Ronald Bush: On "T. S. Eliot's Life and Career"

Eliot, T. S. (26 Sept. 1888-4 Jan. 1965), poet, critic, and editor, was born Thomas Stearns Eliot in St. Louis, Missouri, the son of Henry Ware Eliot, president of the Hydraulic-Press Brick Company, and Charlotte Champe Stearns, a former teacher, an energetic social work volunteer at the Humanity Club of St. Louis, and an amateur poet with a taste for Emerson. Eliot was the youngest of seven children, born when his parents were prosperous and secure in their mid-forties (his father had recovered from an earlier business failure) and his siblings were half grown. Afflicted with a congenital double hernia, he was in the constant eye of his mother and five older sisters. His paternal grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, had been a protégé of William Ellery Channing, the dean of American Unitarianism. William Eliot graduated from Harvard Divinity School, then moved toward the frontier. He founded the Unitarian church in St. Louis and soon became a pillar of the then southwestern city's religious and civic life. Because of William's ties to St. Louis, the Eliot family chose to remain in their urban Locust Street home long after the area had run down and their peers had moved to the suburbs. Left in the care of his Irish nurse, Annie Dunne, who sometimes took him to Catholic Mass, Eliot knew both the city's muddy streets and its exclusive drawing rooms. He attended Smith Academy in St. Louis until he was sixteen. During his last year at Smith he visited the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair and was so taken with the fair's native villages that he wrote short stories about primitive life for the Smith Academy Record. In 1905 he departed for a year at Milton Academy outside of Boston, preparatory to following his older brother Henry to Harvard.

Eliot's attending Harvard seems to have been a foregone conclusion. His father and mother, jealously guarding their connection to Boston's Unitarian establishment, brought the family back to the north shore every summer, and in 1896 built a substantial house at Eastern Point, in Gloucester, Massachusetts. As a boy, Eliot foraged for crabs and became an accomplished sailor, trading the Mississippi River in the warm months for the rocky shoals of Cape Ann. Later he said that he gave up a sense of belonging to either region, that he always felt like a New Englander in the Southwest, and a Southwesterner in New England (preface to Edgar Ansel Mowrer, This American World [1928]).

Despite his feelings of alienation from both of the regions he called home, Eliot impressed many classmates with his social ease when he began his studies at Harvard in the fall of 1906. Like his brother Henry before him, Eliot lived his freshman year in a fashionable private dormitory in a posh neighborhood around Mt. Auburn Street known as the "Gold Coast." He joined a number of clubs, including the literary Signet. And he began a romantic attachment to Emily Hale, a refined Bostonian who once played Mrs. Elton opposite his Mr. Woodhouse in an amateur production of Emma. Among his teachers, Eliot was drawn to the forceful moralizing of Irving Babbitt and the stylish skepticism of George Santayana, both of whom reinforced his distaste for the reform-minded, progressive university shaped by Eliot's cousin, Charles William Eliot. His attitudes, however, did not prevent him from taking advantage of the elective system that President Eliot had introduced. As a freshman, his courses were so eclectic that he soon wound up on academic probation. He recovered and persisted, attaining a B.A. in an elective program best described as comparative literature in three years, and an M.A. in English literature in the fourth.
In December 1908 a book Eliot found in the Harvard Union library changed his life: Arthur Symons’s The Symbolist Movement in Literature (1895) introduced him to the poetry of Jules Laforgue, and Laforgue’s combination of ironic elegance and psychological nuance gave his juvenile literary efforts a voice. By 1909-1910 his poetic vocation had been confirmed: he joined the board and was briefly secretary of Harvard’s literary magazine, the Advocate, and he could recommend to his classmate William Tinckom-Fernandez the last word in French sophistication—the Vers Libre of Paul Fort and Francis Jammes. (Tinckom-Fernandez returned the favor by introducing Eliot to Francis Thompson’s "Hound of Heaven" and John Davidson’s "Thirty Bob a Week," poems Eliot took to heart, and to the verse of Ezra Pound, which Eliot had no time for.) On the Advocate, Eliot started a lifelong friendship with Conrad Aiken.

