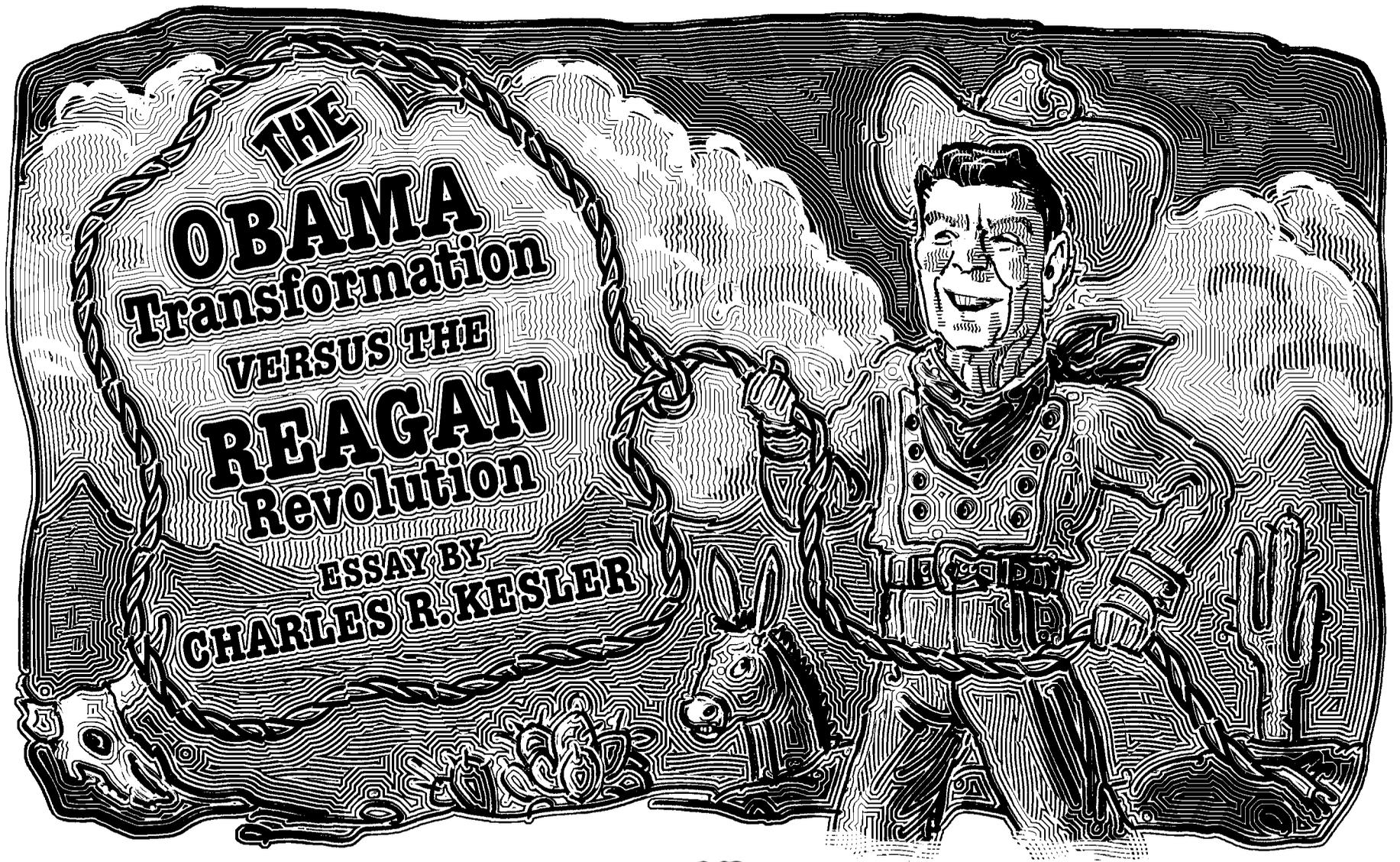


VOLUME XV, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2015

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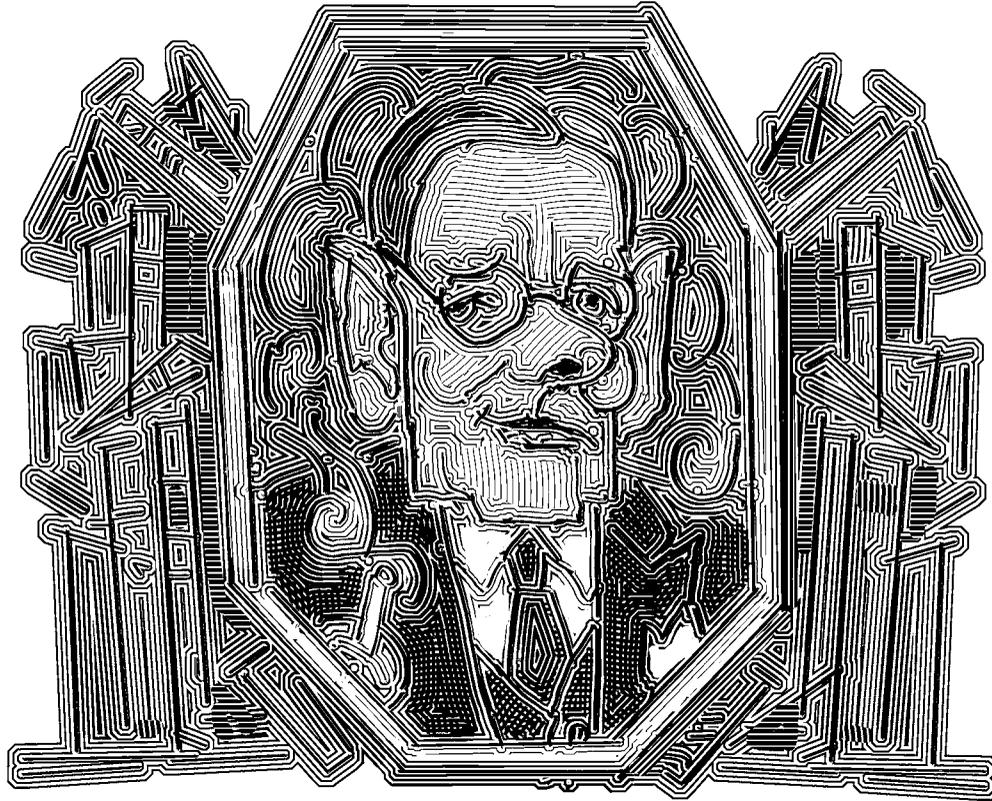
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Book Review by Joseph Epstein

FROM TOM TO T.S.

Young Eliot: From St. Louis to The Waste Land, by Robert Crawford.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 512 pages, \$35



READERS OF THE CLAREMONT REVIEW of Books, no matter how young, will not in their lifetimes, and quite possibly in the lifetimes of their children and grandchildren, encounter another poet who achieved the fame and had the literary authority of T.S. Eliot. That fame and authority ranged through the Anglophone world roughly between 1922, with the publication of *The Waste Land*, and Eliot's death in 1965. If an example of its magnitude is needed, Eliot, in 1956, lectured on the subject of "The Frontiers of Criticism" in a gymnasium at the University of Minnesota before a crowd of 15,000. He exchanged amusing letters with Groucho Marx. His approval or disapproval of writers, living or dead, could elevate or deflate their standing instantaneously. While still young, he had the confidence to declare *Hamlet* a flop—"So far from being Shakespeare's masterpiece, the play is most certainly an artistic failure"—lightly scolding Goethe and Coleridge for their misapprehension of the play's true meaning.

At the close of his brief essay on the failure of *Hamlet*, Eliot wonders why Shakespeare attempted this play for whose central

problem—the guilt of a mother in the eyes of her son—he, Shakespeare, could find no objective correlative. The phrase "objective correlative," which Eliot brought over from philosophy into literary criticism, refers to "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts...are given, the emotion is immediately evoked." In order to understand this failure, Eliot claims, we should have to know a great many facts about Shakespeare's life that are unknowable. "We should have to understand things which Shakespeare did not understand himself."

MIGHTN'T SOMETHING OF THE SAME be said not about T.S. Eliot's failure but of his extraordinary success? How did this success come about? On what was it based? What was his own estimate of it? Biography, with all its limitations and inadequacies, is our only resource in pursuit of the answers to these questions. To understand them, to paraphrase Eliot, we should have to understand things which T.S. Eliot himself did not understand.

