

## *Eliot and Our Century*

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

THE PLACE of T. S. Eliot in the Kirkian canon may be surmised from the fact that the subtitle of Mr. Kirk's best known book, *The Conservative Mind*, which began life as "From Burke to Santayana," became in an early revision "From Burke to T. S. Eliot." The object of the present book, Mr. Kirk tells us, is "to discuss the significance of Eliot's convictions for this age, and to set in his social perspective the most eminent writer of the past half-century." All this Mr. Kirk most certainly does, yet one cannot help but feel that the book originated in the author's mind as a justification for his choice of T. S. Eliot as the culmination of that succession which began with Edmund Burke and included such figures as John Quincy Adams, John Randolph of Roanoke, Coleridge, de Tocqueville, and, from the present century, Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More. The conception Kirk uses as the measure of Eliot's work is the moral imagination—"that power of ethical perception which strives beyond the barriers of private experience and events of the moment . . . [and] aspires to the apprehending of right order in the soul and right order in the commonwealth." No one familiar with the work of Russell Kirk will be surprised to learn that the phrase "moral imagination" comes from Edmund Burke.

Mr. Kirk tells us all he thinks we need to know of the details of Eliot's life and background, but he has not undertaken to write a formal biography—"the classical objectivity of Eliot," Kirk remarks, "reduces his personal experience to incidental interest"; nor does he attempt to give us an intimate picture of Eliot as a person, as various friends and associates have done, and the task of line-by-line interpretation of Eliot's poetry he has left to those who delight in that sort of thing. What Kirk has done is probably more difficult than any of the above and more rewarding for the reader: he has given us a thorough, sympathetic account and evaluation of Eliot's achievement as a poet, critic, and man of his time, and has shown its relation to his own era and its sources in the past. For such a task Kirk's qualifications are almost unique: he seems to know every line that Eliot published, whether in poetry, essays or plays, he is thoroughly familiar with the writers Eliot turned to and was influenced by, whether Dante, or the seventeenth century English divines, or Dryden, Johnson and Coleridge, or Irving Babbitt from Eliot's Harvard years, or Christopher Dawson among contemporaries. And Mr. Kirk has a great facility, to which *The Conservative Mind* stands as testimony, for tracing the development of ideas and putting a complex body of thought into coherent form.

Kirk treats all the varied aspects of Eliot's work—poems, essays, dramas, editorial comments—and relates them to each

other and to the time and circumstances of their origin. In his comments, for example, on Eliot's unfinished *Cariolan* poems, Kirk begins with a masterful account of the confusion and aimlessness of the period of their creation, the early 'thirties, a time when inept politicians fumbled to master a political and economic crisis of which they had no comprehension. He quotes what Eliot was writing at the time in *The Criterion*, then goes on to give his interpretation of the poem. "As I understand it," says Kirk,

this poem is neither a deification of the leader, nor yet a denunciation of strong leadership. . . . It is an appeal to true principles of public order, rooted in religion and in historical consciousness, against ideology, against the cult of personality, against the indifference of irresponsibility of the crowd, against the "servile state" described by Hilaire Belloc, and against captivity to a moment of time.

Kirk's discussion of the *Four Quartets*, with his beautiful descriptions of the places after which three of the poems are named—Burnt Norton, Little Gidding and East Coker—and his account of their relation to the poems and to Eliot's life shows remarkable insight and skill; but particularly successful, so it seems to me, is his interpretation of *The Cocktail Party*. "A supper," observes Kirk in explaining Eliot's choice of a setting, "is communion, a cocktail party is evasion of thought and feeling." After pointing out Eliot's success in putting what appears to be a fashionable play into verse, Kirk goes on to say:

Yet the Eliot of 1949, his high ingenuity notwithstanding, was less interested in metrics and style than the Eliot of 1917 had been. He was bent, now, upon communicating certain truths perceived; literary techniques were only means to that end. How were we to live this imperfect life of ours and transcend the body of this death? How do we escape

from the prison of the ego, and from our old servitude to time? These are the concerns of *The Cocktail Party*.

