

THE SCANDAL IN T.S. ELIOT'S LIFE

by James W. Tuttleton

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), dead now for more than 20 years, continues to vex those for whom his poetry is not complete—or is not completely to be understood—without an intimate knowledge of his biography. At the time of his death, of course, Eliot's reputation was somewhat in decline, despite the Nobel Prize of 1948, the Order of Merit, and many other awards. But during the years that he flourished, his literary authority was so commanding that those irritated by what he had done and what he stood for felt the need to diminish his remarkable achievement once

James W. Tuttleton is professor of English at New York University.

he was gone. Gossip about his life was always a London pastime, but the passing of the great poet sharpened the interest in the story of his life, and more than a few readers still look forward to revelations that will supposedly clarify what is felt to be the hidden scandal of his youth.

Certain already-known facts about Eliot's past give a titillating foretaste of the anticipated scandal. It is known, for example, that Eliot broke with his distinguished family in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and that he insisted on living apart from them in London. Why, is not perfectly clear. Then there was the discovery of his King Bolo verses, with their obscene sexual ribaldry. Some of the early poems like "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" were said to suggest that he had prowled the Paris red-light districts, a la Charles-Louis Phillipe's *Bubu de Montparnasse*. Is there a concealed murder somewhere ("Any man has to, needs, to wants to / Once in a lifetime, do a girl in")? Even odder was Eliot's impulsive marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood in 1915, which estranged him even further from his family. Lurid tidbits about this strange marriage were traded by insiders in London. Didn't this vivid and impulsive girl leave Eliot, shortly after the marriage, to seek the counsel (if not sexual comfort) of the priapic Bertrand Russell, who had been Eliot's philosophy tutor at Harvard? He must have been impotent—no? Isn't that the source of his mysterious *aboutie*? Didn't Eliot's exhausting struggle to support the bizarre and frequently ill Vivienne produce that famous nervous breakdown, the psychiatric medical treatment he underwent in a Swiss sanitarium, and the despair of *The Waste Land* (1922)? ("By the waters of Lemman I sat down and wept.")

Or was it because he was in love with somebody else? What about those hundreds of letters in the Princeton University library, written to his American friend Emily Hale—closed to inspection until the next century? Was she his lifelong mistress? And wasn't there something secretive and scandalous in his sudden marriage in 1957 to Valerie Fletcher, a woman so much younger than he? And if there's nothing to any of this, wasn't he at least a crypto-fascist who hated American democracy? In the continuous effort to dig something up to downgrade Eliot's reputation as a writer, there have been, in short, many insinuations of scandal, but few surprising revelations.

Eliot, it must be said, indirectly contributed to this appetite for scandal. As his fame grew, he insisted that his poetry was impersonal, indeed, that all great poetry was, or ought to be. And his resistance to inquiry into his private life simply whetted curiosity and led many readers to suppose that some very dark secret, some wonderfully rich and juicy scandal, was hidden in the obscurity of his early years. The manifest element of guilt in his verse and his absolving embrace of Christianity in 1927, together with his prohibition of a biography and of an edition of his letters (so far honored by his widow) made it seem inevitable to some that the life of Eliot, when it was finally and definitively written, would disclose moral horrors that only the despair of *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men* could adequately express. Since his death, of course, we have had a number of



biographical studies and some illuminating personal recollections about the man—including Herbert Howarth's *Figures Behind T.S. Eliot*, T.S. Matthews' *Great Tom*, and, most recently, Peter Ackroyd's *T.S. Eliot: A Life*. But such books are "unauthorized," written without the assistance of—and without the information possessed by—Eliot's widow, Valerie; hence, there is still the nagging suspicion that Old Possum indeed had a scandal to hide—one not yet really revealed by any of the literary snoops.

Literary jealousy, political irritation, wounded national vanity, and the human propensity to gossip fuel much of this tongue-clucking. But what this kind of prurience obscures is the real scandal of Eliot's life, the scandal that underlies so much of the effort to reduce his literary achievement to middling proportions. And that scandal was Eliot's conversion to Christianity. While some of his most intimate friends knew of his baptism at the Finstock Church in the Cotswolds on 29 June 1927, Eliot's announcement in the Preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928) that henceforth his point of view would be "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion" had the effect of a bombshell. It is a complicated statement, with many ramifications. But it is the religious scandal that needs to be understood, and understood in the literary context of Eliot's time, if the biographical speculation, still current, is to be grasped in the fullness of its motivation.