To begin with, there is the interesting circumstance of Eliot's turning himself from a Midwestern American into an Englishman, in some ways even more English than the English. His model here was his fellow American Henry James, whom Eliot much admired, and whose cosmopolitanism he hoped to emulate. "It is the final perfection, the consummation, of an American," Eliot wrote apropos of James, "to become, not an Englishman, but a European—something which no born European, no person born of any European nationality, can become." Eliot also drew inspiration from James's double talent as artist and critic, which is of course what Eliot himself would become: a powerful critic, the most influential of his day, and an avant-garde poet of the highest rank and power. The combination of the two, poet and critic, conduced to the great *réclame* that Eliot enjoyed.

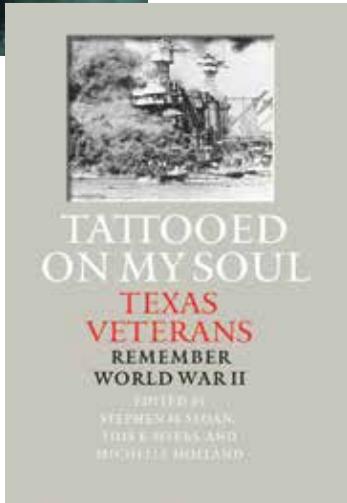
Thomas Stearns Eliot, born in 1888, was half Midwesterner, half New Englander. He grew up in St. Louis, the youngest of six children, but his well-established genealogical origins were in New England, where, in Gloucester, Massachusetts, the family spent its summers. A cousin, Charles Eliot, was president

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of Harvard. His grandfather was the founder of Washington University in St. Louis. His father was a successful businessman, owner of the Hydraulic-Press Brick Company. His mother was a published—in church magazines—poet. The family, among the first in St. Louis, was Unitarian, and took its religion seriously.

T.S. (then Tom) Eliot loved his parents, without complication, his life long. As the youngest child he was coddled. He was sent to the best, which is to say the most exclusive, schools in St. Louis. He had, it would seem, all the advantages: money, birth, a loving family. Yet he was born with a double hernia, and had to wear a truss early in life, which prevented him from participating in football and other games, and was in itself an embarrassment. He didn't like his own looks: his teeth came in crooked, his nose was big, with flared nostrils, he was sensitive about his too large ears. He was bashful generally, and especially shy with girls. While not unhappy, his boyhood was a somewhat isolated and bookish one, without close friends among his contemporaries, always slightly on the periphery of things.

THE CONTENTION OF ROBERT CRAWFORD in *Young Eliot* is that T.S. Eliot's early years, which have tended to be scanted by earlier biographers, were formative in the root sense. These years have been scanted because there is little documentary evidence to help biographers in filling them out. For five years in his late teens and early twenties, for example, the only surviving Eliot correspondence is a single postcard. T.S. Eliot was not eager for a biography, and to this day no official biographer has been appointed. Valerie Eliot, his second wife, asked Richard Ellmann, the biographer of James Joyce, to undertake her husband's biography, but, put off by the anti-Semitic streak in Eliot, Ellmann, a Jew, demurred.

Robert Crawford, who has published several collections of his own poetry, in addition to his many other books, is a professor of English at the University of St. Andrews. His is not the official biography of T.S. Eliot, nor does he claim, despite its length—a second volume is planned, taking up his subject's life after 1922—that it will be definitive. What is most impressive about *Young Eliot* is the insistent pressure its author keeps on the attempt to show how Eliot's experiences impinged on his poetry and the ideas propelling his criticism. His reading, both as a boy and later as a student, is underscored and highlighted, its use in his later poetry persuasively indicated.

Of his prep school reading, for example, Crawford writes: "Extended study of Xeno-

phon's *Anabasis* in Greek when he was 14 and 15 set him up for his much later translation of Saint-John Perse's *Anabase*. *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice* yielded phrases used in his mature verse." In Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, a famous poetry anthology of its day, he picked up, from Shakespeare, the line "Those are pearls that were his eyes," which became part of *The Waste Land*. Crawford is aware that, to a writer of sensitive antennae, such as Eliot possessed, reading can be as vivid and significant as the most direct experience offered by life.