In May 1910 a suspected case of scarlet fever almost prevented Eliot’s graduation. By fall, though, he was well enough to undertake a postgraduate year in Paris. He lived at 151 bis rue St. Jacques, close to the Sorbonne, and struck up a warm friendship with a fellow lodger, Jean Verdenal, a medical student who later died in the battle of the Dardenelles and to whom Eliot dedicated "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." With Verdenal, he entered the intellectual life of France then swirling, Eliot later recalled, around the figures of Émile Durkheim, Paul Janet, Rémy de Gourmont, Pablo Picasso, and Henri Bergson. Eliot attended Bergson’s lectures at the College de France and was temporarily converted to Bergson’s philosophical interest in the progressive evolution of consciousness. In a manner characteristic of a lifetime of conflicting attitudes, though, Eliot also gravitated toward the politically conservative (indeed monarchistic), neoclassical, and Catholic writing of Charles Maurras. Warring opposites, these enthusiasms worked together to foster a professional interest in philosophy and propelled Eliot back to a doctoral program at Harvard the next year.

In 1910 and 1911 Eliot copied into a leather notebook the poems that would establish his reputation: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Portrait of a Lady," "La Figlia Che Piange," "Preludes," and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night." Combining some of the robustness of Robert Browning’s monologues with the incantatory elegance of symbolist verse, and compacting Laforgue’s poetry of alienation with the moral earnestness of what Eliot once called "Boston doubt," these poems explore the subtleties of the unconscious with a caustic wit. Their effect was both unique and compelling, and their assurance staggered his contemporaries who were privileged to read them in manuscript. Aiken, for example, marveled at "how sharp and complete and sui generis the whole thing was, from the outset. The wholeness is there, from the very beginning."

In the fall of 1911, though, Eliot was as preoccupied with ideas as with literature. A student in what has been called the golden age of Harvard philosophy, he worked amid a group that included Santayana, William James, the visiting Bertrand Russell, and Josiah Royce. Under Royce’s direction, Eliot wrote a dissertation on Bergson’s neidealist critic F. H. Bradley and produced a searching philosophical critique of the psychology of consciousness. He also deepened his reading in anthropology and religion, and took almost as many courses in Sanskrit and Hindu thought as he did in philosophy. By 1914, when he left on a traveling fellowship to Europe, he had persuaded a number of Harvard’s philosophers to regard him as a potential colleague.

Eliot spent the early summer of 1914 at a seminar in Marburg, Germany, with plans to study in the fall at Merton College, Oxford, with Harold Joachim, Bradley’s colleague and successor. The impending war quickened his departure. In August he was in London with Aiken and by
September Aiken had shown Eliot's manuscript poems to Pound, who, not easily impressed, was won over. Pound called on Eliot in late September and wrote to Harriet Monroe at Poetry magazine that Eliot had "actually trained himself and modernized himself on his own." The two initiated a collaboration that would change Anglo-American poetry, but not before Eliot put down deep English roots.

In early spring 1915 Eliot's old Milton Academy and Harvard friend Scofield Thayer, later editor of the Dial and then also at Oxford, introduced Eliot to Vivien Haigh-Wood, a dancer and a friend of Thayer's sister. Eliot was drawn instantly to Vivien's exceptional frankness and charmed by her family's Hampstead polish. Abandoning his habitual tentativeness with women, in June 1915 he married Vivien on impulse at the Hampstead Registry Office. His parents were shocked, and then, when they learned of Vivien's history of emotional and physical problems, profoundly disturbed. The marriage nearly caused a family break, but it also indelibly marked the beginning of Eliot's English life. Vivien refused to cross the Atlantic in wartime, and Eliot took his place in literary London. They were to have no children.

Eliot and his wife at first turned to Bertrand Russell, who shared with them both his London flat and his considerable social resources. Russell and Vivien, however, became briefly involved, and the arrangement soured. Meanwhile Eliot tried desperately to support himself by teaching school, supplemented by a heavy load of reviewing and extension lecturing. To placate his worried parents, he labored on with his Ph.D. thesis, "Experience and the Objects of Knowledge in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley." (Eliot finished it in April 1916, but did not receive his degree because he was reluctant to undertake the trip to Massachusetts required for his dissertation defense.) As yet one more stimulating but taxing activity, he became assistant editor of the avant-garde magazine the Egoist. Then in spring 1917 he found steady employment; his knowledge of languages qualified him for a job in the foreign section of Lloyds Bank, where he evaluated a broad range of continental documents.

The job gave him the security he needed to turn back to poetry, and in 1917 he received an enormous boost from the publication of his first book, Prufrock and Other Observations, printed by the Egoist with the silent financial support of Ezra and Dorothy Pound.

