

## *Young Eliot—Everything but Poetry*

Robert Crawford, *Young Eliot: From St Louis to The Waste Land*, Jonathan Cape, 500 pp., 978-0-22409-388-0, £25

This book is a frighteningly comprehensive forensic examination of the quotidian T. S. Eliot from his birth in Missouri in 1888 to the publication of *The Waste Land* in 1922. It is so detailed that, by the time I'd reached page thirty, I thought I would be told next what he had for breakfast on a particular day and the colour of the socks he put on. We learn that young Eliot—Crawford calls him Tom throughout—was embarrassed by the size of his ears, that he had a big nose, wore a truss, took dancing lessons and boxing lessons, went sailing and achieved such poor grades at Harvard that he was put on probation. Fortunately, he bucked his ideas up and turned himself into a first rate philosopher, with a particular expertise on the idealist F. H. Bradley.

He married the vivacious Vivien in haste and they led a troubled life together. She seemed to catch flu every couple of weeks; she suffered from exhaustion, hysteria, anaemia and heavy periods—really, she suffered most of all from Vivien. Eliot provides a glimpse into their marriage in *The Waste Land* where a character says, “My nerves are bad tonight.” Vivien’s nerves were bad every night. We are told of their sexual difficulties: she called him “Wonkyplenky,” which, says Crawford, meant “faulty penis”. Perhaps it was owing to the truss? Anyhow, Vivien seemed consoled for a time by the seductive attentions of Bertrand Russell.

Often this book reads like a travelogue. We find out that Eliot used to like to visit Paris with Wyndham Lewis and to hang around there with Pound and Joyce. But he and Viv liked to see places in England too, places where they might hope to improve their health: Eastbourne, Lewes, Tunbridge Wells and, of course, Margate where Tom went to recover from his nervous breakdown. That finds its way into *The Waste Land* as well: “On Margate sands. / I can connect / Nothing with nothing.” And then there were the couple’s sojourns with the ghastly Garsington gang of decadents and immoralists including Strachey, Keynes, Virginia Woolf, and presided over by the horse-faced Lady Ottoline Morrell—the model for Hermione in *Women in Love*—another of dirty Bertie Russell’s mistresses.

Tom was a schoolmaster for a time and lectured on literature in Ilkley, Yorkshire. His long-term employment in the foreign exchange department at Lloyds bank in Lombard Street was no meagre clerking job: he was in charge of high-level financial transactions which were the result of the First World War and in this he was advised by Keynes.

Crawford clearly idolises Eliot, and he spent years preparing this book. What a pity then that Crawford, the meticulous academic, has no understanding of Eliot’s poetry: in fact I would say there isn’t a poetic twitch in his whole nervous system. For example, discussing the line in *Prufrock*, “like a patient etherised upon a table,” Crawford remarks that Eliot does not say “an operating table”. Well, he wouldn’t would he? As the greatest poet and critic of the 20th century, he knew what would go into ordinary English. And, for heaven’s sake, what other sort of table does anyone ever get etherised upon?

And Eliot’s poetry “draws on aspects of his own psyche.” This is psychobabble. Where else does Crawford think imaginative writing comes from? Among some truly magnificent howlers, we are given this: “Good night ladies . . .” is from *Hamlet*, “. . . yet in Tom’s poem this sounds as if spoken to drinkers leaving the modern tavern.” Dammit—it is a tavern—it’s the East End pub scene in *The Waste Land*!

All that said, I was fascinated by this book. For anyone who wishes to learn about the minutiae of Eliot’s interesting everyday life, it is unsurpassed. Just don’t look for insights into some of the finest poetry ever composed.

*Peter Mullen*