

reviewed by LOUIS I. BREDVOLD

Eliot's Issue with His Age

Eliot and His Age: T. S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century, by Russell Kirk. New York: Random House, 1972. Pp. 462. \$12.50.

ONLY late in Eliot's life did Russell Kirk enjoy the personal intimacy which adds a special appeal to this biography, the first one covering the whole life and activity of Eliot. Since 1953 Kirk benefited by friendly visits with Eliot in England and America, and they carried on a considerable correspondence. As a result of this friendship, Kirk can speak with authority in his interpretation of Eliot as a personality and of the impulses that produced, not only his poetry, but the wrestling with those current drifts of the age which Eliot predicted would lead to disaster. In his documentation Kirk has done a thorough searching, not only through Eliot's own publications, but through the countless recollections, allusions, and fragments of information in books and periodicals. Thorough indices will make the volume indispensable to scholars and to general readers as well.

There will be future biographies which no doubt will add valuable information. But Kirk has provided what is needed first of all, a comprehensive understanding of Eliot's intellectual and spiritual, as well as

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poetic, development, an assistance to the bewildered who fain would have been his disciples. Kirk narrates with keen perception the inner struggle of Eliot as coherent from beginning to end. It is possible to apply to it Eliot's own utterances: "In my beginning is my end" and "In my end is my beginning." Kirk's interpretation is therefore a rejection of the rather popular theory that Eliot early showed his powers which made him the long-awaited "Leader of the Lost Generation," and suddenly, about 1927, lapsed into orthodoxy and became henceforth the "Lost Leader," his greatness as poet and man gone from him. A man with Eliot's integrity cannot be understood in this fashion.

In fact, it seems there was a rift already apparent in Eliot's early poetry and his professed left-wing followers in Paris, England, and America. How many of them could admit any such learning in Homer, Vergil, the Elizabethans, and above all, Dante? Eliot faced metaphysical crises of which even the most talented of the *avant-garde* were completely oblivious—except perhaps Ezra Pound. For two decades after his graduation from Harvard, Eliot had wrestled in his own way with the ultimate questions, and he gives us a glimpse of those years when, after his conversion, he in 1929 published his little volume on Dante. He was of course searching for both metaphysical truth and literary genuineness. In the preface to this volume he records that "I have found no other poet than Dante to whom I could apply continually, for many purposes, and with much profit, during a familiarity of twenty years. . . . My purpose has been to persuade the reader first of the importance of Dante as a master—I may even say *the* master—for a poet writing today in

any language. . . . I should not trust the opinion of anyone who pretended to judge modern verse without knowing Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare." It would seem that those who acclaimed *The Waste Land* in 1923, were only dimly aware of the direction of Eliot's aspirations.

There are some passages in Kirk's volume that clearly reveal how the Lost Generation already sensed, even as they acclaimed *The Waste Land*, that Eliot was pursuing a course that they would reject. They found disturbing challenges in Eliot, however eager they were to welcome the master. They sensed a coming crisis. Malcolm Cowley recalls that "in Paris in the year 1922 we were forced by Eliot to make a preliminary choice. Though we did not see our own path, we instinctively rejected his." And Eliot, for his part, did not find comfort in the adulation of the *sans-culottes*, expatriate Americans haunting Paris. A curious incident is recorded by Williams Carlos Williams. In 1924 Eliot was still eking out a moderate income as bank clerk at Lloyd's. But he decided to journey to Paris to meet his ecstatic admirers in person in their favorite restaurants on the Left Bank. For this purpose he dressed himself, not in Bohemian garb, not in the revolutionary style to be expected in these precincts of revolt, but in top hat, cutaway, and striped trousers. According to Kirk, Williams grumbled that this correct attire "was intended as a gesture of contempt for the expatriates." Unfortunately, these fragmentary reminiscences do not tell us whether the disciples inquired about the meaning of the conclusion of *The Waste Land*, for instance. Nothing seems to have prepared them for the renegade Master of three years later.

But by 1927 Eliot's position became clear, and his poem *Ash-Wednesday* and his little volume *For Lancelot Andrewes* in 1928 revealed publicly the direction in which his earlier aspirations had been drawing him. Immediately the shocked *avant-garde* withdrew their allegiance with strong protests and loud lamentation. When Edmund Wilson read Eliot's profession that "it is doubtful whether civilization can endure without



T. S. Eliot

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religion," he could only respond that in that case civilization could find "no guidance for the future" in the writings of Eliot. From that point in his career, Eliot became a public figure resisting all manner of tendencies and movements, in religion, politics, education, culture, almost every aspect of the national life. He became a celebrity, received the Nobel Prize for literature, distinguished himself by several highly original and successful dramas, and was sought after as a lecturer in England and America. But he was always in a minority, battling for some lost cause. Gentle and affable as Eliot naturally was, much of his later life was devoted to exposing the dangers and errors of contemporary developments. It is one of the merits of Kirk's biography that he records Eliot's complicated contention with his own era with full and admirable documentation and with intelligent and understanding comment.

AS Kirk indicated in his sub-title and frequently throughout his volume, he borrows from Burke the concept of "the moral imagination" to indicate comprehensively what Eliot was championing in verse and prose from 1927 to the end of his life. Kirk admits that he has not found Eliot making use of this phrase and Eliot is not known to have been a devoted reader of Burke, but Kirk's use of the concept has its obvious appropriateness and validity. Both Burke and Eliot would have agreed that a society devoid of a belief in transcendent values would be a petrifying society in which civilization would disappear. Both were deeply committed to the humanistic traditions which are necessary to supplement the positivistic and scientific imagination. In his *Reflections on the French Revolution* Burke warned against the consequences of the "new conquering empire of light and reason. All the super-



Russell Kirk

added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation. are to be exploded as ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion."

Eliot's style was of course different, as the essayist or academic lecturer must avoid oratory, but he frequently, though gently, flattened out the soaring promises of such as H. G. Wells and Bernard Shaw. In his Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard in 1933, Eliot offered his own prediction regarding the dehumanization of a scientific society.

When every theatre has been replaced by 100 cinemas, when every musical instrument has been replaced by 100 gramophones, when every horse has been replaced by 100 cheaper motorcars, when electrical ingenuity has made it possible for every child to hear its bedtime stories through a wireless receiver attached to its ears, when applied science has done everything possible with the materials on this earth to make life as interesting as possible, it will not be surprising if the population of the entire civilized world rapidly follows the fate of the Melanesians.¹

One could hardly find a more devastating satire on a society without any more imagination, and devoid of any transcendent aspirations.

It will no doubt seem bold to many readers to go to Burke for the concept to cover comprehensively Eliot's multifarious dissent from the developments of his time. One might have expected a phrase from Dante. However, Dante, Burke, and Eliot were writing for different purposes in different ages; but they were basically in accord regarding the nature and plight of man. The abyss

1. The Melanesians were reputed to have lost their indigenous culture when they became a classless society and imported "civilisation" bored them to death.

from which we must be rescued is indicated by all three and the "wardrobe of the moral imagination" makes it possible for the sinners of Dante's *Purgatorio* to rise above the complacent evil of those who no longer have any hope. Eliot devoted his poetry and prose to a stimulation of his age, to an arousing of a sort of Socratic self-criticism which would disturb the complacency with

which society was accepting its drift into the abyss and all hope of purgation and purification would be gone. "Moral imagination" is an apt and comprehensive concept for his career as a whole. Kirk's admirable and detailed exposition of Eliot's aims and pursuits might well suggest that his books be put on the shelf alongside those of Burke.



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