For a struggling young American, Eliot had acquired extraordinary access to the British intellectual set. With Russell's help he was invited to country-house weekends where visitors ranged from political figures like Herbert Henry Asquith to a constellation of Bloomsbury writers, artists, and philosophers. At the same time Pound facilitated his entry into the international avant-garde, where Eliot mixed with a group including the aging Irish poet William Butler Yeats, the English painter and novelist Wyndham Lewis, and the Italian Futurist writer Tamaso Marinetti. More accomplished than Pound in the manners of the drawing room, Eliot gained a reputation in the world of belles-lettres as an observer who could shrewdly judge both accepted and experimental art from a platform of apparently enormous learning. It did not hurt that he calculated his interventions carefully, publishing only what was of first quality and creating around himself an aura of mystery. In 1920 he collected a second slim volume of verse, Poems, and a volume of criticism, The Sacred Wood. Both displayed a winning combination of erudition and jazzy bravura, and both built upon the understated discipline of a decade of philosophical seriousness. Eliot was meanwhile proofreading the Egoist's serial publication of Joyce's Ulysses, and, with Pound's urging, starting to think of himself as part of an experimental movement in modern art and literature.

Yet the years of Eliot's literary maturation were accompanied by increasing family worries. Eliot's father died in January 1919, producing a paroxysm of guilt in the son who had hoped...
he would have time to heal the bad feelings caused by his marriage and emigration. At the same time Vivien's emotional and physical health deteriorated, and the financial and emotional strain of her condition took its toll. After an extended visit in the summer of 1921 from his mother and sister Marion, Eliot suffered a nervous collapse and, on his physician's advice, took a three month's rest cure, first on the coast at Margate and then at a sanitarium Russell's friend Lady Ottoline Morell recommended at Lausanne, Switzerland.

Whether because of the breakdown or the long needed rest it imposed, Eliot broke through a severe writer's block and completed a long poem he had been working on since 1919. Assembled out of dramatic vignettes based on Eliot's London life, The Waste Land's extraordinary intensity stems from a sudden fusing of diverse materials into a rhythmic whole of great skill and daring. Though it would be forced into the mold of an academic set piece on the order of Milton's "Lycidas," The Waste Land was at first correctly perceived as a work of jazzlike syncopation--and, like 1920s jazz, essentially iconoclastic. A poem suffused with Eliot's horror of life, it was taken over by the postwar generation as a rallying cry for its sense of disillusionment. Pound, who helped pare and sharpen the poem when Eliot stopped in Paris on his way to and from Lausanne, praised it with a godparent's fervor. As important, Eliot's old friend Thayer, by then publisher of the Dial, decided even before he had seen the finished poem to make it the centerpiece of the magazine's attempt to establish American letters in the vanguard of modern culture. To secure The Waste Land for the Dial, Thayer arranged in 1922 to award Eliot the magazine's annual prize of two thousand dollars and to trumpet The Waste Land's importance with an essay commissioned from the Dial's already influential Edmund Wilson. It did not hurt that 1922 also saw the long-heralded publication of Ulysses, or that in 1923 Eliot linked himself and Joyce with Einstein in the public mind in an essay entitled "Ulysses, Order and Myth." Meteorically, Eliot, Joyce, and, to a lesser extent, Pound were joined in a single glow--each nearly as notorious as Picasso.

The masterstroke of Eliot's career was to parlay the success of The Waste Land by means of an equally ambitious effort of a more traditional literary kind. With Jacques Riviere's La Nouvelle Revue Française in mind, in 1922 Eliot jumped at an offer from Lady Rothermere, wife of the publisher of the Daily Mail, to edit a high-profile literary journal. The first number of the Criterion appeared in October 1922. Like The Waste Land, it took the whole of European culture in its sights. The Criterion's editorial voice placed Eliot at the center of London writing.

