called life “behind reality” was an aberration. We owe Alex Zwerdling a debt of gratitude for showing us that this is so.

—Reviewed by Karen L. Levenback

T. S. Eliot
(1888-1965)


DURING THE PAST TEN years the critical reaction against the mind and character of T. S. Eliot has been gaining momentum and academic respectability, justifying itself as a more “objective” appreciation of Eliot’s contribution to modern literature. Such a reaction seemed almost bound to rise given the veneration he was accorded for so long. Eliot’s domination over his own and several succeeding generations was so powerful that the image of him as both the representative poet of modern dislocation and the supreme diagnostician of the wasteland continued to be held even by those who had little sympathy for his religious and philosophical convictions. This combination of alienation and a rage for order appealed deeply to those who had experienced the social and psychic cataclysms accompanying the two world wars. The lack of another magisterial figure to rival Eliot and the numerous distinctions showered on him in his later years (including the Order of Merit and the Nobel Prize) only confirmed his residence in an Olympian fastness beyond all reach.

Soon after the tributes to Eliot were published in the months after his death, however, critical attitudes toward him began to shift. Gradually a new Eliot began to emerge. In place of the cold, classical, ironic Eliot, the poet who had expressed modern fragmented consciousness and had then shored up his ruins by uniting in his own personality the religious and literary traditions of England, the new Eliot was an alienated ascetic, a conscience-ridden Puritan who was drawn, paradoxically, to the aestheticism of the French Symbolists and who poetically expressed the relativism of modern science. The new Eliot was pre-eminently the poet of “Prufrock” and The Waste Land, the troubled prober of the self. Though no one did so, a poem like Browning’s “Lost Leader” (lamenting the conservatism of the older Wordsworth), could have been written about Eliot, whose conversion to the Anglican church signified to later critics the abrupt end of a promising career. The new Eliot became a latter-day poète maudit, an artist whose work is valuable because it derives from sickness and despair.

It is this “new” Eliot who is generally accepted today, not only by the leading critics but on a more popular level as well. Witness the recent stage play, Tom and Viv, which portrayed Eliot’s tragic first marriage in such a way as to suggest that it was his passionless, inhibited insecurity that was largely responsible for the breakdown of the marriage and his wife’s eventual insanity. Ironically, the poets who, during their lifetimes, felt unjustly eclipsed by Eliot—Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams—have supplanted him in the contemporary critical pantheon. Somehow Pound’s politics, at once more naive and more fanatical than Eliot’s, can easily be separated from his poetry, whereas Eliot is routinely analyzed in terms of the “authoritarian” personality that leftists have always ascribed to the conservative mind.

Peter Ackroyd, one of Eliot’s latest and most fluent biographers, has no axes to grind, but he subscribes to the neurotic, relativist image of Eliot’s inner psychic being. Like several other younger British writers who have produced successful literary biographies (Humphrey Carpenter and A. N. Wilson come immediately to mind), Ackroyd, a poet and novelist, has little understanding of politics, philosophy, history, or theology, but is widely read in literature and commands an extremely readable style. His narrative is urbane and
confident, free from excessive detail, neatly balancing fact with evaluation. The one obvious gap in Ackroyd's knowledge, noted in nearly all the early reviews, is an acquaintance with American history and culture. At any rate, anyone wishing to master the basic facts of Eliot's life will refer to this biography.

On the more difficult aspects of Eliot's personal life, Ackroyd is more even-handed than many recent critics. This is especially true with regard to Eliot's first marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood, but also characterizes his treatment of Eliot's alleged anti-Semitism, his relationship with the crippled poet John Hayward, and his second and happy marriage late in life to his secretary, Valerie Fletcher. For example, the often-voiced opinion that the "Game of Chess" section of *The Waste Land* ("What shall we do tomorrow? What shall we ever do?") is a literal transcription of scenes from Eliot's first marriage is demolished by Ackroyd, who notes the sense of mutual dependence, a "collusion" against the world, which existed between Eliot and Vivien. And if Eliot is shown as not being without fault in the breakdown of the marriage, Ackroyd makes it clear that Vivien's problems were immense and probably irremediable.