Eliot's answer, which culminates in the martyrdom of Celia Copplestone, Kirk treats with sympathetic understanding; and though he does not presume to ascribe martyrdom to its author, Kirk does feel that in this play Eliot projected his own experience of life:

If one labors to redeem the time, and embraces the timeless moment, then one may be lifted out of time and caught up in eternity.

For all the skill and thoroughness of his interpretation of Eliot's works, Kirk, I think, has misunderstood one allusion, perhaps not a particularly important one, in *The Waste Land*. The scene in the Hofgarten, beginning with the ninth line, is not on the Starnbergersee, but obviously in Munich, and the overheard conversation—"Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch"—is not the "querulous voice" of Marie, "a stateless person from the wreck of the Austro-Hungarian Empire," but obviously a Baltic German, displaced like thousands of others in the aftermath of war. Her situation is made all the more poignant just because the scene does take place in the Munich Hofgarten, with its colonnades on two sides, the solid neoclassic *Residenz* on another, the carefully swept gravel walks, the white tables and neat waitresses of the outdoor cafe, the Baroque spires of the *Theatinerkirche* rising in the background. She is a refugee, one of many millions—and what better characterizes our century than the person driven from his home by some political decision, the victim of some ideology? The refugee represents the world of our century, the Hofgarten the world that preceded it.

In speaking of *The Waste Land*, Kirk expresses the opinion that it "might have been more coherent and less puzzling had Ezra Pound let it alone." Had Mr. Kirk the opportunity to see what Pound had done—

the facsimile edition of the original manuscript with Pound's cuts and rearrangements was not available when that judgment was offered—I doubt whether he would have made such a statement. Eliot himself took quite a different view of Pound's editing. In 1938, explaining the dedication of his first volume of collected poetry to Pound—*miglior fabbro*, as he called him—Eliot wrote:

I wished at that moment to honor the technical mastery and critical ability . . . which had . . . done so much to turn *The Waste Land* from a jumble of good and bad passages into a poem.

If the publisher of several of Mr. Kirk's earlier books may venture to say so, some judicious editing might have been in order for the present work. I for one would have suggested various deletions, of which the following is an example:

Others, your servant [*i. e.* Russell Kirk] among them, have kept their metaphysics warm even in the company of Cupid and Campaspe.

But this criticism is of no great moment. Mr. Kirk has written a book which tells us much not only about T. S. Eliot and the time in which he lived, but because it is also our time, much about ourselves as well. May I suggest, however, that just as Eliot's poetry admits of several interpretations, his life too may be explained differently by different persons. Mr. Kirk is of the opinion that had it not been for Eliot's unhappy first marriage, he would probably have gone back to the United States and contented himself with a Harvard professorship and a few scholarly books on the order of his doctoral thesis. Another, and to me more plausible explanation, would have it that Eliot was well aware of his creative gifts, and that his first marriage, unhappy as it may have been, was a necessary expression of his determination to assert himself, to live his own life independently of the demands and claims of his family. His second wife has said that he "dreaded" the

prospect of a return to Harvard, but it was no doubt not alone Harvard that he dreaded, but all that it would have meant in the sacrifice of his creative gift. Whether Eliot wrote great poetry future generations will have to decide—is it possible, one may ask, in this age of disintegration and dissolution to write great poetry at all? But in his ability to capture in his poetry the essential nature of his time and in his own life to rise above it, there can be no doubt that Eliot was a towering figure.

There are many books on T. S. Eliot and there will be many more, but it seems safe to say that few critics, if any, will better grasp the wholeness and significance of his work than Russell Kirk has done. Kirk makes a convincing case for his assertion that Eliot's primary concern was to apprehend "right order in the soul and right order in the commonwealth," and in so doing showed us the way whereby "the time may be redeemed."

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## *Testaments to Devotion*

### **Memoirs of an Aesthete 1939-1969,**

by Harold Acton, *New York: The Viking Press, 1971. xv + 388 pp. \$8.95.*

### **Carrington: Letters and Extracts from**

**her Diaries**, chosen and with an Introduction by David Garnett, *New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971. 514 pp. \$12.50.*

## I

DEVOTION is a virtue that in both theory and practice frequently absents itself from the contemporary situation. Devotion to family, or to friends, or to country, or to God, or to work, or to excellence has been replaced by mean tendencies, by the fanati-