Eliot of course was reared in a bland New England Unitarianism, whose principal feature, according to Henry Adams in *The Education*, was the clergy's refusal to insist on any doctrine, believing as they did that "leading a virtuous, useful, unselfish life" was "sufficient for salvation." Since Unitarianism was to Eliot but an amorphous humanism claiming the status of a religion, it is hardly a surprise that he felt himself to have been brought up "outside the Christian Fold," as he told Bertrand Russell in a letter of 22 June 1927. For someone, like Eliot, outside the Christian Fold, there were at least three serious available alternatives: (1) a world view based on naturalistic scientism, which seems to have been the dominant literary viewpoint after 1890—a perspective alien to Eliot's temperament and without adequate intellectual authority for him; (2) Oriental thought, in which Eliot immersed himself for two years, while studying Sanskrit at Harvard—an experience that left him, he said, more mystified than enlightened; and (3) the secular tradition of Western reflective philosophy in which Eliot immersed himself as a graduate student at Harvard, leading, finally, to a doctoral dissertation he called *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley*. Given his formal education and his systematic reading and study, his conversion was not an act of ignorance, superstition, or some merely personal guilt. He was one of the most learned, widely inclusive thinkers of the Anglo-American literary milieu. But none of the approaches listed above could make a permanent claim on his intellectual allegiance during the formative years when Eliot was struggling to find a ground for being and a guide for conduct that transcended the skepticism and the ethical relativism espoused by his contemporaries.

Eliot's conversion to Christianity, in retrospect, was a clear line of development more than a decade in the making. Early fugitive poems like "Silence," "Easter,"

"The Love Song of St. Sebastian," and "The Death of St. Narcissus," written between 1910 and 1915, reflect his intense preoccupation with ultimate questions. Reflection on the nature of God, the longing for the divine, the conflict between the body and soul, the aspiration to sainthood, even the ecstasies of martyrdom as a redemption for the horror of life in a godless, desecralized universe—themes expressed in all these poems—he suppressed as incomprehensible in the literary climate of the time, or as otherwise youthful embarrassments to a proper Harvard man. But what he did express, on the intellectual plane, during these years, was a continuous philosophical argument, culminating in the scandal of his conversion, about whether morals can be grounded on human thought alone, or whether divine revelation, in the form of the Scriptures and the Church, was the necessary foundation.

In reaction to the skeptical scientism of the age, some of his contemporaries had posited a New Humanism derived from what Irving Babbitt, Eliot's Harvard teacher, called "the wisdom of the ages"—a central core of "normal human experience" which found its highest expression, according to Babbitt, in the thought and conduct of Buddha, Christ, Confucius, and Aristotle. The person who embraces such a wisdom, Babbitt argued in *Literature and the American College*, does "inner obeisance to something higher than his ordinary self, whether he calls this something God, or, like the man of the Far East, calls it his higher Self, or simply the Law." As a substitute for "religious obligation" and "religious restraint," this wisdom constituted an "inner check" on the various lusts that afflict man's natural will. "To be modern," Babbitt observed, means "to refuse to receive anything on an authority 'anterior, exterior, and superior' to the individual." John Middleton Murry likewise remarked in "Romanticism and Tradition" that "The foundation of the modern consciousness is this, that the individual man takes his stand apart and alone, without the support of any authority."

But for Eliot any humanism that relied on individual authority or this "inner check" was entirely too optimistic in

In the forthcoming issue of *Chronicles*:

Ethnic Conflict

"The Swiss do not believe in deficit financing, and they do believe in maintaining the value of the Swiss franc. When foreigners, despite horribly high real estate prices, start buying too much land, the Swiss yell "Ueberfremdung" (overalienation) and prohibit it. They believe in the free market, and have relatively free trade, but they do not believe in allowing themselves to be put out of business or bought out by foreigners."

—from "Pluralism in Miniature"
by Harold O.J. Brown

Autumn Day

by Rainer Maria Rilke

(translated by Alban Coventry)

Lord! It is time. The summer days were full;
Now lay thy shadows on the warm sundials,
And loose the wind upon these grassy isles;
Bid the unfallen fruits ripen and swell;
Grant them just two more days of sunny clime;
Urge them to their perfection and instill
The final sweet into the heavy wine.