When it comes to an assessment of Eliot's personality, Ackroyd adds only a few brush strokes to the portrait, already developed by Eliot's detractors, of a repressed, anemic poet. In this sense, Ackroyd has written not a revelatory but a thoroughly conventional biography. This view might take as its motto the words of one of Eliot's doctors: "Mr. Eliot, you have the thinnest blood I've ever tested." Born with a congenital double hernia, and affected by a low metabolism rate, Eliot inevitably was self-conscious and detached in relation to his physical nature—with obvious implications for his sexual life. To the modern, Freud-riddled mind, with its amoral model of animal sexuality, Eliot can only appear as a bloodless, insecure man. It rarely occurs to this mind that such a "disability" as Eliot's could give him an advantage of vision, like the blind Homer. Or, better yet, the blind Tiresias of *The Waste Land*, the androgynous seer who has "foresuffered all." Eliot early felt the sterility of desire which promises but can never achieve complete fulfillment. To call Eliot a "Calvinist... or a Gnostic in Anglican clothing," as Ackroyd does, is to perpetuate a profound misunderstanding. Eliot's mind was essentially Augustinian: He does not reject the goodness of creation ("Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown"), but he knows that man's restless heart can only find its fulfillment in God.

The problem of Eliot-through-secular-eyes is recurrent. To these eyes celibacy is inhibition, asceticism is masochism, penance is morbid guilt, religion is escape, and the desire for authority and order is insecurity. (Ackroyd's comments on religion, and Christianity in particular, sound like the dismissive tones of a British consul in Africa describing some local fetishist cult.) Thus we find Ackroyd saying, in all seriousness, that the center of Eliot's "faith was the belief in, and fear of, Hell." Eliot indeed became drawn to religious belief through his increasing conviction that men were able to damn themselves (think of those petty nihilists, Prufrock and Gerontion, and the "Hollow Men"), but this capacity is always seen as a deliberate closing off, a diminution of being. Eliot once rejected the notion that the poet works with a "beautiful world." He said: "the advantage of the poet is not to have a beautiful world with which to deal: it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom, and the horror, and the glory." A stark vision, yes; but no more so than that of Samuel Beckett, the existentialists, and other poets of negation. For Beckett, man can do nothing but admit the absurdity of his existence by naming it; for Eliot, the admission of limitation opens the window of grace. That grace comes not like a *deus ex machina*, from out of nowhere, but is something hard-won, even unwanted, like the birth-in-death of the Magi.

By subtitling his book "A Life" Ackroyd indicates his desire to stick close both to
the outward events and to the inner workings of Eliot's psyche, avoiding literary criticism and intellectual history. And yet for so intellectual a poet as Eliot nothing short of a "critical biography" (which would run closer to a thousand pages and be that much more difficult to read—and write) seems adequate. Again and again Ackroyd skips over, inaccurately summarizes, or cavalierly dismisses the great thinkers and ideas that influenced Eliot. Ackroyd treats Eliot's influences as if they were nothing more than the mirror images of a particular, momentary, psychological need. If Eliot has a craving for order, then he chooses Irving Babbitt and Charles Maurras as his mentors. At one point Ackroyd scoffs at Ezra Pound's suggestion that Eliot and George Santayana collaborate on a book, citing Santayana's low opinion of Eliot. If Ackroyd knew anything about Santayana, however, he would realize that Pound, as usual, clearly saw a common frame of mind.

This belittling of Eliot's intellectual ability is symptomatic of recent criticism. Ackroyd equates Eliot's early interest in philosophy with a "call to order." But far from being an exercise in categorization or an attempt to find comfort in order, Eliot's grappling with the Idealism of F. H. Bradley made him vividly aware, in an almost existential sense, of the precariousness of a unified vision of reality. Unity of vision requires the ability to see the correlation of disparate phenomena. The young Eliot developed the concept of the "significant self," which gains substance in time by participating in the process of distinguishing relationships, thereby finding "concrete universals." Though he was not a systematic thinker, and dropped his philosophical studies early on, Eliot was deeply aware of the anxiety brought on by modern man's fragmented perception. The Waste Land, then, is not likely to be a simple reflection of scientistic relativism, or the random babblings of a man undergoing a nervous breakdown, as Ackroyd and others would have it, but an expression of a dislocated consciousness that is searching for unity of vision. From the perspective of literary criticism, Cleanth Brooks, among others, has shown the sifting of "identify in difference" which is the central process enacted in the poem.

