

---

James E. Miller, Jr. *T.S. Eliot: The Making of an American Poet, 1888-1922*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005. 468p.

SURA P. RATH  
CENTRAL WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Since Eliot's death in 1965, several new biographical works have come out revealing his life and adding to the interpretation of his works: Robert Sencourt's *T.S. Eliot: A Memoir* appeared in 1971 and T.S. Matthews' *Great Tom: Notes Towards the Definition of T.S. Eliot* in 1974, though neither had the benefit of access to the poet's personal papers and unpublished letters. These were followed by Lyndall Gordon's *Eliot's Early Years* (1977) and *Eliot's New Life* (1988), and Peter Ackroyd's *T.S. Eliot* (1984), all incorporating information from the poet's papers. In 1988 Valerie Eliot brought out *The Letters of T.S. Eliot, Volume 1, 1898-1922*; the second volume, expected the following year, has yet to appear. Gordon's two volumes, revised, appeared in a single volume, *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (1998). Carole Seymour-Jones brought out her biography of Eliot's first wife, *Painted Shadow: A Life of Vivienne Eliot* (2001).

James E. Miller, Jr.'s *T.S. Eliot: The Making of an American Poet, 1888-1922* is a biography of the poet's early life, focusing on his formative years in St. Louis, Boston (especially his Harvard days), Paris, and London. Miller begins by quoting Eliot's comment on his own poetry: "I'd say that my poetry has obviously more in common with my distinguished contemporaries in America than with anything written in my generation in England. That I'm sure of. . . . In its sources, in its emotional springs it comes from America." On the surface, then, the biography serves as a vindication of scholars who claim Eliot as an "American" poet; however, more important, it is both a continuation and an elaboration of Miller's homosexual interpretation of *The Waste Land* in *T.S. Eliot's Personal Waste Land: Exorcism of the Demons* (1977).

Miller counters the common critical view—based largely on Eliot's "impersonal theory" of poetry as an "escape from personality," not an expression of it—that poems such as the "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land* should be read in separation from the poet's life. He draws on what he calls Eliot's "most intriguing statement about *The Waste Land*" from a 1951 lecture "Virgil and the Christian World":

A poet may believe that he is expressing only his private experience; his lines may be for him only a means of talking about himself without giving himself away; yet for his readers what he has written may come to be the expression both of their own secret feelings and of the exultation or despair of a generation. (xii)

His follow-up questions suggest his goal as a biographer is to deconstruct Eliot's remark, to probe the "skull beneath the skin" and establish the missing links between the poet who created and the man who suffered. The result of this psychoanalyti-

---

cal search of the youth Eliot is the discovery of a sustained stream of homosexual affinities. Miller continues the saga of John Peter's homoerotic reading of Phlebas the Phoenician as a character modeled after Jean Verdenal in "A New Interpretation of *The Waste Land*" published in *Essays in Criticism* in 1952, Eliot's objections and his lawyers' threats to the journal, subsequent withdrawal of the journal issue from the market, and later reappearance (1969) of the article.

Miller illustrates, sometimes with explicit statements from Eliot and his circle of friends as well as with speculative cross-references and allusions, connections between the poetry and the biographical details of the poet's personal experiences, his relationship with family and friends, his marriage and sexuality, his intellectual and social development, and his influences. The common image of Eliot among his readers has evolved from the public impression of him as a student in prim and proper attire at Harvard. Bertrand Russell, a visiting professor there, wrote of Eliot in 1914 to Lady Ottoline Morrell: "very well dressed and polished with manners of the finest European type... ultracivilized, knows his classics very well, is familiar with all the French literature from Villon to Vildrach, and is altogether impeccable in his taste but has no vigour of life—or enthusiasm." However, Miller traces Eliot's lack of "vigour" to early indications such as his adoration for D.H. Lawrence, especially of *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, his shyness and "inversion," and the "painfully mixed memories of his experience with his own mother."

Miller holds that Eliot "surely saw one side of him delineated by Lawrence in describing the introvert's intense curiosity in 'mild perversions,' his 'lust for dirty stories.'" The poet's own private side reflects this perversion and lust, according to Miller, in his private correspondence with Conrad Aiken and Ezra Pound. In 1988, writing about Pound's friendship with T.S. Eliot in *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound*, Humphrey Carpenter quotes from a Wyndham Lewis letter dated January 1915: "Eliot has sent me 'Bullshit' & the ballad for Big Louise. They are excellent bits of scholarly ribaldry. I am longing to print them in *Blast*; but stick to my naïve determination to have no 'Words Ending in -Uck, -Unt, and -Ugger.'" Eliot understood and accepted *Blast's* editorial policy and wrote to Pound, "I fear that King Bolo and His Big Black Kween will never burst into print. I understand that Priapism, Narcissism, etc., are not approved of."

The book is organized in fourteen chapters, each covering two to three years. Whether one agrees with the legitimacy and literary value of what Eve Kosofsky calls "the epistemology of the closet," Miller makes a persuasive argument for his homosexual reading of Eliot with support from archival material taken from Gordon, Ackroyd, and Seymour-Jones. Obviously, *The Making of an American Poet* will contribute to some revisionist readings of Eliot and provoke scholars to approach the poet in new ways. ✱