

*Words Alone: The Poet T. S. Eliot*, by Denis Donoghue

Reviewed by [John Ottenhoff](#) in the [April 11, 2001](#) issue

Denis Donoghue describes his book as "partly a memoir, partly a study of Eliot's poetry." When the two parts come together his book moves with uncommon gracefulness. University Professor and Henry James Professor of English and American Letters at New York University, Donoghue best serves the general reader when he writes about his struggles with Eliot's complex language and the pleasures to be found in it. Both readers interested in the nature of poetic language and those troubled by the carping criticism aimed at Eliot in recent decades will find Donoghue an illuminating guide. But perhaps too often for the nonexpert, Donoghue wanders into the "tedious arguments" and "half-deserted streets" of scholarly criticism rather than toward the "overwhelming questions" of the universe.

Donoghue is at his most refreshing when he admits to the confusion that so many of us feel when we read Eliot. "Eliot makes me feel that his ways with the English language will continue to be opaque, no matter how much time and concern I spend on them. That is why, like other readers, I read his poems as if they were music become speech." Words, for Eliot, somehow seem to have "feelings already inscribed" rather than simply conveying emotions. The title *Words Alone*, Donoghue asserts, points to "both the authority of words and the perturbation of words that can't rely on an authentic syntax"; to read Eliot is to confront the "uncertainty of words."

Thus "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" made an impression on Donoghue through the "tunes, the rhythms," which "proved enchanting. They intuited not the world I inhabited but a possible other world." Donoghue often comes back to the theme of Eliot pushing the reader to "gain access to feelings other than his own," especially as he defends Eliot against the complaint that he was a "cold, bloodless person."

Donoghue reveals himself most fully in the tenth chapter, on Eliot's prose works *The Idea of a Christian Society*, *After Strange Gods* and *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*. Donoghue admits that *The Idea of a Christian Society* is "a difficult book to like" and says he sometimes wishes Eliot had not tried to justify his beliefs in prose. Politely but insistently he critiques Eliot's "essentially mythical" imagination and

"respect for a pattern laid up in heaven" that detached him from "what goes on in the street." But he passionately defends *The Idea of a Christian Society* against Eliot's critics.

Further, Donoghue rather testily dismisses the charge that Eliot was an anti-Semite as "an injustice" and insists that readers, including non-Christians, should muster enough imagination to experience "certain convictions that they don't otherwise feel." Elsewhere, Donoghue rejects claims that the poetry of Eliot's Christian years shows a falling off; "I don't understand why his Christian belief attracts more aggressive attention than any other writer's agnosticism," he complains.

Such bursts of passion indicate that Eliot's poetry still lives, still challenges, still raises questions about how "words aspire beyond their condition to create the very form by which their fragmentary state is judged."