There is a sense, I think, in which Ackroyd and other commentators have contributed a needed balance to the critical evaluation of Eliot. Conservatives have been guilty of promoting a facile belief that Eliot is the objective chronicler of the decline of the West just as relativists have treated Eliot merely as a subject for psychoanalysis. Both sides entirely miss the central quest (and I would add, an achieved quest) of Eliot's poetic career: the transcending of the dichotomies between tradition and the individual talent, personal and impersonal, classical and romantic. That Eliot's attempts to express himself in critical prose are often confusing and contradictory is clear. But the same drive is successfully embodied in the poetry.

Eliot repeatedly spoke of the modern poet's dislocation: uprooted from place, living in a culture which spurns the past, locked in his own self-consciousness. He even gave the phenomenon a name: the "dissociation of sensibility." Yet Eliot knew that man could not restore some prelapsarian form of consciousness. He undoubtedly agreed with Jacques Maritain's comment in The Frontiers of Poetry: "art cannot return to ignorance of itself, cannot abandon the gains won by consciousness. If it succeeds in finding a new spiritual equilibrium, it will be, on the contrary... by still greater self-knowledge."

Eliot's quest, and his achievement, was directed toward the creation of the poetry of personal knowledge, a bridge between subjective and objective worlds. I take the phrase "personal knowledge" from the work of a modern philosopher of science, Michael Polanyi. It is the burden of Polanyi's seminal study to prove that science does not operate by impersonal or "objective" actions on the mind; rather, according to Gerhart Niemeyer's reading of Polanyi, "all knowledge involves an element of intellectual passion, a tacit component of previous beliefs, as well as a per-
sonal commitment.” Though this argument was originally related to modern science, it applies with equal force to the poetic sensibility. Since the Romantics, and Wordsworth in particular, modern poetry has either been helped or hindered by self-consciousness. Eliot sought a synthesis in personal knowledge, a synthesis that involved an awareness of the past in the present, a commitment of faith, and an ongoing process of self-understanding. His search was not without false steps, but it remains the most remarkable poetic journey of our time. The Waste Land expresses a consciousness searching the fragments for a unified vision, but in Four Quartets that vision has become incarnate. The poet integrates the tradition within himself, finds the universal in the concrete and the personal experience, the “timeless moment.” “History is now and England.”

The essence of “personal knowledge” was already contained in Eliot’s Bradleyan studies: the “significant self” bridging the gap between personal and impersonal. Seen in this light, the endless debate over whether Eliot was being “subjective” or “objective” becomes largely meaningless. Again, it cannot be denied that in his public pronouncements Eliot often made awkward and wooden efforts at participation in the meta-personal. An example of this would be his declaration of allegiances as an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a royalist in politics, and a classicist in literature. Such statements inevitably distort reality by putting it into neat packages. That is why we must keep returning to the poetry. Peter Ackroyd, normally a sensitive reader, can say of Ash Wednesday that Eliot “has borrowed the authoritative tones and cadences of religious texts in order to sustain images or sensations which are wholly personal and inexplicable.” He refers to the lines: “Sister, mother / And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea, / Suffer me not to be separated / And let my cry come unto Thee.” The childhood memories of family, of the Mississippi River, and of his love for the sea are indeed intensely personal, and yet they are common images that can speak directly to the reader. The prayer that he be not “separated” implies not only being severed from God, but a desire to have a divided consciousness made whole. There is nothing “inexplicable” about a poet relating his experience of the transcendent through the emotional suggestiveness of family, and the immemorial image of water as symbol of the infinite. That so many critics have blinded themselves to this reality is a loss which we can only hope to be partial and temporary.

To say that Eliot is a poet of personal knowledge is not to issue a license for infinite biographical speculation. What is needed, however, is a criticism that is not narrower than its subject. So long as Eliot is viewed from the perspective of secular psychologism we will be deprived of the healing power of his art.

— Reviewed by Gregory Wolfe

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Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)


In CONVERSATIONS WITH MY teacher the late Will Herberg there were occasions when he would recollect the times he had spent with Reinhold Niebuhr. He told the story of how, when he himself was near conversion to Christianity, Niebuhr persuaded him to examine seriously his own Jewish heritage. This Herberg did and became a Conservative Jew. Herberg, who was brought up in an atheistic Jewish home, was attracted to Marxism and joined the Communist party. Herberg discovered Niebuhr’s writings in the late 1930s when his Marxist faith had begun to crumble under the impact of Stalinism. In Niebuhr’s Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932) he