The boy Tom's first hint of genuine poetic talent showed up in a pastiche of Ben Jonson in a lyric he wrote for an admired teacher at Smith Academy in St. Louis. So proficient was it that his teacher asked if he had had any help in writing it. His mother, who was always in his corner, told Tom that it was better than anything she could have written. "I knew what her verse meant to her," Eliot later wrote. "We did not discuss the matter further." He would later remark that he had been "forced into poetry by my weakness in other directions.... I took this direction very young, and learned very early to find my life and my realisation in this curious way, and to be obtuse and indifferent to my reality in other ways."

EDITH WHARTON, IN HER MEMOIR *A Backward Glance*, remarks that one of the great mistakes a young person could make was to be thought promising. So many of her young contemporaries so judged couldn't abide the pressure of expectation and petered out early in their lives. She and others, left to their own devices without any ballyhoo about their promise, went on to impressive achievement.

The young Tom Eliot did not suffer from the pressure of having been considered promising. He was a less than stellar student. He required an additional year of prepping at Milton Academy in Massachusetts before entering Harvard. His shyness continued at Harvard, and his social entrée card was ribald verse, which he could turn out on demand. At the end of his first semester he was put on probation, owing to lower than mediocre grades. His second year he was a C student.

In those years, under the recently installed elective system, Eliot's main course of study was what would in a later day, as Crawford suggests, be called comparative literature. He took courses in Latin, Greek, French, and German, and in philosophy, history, and government. Barrett Wendell and George Santayana and Irving Babbitt were among his teachers; Babbitt, he claimed, was the "one teacher at Harvard" who "had the greatest in-

fluence on me." The journalist John Reed (*Ten Days That Shook the World*) was in his class of 1910; so, too, was Walter Lippmann. Van Wyck Brooks, whose book *The Wine of the Puritans* was to influence Eliot in his decision to depart America for England, was at Harvard at the same time, but in the class of 1908.

Only in his last years at Harvard did Eliot catch intellectual fire. His lingering interest in a poetic career was reignited, Crawford reports, by his coming upon the poetry of Jules Laforgue in Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. Laforgue taught him the possibility of combining the traditional and the new, the profound and the profane, in verse in a way he hadn't hitherto thought possible. ("Without [Laforgue's]...intoxicating example, however," Crawford writes, "Tom might have stalled forever [as a poet].") He was elected to the editorial board of the *Advocate*. George Herbert Palmer, a popular teacher of Ancient Philosophy, introduced him to the poetry of George Herbert, an interest that would later issue in Eliot's writing about, and thereby reviving interest in, those 17th-century poets that Samuel Johnson called the Metaphysical poets. Palmer was perhaps the first of his teachers to recognize something extraordinary about the young T.S. Eliot.

TWO TRIPS TO EUROPE FURTHER WIDENED Eliot's intellectual range, applying the polish to the blacking of his undergraduate years. On the first, taken in 1910, shortly after his graduation, he attended the lectures of Henri Bergson at the Sorbonne. Travel in France turned him Francophiliac; at one point he even thought he might write exclusively in French. He acquired an interest in Charles Maurras, one of the leading figures in *Action Française* and an anti-Semite, and perhaps an influence in sustaining Eliot's own home-grown WASP anti-Semitism.

Returning to Harvard as a graduate student, he studied Sanskrit and began a thesis on the idealist philosophy of F.H. Bradley. The Sanskrit would later be of use in *The Waste Land*. He studied with Josiah Royce. From another philosophy professor, J.H. Woods, he acquired the notion that philosophy and poetry could be welded together, much to the advantage of poetry. "No other major twentieth century poet," as Crawford notes, "was so thoroughly and strenuously educated." As a graduate student he was thought sufficiently promising to be awarded a Sheldon Fellowship, which allowed him a second, and decisive, trip to Europe—a trip from which, it might be said, he never returned.

In 1914, the year World War I began, Eliot was at the University of Marburg, from

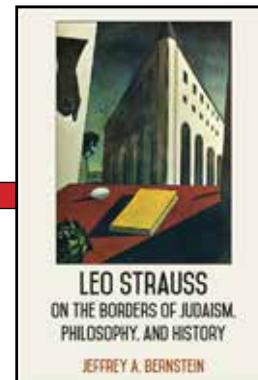
which he found it difficult to leave Germany. He next traveled on to London; there he had his fateful meeting with Ezra Pound, who had read his first major poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and immediately sensed the potential of its author. (Eliot took the name Prufrock, Crawford informs us, from a St. Louis furniture manufacturer.) With his unerring radar for spotting authentic poetic talent, Pound took up the cause of, and proved immensely helpful in, promoting Eliot's career. Pound it was who later, through extensive cutting, edited *The Waste Land* into its final form.

