meant to simply observe cats and place them within a context somewhere between life and the fantasy of what cat owners secretly believe.

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The review complained about a lack of plot, both in the movie and he presumed the play. And the movie made a critical error when it attempted to *have* a plot, or at least nod towards one.

But the play was not story but cabaret.

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But then, I sincerely doubt the reviewer's ever been to a cabaret in his life. The very concept seems to have slipped away, which is weird when one considers Youtube -- the place I saw this -- is in one sense the ultimate cabaret.

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An entirely different reviewer -- one I'm more comfortable identifying as @thelindsayellis -- had an equally savage review of the movie, but also clearly knew and understood the play, whatever her opinion *of* the play or Eliot, and it included a moderately famous anecdote.

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When the play was first being pitched to Hal Prince by Andrew Lloyd Webber, Prince tried to understand the point. The plot. The metaphor. The *statement.* Was this antimonarchical? Was it about the human condition or the yearning for the afterlife?

And if not, then *what?*

/16

And Webber, almost sadly, replied "It's about cats, Hal."

And that's it. That's all it is. It's a revue. A cabaret. It's about cats. Nothing deeper. Nothing trying to be deeper.

/17

Eliot redefined poetry in his era, and forged meaning that echoes through us straight to today. But "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats" was just Eliot writing about cats. Writing about what they were like, and what humans imagined they were like, and conflating the two.

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And I understood, deep down, a little more of 'Prufrock' instead of 'Cats,' after seeing that hilarious yet oddly disconcerting review.

And I understood that tweedy Dean, all those years ago.

/19

For I have known them all already, known them all:
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume?

/20

I'm on vacation, but I'm up and I'm checking things and poking at systems and going through the motions, because of course I am. It's what I do.

How am I?

You know. Measuring out my life with coffee spoons.

How are you?

21/21

For reference:

https://t.co/49gAeeFUyM