Eliot, however, was too consumed by domestic anxiety to appreciate his success. In 1923 Vivien nearly died, and Eliot, in despair, came close to a second breakdown. The next two years were almost as bad, until a lucky chance allowed him to escape from the demands of his job at the bank. Geoffrey Faber, of the new publishing firm of Faber and Gwyer (later Faber and Faber), saw the advantages of Eliot's dual expertise in business and letters and recruited him as literary editor. At about the same time, Eliot reached out for religious support. Having long found his family's Unitarianism unsatisfying, he turned to the Anglican church. The seeds of his future faith can be found in The Hollow Men, though the poem was read as a sequel to The Waste Land's philosophical despair when it appeared in Poems 1909-1925 (1925). In June 1927 few followers were prepared for Eliot's baptism into the Church of England. And so, within five years of his avant-garde success, Eliot provoked a second storm. The furor grew in November 1927 when Eliot took British citizenship, and again in 1928 when he collected a group of politically conservative essays under the title of For Lancelot Andrewes, prefacing them with a declaration that he considered himself a "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion." Eliot's poetry now addressed explicitly religious situations. In the late 1920s he published a series of shorter poems in
Faber's Ariel series--short pieces issued in pamphlet form within striking modern covers. These included "Journey of the Magi" (1927), "A Song for Simeon" (1928), "Animula" (1929), "Marina" (1930), and "Triumphal March" (1931). Steeped in Eliot's contemporary study of Dante and the late Shakespeare, all of them meditate on spiritual growth and anticipate the longer and more celebrated Ash-Wednesday (1930). "Journey of the Magi" and "A Song for Simeon" are also exercises in Browningesque dramatic monologues, and speak to Eliot's desire, pronounced since 1922, to exchange the symbolist fluidity of the psychological lyric for a more traditional dramatic form.

Eliot spent much of the last half of his career writing one kind of drama or another, and attempting to reach (and bring together) a larger and more varied audience. As early as 1923 he had written parts of an experimental and striking jazz play, Sweeney Agonistes (never finished, it was published in fragments in 1932 and performed by actors in masks by London's Group Theatre in 1934). In early 1934 he composed a church pageant with accompanying choruses entitled The Rock, performed in May and June 1934 at Sadler's Wells. Almost immediately following these performances, Bishop Bell commissioned a church drama having to do with Canterbury Cathedral, which, as Murder in the Cathedral, was performed in the Chapter House at Canterbury in June 1935 and was moved to the Mercury Theatre at Notting Hill Gate in November and eventually to the Old Vic. In the late 1930s, Eliot attempted to conflate a drama of spiritual crisis with a Noël Coward-inspired contemporary theater of social manners. Though Eliot based The Family Reunion on the plot of Aeschylus's Eumenides, he designed it to tell a story of Christian redemption. The play opened in the West End in March 1939 and closed to mixed reviews five weeks later. Eliot was disheartened, but after the war fashioned more popular (though less powerful) combinations of the same elements to much greater success. The Cocktail Party, modernizing Euripides's Alcestis with some of the insouciance of Noël Coward, with a cast that included Alec Guinness, opened to a warm critical reception at the Edinburgh Festival in August 1949 and enjoyed popular success starting on Broadway in January 1950. Eliot's last two plays were more labored and fared less well. The Confidential Clerk had a respectable run at the Lyric Theatre in London in September 1953, and The Elder Statesman premiered at the Edinburgh Festival in August 1958 and closed after a lukewarm run in London in the fall.

Eliot's reputation as a poet and man of letters, increasing incrementally from the mid-1920s, advanced and far outstripped his theatrical success. As early as 1926 he delivered the prestigious Clark Lectures at Cambridge University, followed in 1932-1933 by the Norton Lectures at Harvard, and just about every other honor the academy or the literary world had to offer. In 1948 Eliot received the Nobel Prize for literature during a fellowship stay at the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study. By 1950 his authority had reached a level that seemed comparable in English writing to that of figures like Samuel Johnson or Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Ironically, after 1925 Eliot's marriage steadily deteriorated, turning his public success hollow. During the tenure of his Norton year at Harvard he separated from Vivien, but would not consider divorce because of his Anglican beliefs. For most of the 1930s he secluded himself from Vivien's often histrionic attempts to embarrass him into a reconciliation, and made an anguished attempt to order his life around his editorial duties at Faber's and the Criterion and around work at his Kensington church. He also reestablished communication with Emily Hale, especially after 1934, when she began summering with relatives in the Cotswolds. Out of his thinking of "what might have been," associated with their visit to an abandoned great house, Eliot composed "Burnt Norton," published as the last poem in his Collected Poems 1909-1935.
(1936). With its combination of symbolist indirection and meditative gravity, "Burnt Norton" gave Eliot the model for another decade of major verse.