From London Eliot went on to Merton College, Oxford, which was neither to his temper nor to his taste. "Oxford is very pretty," he wrote to Conrad Aiken, "but I don't like to be dead." He considered a career in university teaching, though when the prospect arose of a teaching job at Harvard, if he would return to America to defend his doctoral thesis, he had no hesitation in turning it down. At Oxford Eliot encountered an important influence in the person of Harold Joachim, a philosopher who "taught me in the course of criticizing weekly essays with a sarcasm the more authoritative because of its gentle impersonality." The ideal of impersonality would loom large in Eliot's writing, and especially in his most famous essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," where he wrote: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality," to which he added the biographically supercharged coda: "But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things."

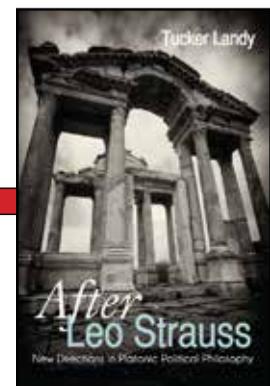
THE EMOTIONAL QUAGMIRE TO WHICH those sentences ever so indirectly allude began to form when Eliot returned from Oxford to London. There he began to make further literary connections; among them was Wyndham Lewis, the novelist who published some of Eliot's poetry in his magazine, *Blast*. He picked up relations with Bertrand Russell, whom he had first met at Harvard, and who introduced him at Garsington, home of Lady Ottoline Morrell, whose salon attracted the figures of what had by then become known as Bloomsbury: Lytton Strachey, Roger Fry, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Clive and Vanessa Bell, & Co. He began reviewing books for the *New Statesman*, the *Manchester Guardian*, and, later, the *Times Literary Supplement*.

But the crucial event, not merely of the year but in some ways of Eliot's life, was his

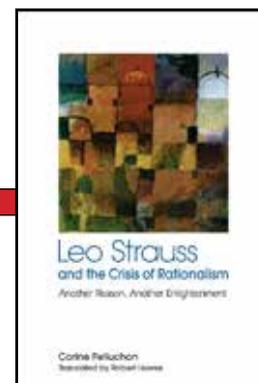
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rather sudden marriage to a woman named Vivien Haigh-Wood, daughter of a little known painter and herself a major-league neurotic, with more troubles than the Middle East. Eliot had earlier declared his love to an American of his own WASP cast named Emily Hale, who turned him down for want of prospects; and Vivien Haigh-Wood had had her hopes of marrying Scofield Thayer, a wealthy American and later editor of the *Dial*, scotched. Each, then, was on the rebound. Both were emotionally fragile. Eliot, at 26 still a virgin, brought to the marriage his sexual inexperience. Although he presented them with a *fait accompli*, his parents disapproved of the marriage.

Robert Crawford quotes Eliot, writing nearly half a century later, on his reason for marrying:

I think all I wanted of Vivienne [she spelled her name in different ways] was a flirtation or a mild affair; I was too shy and unpractised to achieve either with anybody. I believe that I came to persuade myself that I was in love with her simply because I wanted to burn my boats and commit myself to staying in England. And she persuaded herself... that she would save the poet by keeping him in England.

Shouldn't, as the Jews say, be a total loss. Of this marriage made in hell Eliot noted, "To me it brought the state of mind out of which came *The Waste Land*."

THE EARLY YEARS OF ELIOT'S MARRIED life were an unrelenting round of work and worry. He taught at two different boys' schools, and lectured to adult audiences in the evenings. He reviewed books. He worked at his poetry. He was from the outset a conscious and careful careerist, writing to his Harvard teacher J.H. Woods that there were two ways to succeed in the literary life in England, one being to appear in print everywhere, the other to appear less frequently but always dazzle. He chose the former for his criticism, the latter for his poetry.