Whoever has no house and is alone,
Now builds no more and will alone remain,
Will wake and read and write with tired brain,
And when the last brown leaves are earthward blown,
Will wander, restless, in the falling rain.

its view of human nature. Babbitt and Murry, like Emerson and Arnold, "had not seen the silhouette / of Sweeney [the natural man] straddled in the sun." The simple fact of human fallibility logically negated the authority of any such an "inner check" and deconstructed every argument for an adequate ethics grounded on human nature alone. He agreed, moreover, with the *Speculations* of T.E. Hulme that man—"essentially limited and imperfect" and "endowed with Original Sin"—can "never himself *be* perfect" because he "is essentially bad" and can only "accomplish anything of value by discipline—ethical and political." Hulme's account of human experience had convinced Eliot that "Order is thus not merely negative, but creative and liberating" and that "Institutions are necessary." And deep immersion in Bradley's *Ethical Studies*—with its empirical effort "to determine how much of morality could be founded securely without entering into religious questions at all"—had taught Eliot (as he observed in "Francis Herbert Bradley") that reflection on morality leads us to "the necessity of a religious point of view." For Eliot, only the Church provided the necessary structure for the institutionalization of religion; the ground of an adequate ethics could be nothing but divine revelation.

In the *Criterion*, which he had begun to edit in 1922, Eliot sponsored an ongoing public debate about the adequacy of humanism, enlisting the arguments of Allen Tate, G.K. Chesterton, and others against the positions of Babbitt, Murry, and Norman Foerster. He was in substantial agreement with Tate, who argued that the New Humanists had no means of validating their values and that, if their values were to be made rational, "the prior condition of an objective religion is necessary." Religion, Tate observed, "is the sole technique for the validating of values." Eliot likewise found the New Humanism "too ethical to be truth." He remarked that he could not "understand a system of morals which seems to be founded on nothing but itself," and he rightly observed that the New Humanist's morals were mostly derived from their own rejected Christian background. For Eliot, a truth *outside ourselves* had to be the foundation of belief and conduct. This truth, he told

Bonamy Dobree in a letter of 1927, was contained in "the conception of an immutable object or Reality the knowledge of which shall be the final object of the will." Thus he was irresistibly led toward the Christian conception of God and the necessity of conversion.

That Eliot's conversion sent shock waves through the Anglo-American intellectual and literary community is clearly revealed in the general reaction at the time. A *TLS* reviewer of *For Lancelot Andrewes* complained that by "accepting a higher spiritual authority based not upon the deepest personal experience" but rather upon "the anterior and exterior authority of revealed religion," Eliot had abdicated from his intellectual leadership and rejected "modernism for medievalism." Reflecting later on this review, which had called him "if not a lost leader" perhaps "a kind of traitor," Eliot denied that his Catholicism was "merely an escape or an evasion," or that he viewed his conversion as "a defeat." Eliot told Paul Elmer More that he knew "the difficulty of a positive Christianity nowadays," but he accepted the burden of supernatural belief without equivocation and with a genuine humility, living its precepts throughout his lifetime. Nothing galled his skeptical critics (and some fellow churchmen) more than his words that "Thought, study, mortification, sacrifice: it is such notions as these that should be impressed upon the young. . . . You will never attract the young by making Christianity easy; but a good many can be attracted by finding it difficult: difficult both to the disorderly mind and to the unruly passions" ("Thoughts After Lambeth").

That the most brilliant poet and learned writer of his time should have submitted himself to the spiritual authority of an institution called anachronistic by his avant-garde contemporaries was indeed the scandal of the time. And it is still the stumbling block to many intellectuals reading his late verse. But whenever has it been otherwise? We have it on the highest authority that Christian belief is foolishness to the world and that faith is a scandal to merely rational thought. But since, as Eliot observed in "Lancelot Andrewes," a Church is to be judged in part by "its intellectual fruits" and by "its monuments of artistic merit," we cannot conveniently ignore the positive role Christianity played in his verse as well as in his life. His conversion, in kindling the faith, thought, and imagination of his mature years, is manifest in those majestic poems and plays like *Ash Wednesday*, "The Gift of the Magi," *Murder in the Cathedral*, and *Four Quartets*. These memorable works give expression to a sensibility wholly delivered from the chaos of ethical subjectivism, on the private level, and, on the public level, from that "immense panorama of futility and anarchy" that Eliot had called secular history. Together with *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) and *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* (1948), they testify to Eliot's culminating belief that "a Christian world-order, the Christian world-order, is ultimately the only one which, from any point of view, will work." Certainly if we contemplate the horrific events of the 20th century—two world wars, innumerable revolutions, terrorism, the holocausts—the old or the New Humanist idea that man is the adequate measure of things seems a cruel piece of romantic folly. But such folly seems more tolerable, to many, than the scandal of faith.