In 1938 Vivien was committed to Northumberland House, a mental hospital north of London. In 1939, with the war impending, the Criterion, which had occupied itself with the deepening political crisis of Europe, ceased publication. During the Blitz, Eliot served as an air-raid warden, but spent long weekends as a guest with friends near Guildford in the country. In these circumstances, he wrote three more poems, each more somber than the last, patterned on the voice and five-part structure of "Burnt Norton." "East Coker" was published at Easter 1940 and took its title from the village that Eliot's ancestor Andrew Eliot had departed from for America in the seventeenth century. (Eliot had visited East Coker in 1937.) "The Dry Salvages," published in 1941, reverted to Eliot's experience as a boy on the Mississippi and sailing on the Massachusetts coast. Its title refers to a set of dangerously hidden rocks near Cape Ann. "Little Gidding" was published in 1942 and had a less private subject, suitable to its larger ambitions. Little Gidding, near Cambridge, had been the site of an Anglican religious community that maintained a perilous existence for the first part of the English civil war. Paired with Eliot's experience walking the blazing streets of London during World War II, the community of Little Gidding inspired an extended meditation on the subject of the individual's duties in a world of human suffering. Its centerpiece was a sustained homage to Dante written in a form of terza rima, dramatizing Eliot's meeting with a "familiar compound ghost" he associates with Yeats and Swift.

Four Quartets (1943), as the suite of four poems was entitled, for a period displaced The Waste Land as Eliot's most celebrated work. The British public especially responded to the topical references in the wartime poems and to the tone of Eliot's public meditation on a common disaster. Eliot's longtime readers, however, were more reticent. Some, notably F. R. Leavis, praised the philosophical suppleness of Eliot syntax, but distrusted Eliot's swerve from the authenticity of a rigorously individual voice. And, as Eliot's conservative religious and political convictions began to seem less congenial in the postwar world, other readers reacted with suspicion to his assertions of authority, obvious in Four Quartets and implicit in the earlier poetry. The result, fueled by intermittent rediscovery of Eliot's occasional anti-Semitic rhetoric, has been a progressive downward revision of his once towering reputation.

After the war, Eliot wrote no more major poetry, turning entirely to his plays and to literary essays, the most important of which revisited the French symbolists and the development of language in twentieth-century poetry. After Vivien died in January 1947, Eliot led a protected life as a flatmate of the critic John Hayward. In January 1957 he married Valerie Fletcher and attained a degree of contentedness that had eluded him all his life. He died in London and, according to his own instructions, his ashes were interred in the church of St. Michael's in East Coker. A commemorative plaque on the church wall bears his chosen epitaph--lines chosen from Four Quartets: "In my beginning is my end. In my end is my beginning."

In the decades after his death Eliot's reputation slipped further. Sometimes regarded as too academic (William Carlos Williams's view), Eliot was also frequently criticized (as he himself--perhaps just as unfairly--had criticized Milton) for a deadening neoclassicism. However, the multivarious tributes from practicing poets of many schools published during his centenary in 1988 was a strong indication of the intimidating continued presence of his poetic voice. In a period less engaged with politics and ideology than the 1980s and early 1990s, the lasting strengths of his poetic technique will likely reassert themselves. Already the strong affinities of Eliot's postsymbolist style with currently more influential poets like Wallace Stevens (Eliot’s contemporary at Harvard and a fellow student of Santayana) have been reassessed, as has
the tough philosophical skepticism of his prose. A master of poetic syntax, a poet who shuddered to repeat himself, a dramatist of the terrors of the inner life (and of the evasions of conscience), Eliot remains one of the twentieth century's major poets.

The most important collections of Eliot's manuscripts can be found at the Houghton Library, Harvard University; the New York Public Library; and the libraries of King's and Magdalene colleges, Cambridge University. Aside from the volumes already noted, among Eliot's numerous publications should be mentioned his extended appreciation, Dante (1929); his free rendition of Anabasis: A Poem by St. -J. Perse (1930); the collection of his Selected Essays 1917-1932 (1932; rev. ed., 1950); his Norton lectures, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (1933); his pugnacious and never reprinted Page-Barbour lectures, After Strange Gods (1934); Essays Ancient and Modern (1936); his metrical jeux d'esprit, Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats (1939), popularized in the musical Cats; his studies in Christian culture, The Idea of a Christian Society (1939) and Notes towards the Definition of Culture, (1948); and the late collections of essays On Poetry and Poets(1957) and To Criticize the Critic (1965). Eliot's Poems Written in Early Youth were collected and printed in 1950, his Harvard Ph.D. dissertation was published in 1964 as Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley, and the first volume of his Letters appeared in 1988.


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