Beginning in 1917 Eliot worked at Lloyds Bank, in the Colonial and Foreign Department, translating documents and analyzing foreign financial reports. While at the bank, he signed on as an assistant editor for Harriet Shaw Weaver's magazine the *Egoist*. Miss Weaver was a patron to James Joyce; Eliot

himself thought Joyce "the best English prose writer alive" and *Ulysses* "the greatest work of the age." He was offered but turned down a full-time editorial job at John Middleton Murry's *Atheneum*, his justification being that "if one has to earn a living, the safest occupation is that most remote from the arts."

Vivien's mental stability was never to be counted upon, and her myriad illnesses included neuritis, neuralgia, colitis, and heavy depression, with tuberculosis as a child thrown in at no extra charge. Her belief in Eliot's high fate as a poet was unflagging, but this didn't stand in the way of her cuckolding him with that family friend and paragon of political virtue, Bertrand Russell.

The pressure of all this must have seemed to someone of Eliot's delicate nervous organization insuperable. Lady Ottoline Morrell upon meeting him described him as "The Undertaker," adding that he was "dull, dull, dull." Virginia Woolf, noting his repressed behavior, referred to him as "the man in the four-piece suit." I.A. Richards, who saw him at work at Lloyds, described him "stooping, very like a dark bird in a feeder, over a big table covered with all sorts and sizes of foreign correspondence." At one point, Eliot suffered a breakdown, and went off to Lausanne to be treated by a famous mentalist of the day named Roger Vittoz, who diagnosed him as suffering from fatigue and anxiety, though assuring him that his mind was not disordered.

Eliot thought himself the victim of *aboulie*, or want of will. Self-diagnosis couldn't have gone further astray. Under the onslaught of personal problems and career ambitions, his will had held up, and he had begun to win through. Earlier he had written to his mother about his place in contemporary English letters: "There is a small and select public which regards me as the best living critic, as well as the best living poet, in England," and he was not wrong.

AT THE CLOSE OF CRAWFORD'S FIRST volume, T.S. Eliot has just published *The Waste Land*, the most famous of his long poems. The poem set the seal on his position, maintained into our day, in the first rank of modern poets. A large portion of *The Waste Land* appeared in the *Criterion*, the magazine, underwritten by Lady Rothermere, whose editor was Eliot. The *Criterion* added to his literary lustre, and was widely considered the most distinguished magazine of its time. He would

eventually leave Vivien, who in her madness would sometimes show up at his lectures and readings with a sign on her back reading, "I Am the Wife He Abandoned." Having lost interest in his family's Unitarianism, he found his interest in Anglo-Catholicism deepening and his faith grew stronger with the passage of years. When he died in 1965, at the age of 76, Eliot was easily the English-speaking world's most famous poet and influential critic.

Young Eliot is festooned with infelicities in prose style: people in its pages are "bonding," students "gifted" Eliot with *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, Eliot becomes one of "the best networked younger figures in London literary publishing," "Tom and [Wyndham] Lewis decided to excursion to France together," and more. Egregious examples of elegant variation crop up: Paris in one sentence becomes "The French capital" in the next. "Reinvent," one of the leading cant phrases of our day, is too often pressed into service.

BUT THESE MINOR MISSTEPS DO NOT DIMINISH the book's many virtues. Crawford admires Eliot without ignoring his flaws; the anti-Semitism that Eliot picked up from his parents and upper-crust WASP milieu, and that has marred his reputation in the eyes of many, is neither overlooked nor in any way scanted, though Crawford mentions Eliot's horror at the revelations of Auschwitz. Crawford understands that Eliot is only of interest as the man who wrote the poems and the criticism, and everywhere he weighs the events in his life, both social and intellectual, on the precise scale of their importance to his writing. "Ultimately," Crawford writes, in a characteristic sentence, "Tom became a great poet through learning how to access and articulate unforgettably the wide spectrum of his inner life, his experience and his voracious reading."

T.S. Eliot was not a genius—not a poet of the grandeur of Dante, Shakespeare, Pope, Keats—but a great talent, and his life is an example of how far talent, with the aid of a first-rate intelligence and wide learning, can take one. More than anyone else who has written about him, Robert Crawford has shown how Eliot brought it all off.

Joseph Epstein is an essayist and short story writer, and a contributing editor of the Weekly Standard. He is the author, most recently, of Masters of the Games: Essays and Stories on Sport (Rowman & Littlefield).

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