

Books

T.S. Eliot
A Study in Character and Style

by Ronald Bush

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LITERARY BIOGRAPHY has held an accepted, if not always prominent, place in professional literary studies ever since Samuel Johnson combined biographical and aesthetic considerations to compose his model of the genre, *Lives of the Poets*. But even for some humanists whose credo would include an article on the reciprocal influence of a writer's life and art, an inquiry into this relationship in the case of T.S. Eliot may still seem somewhat incongruous. A powerful force in the development of both modern poetry and modern literary criticism, Eliot has often been understood as calling for a strict separation between the personality of the author, with his or her unique qualities and concerns, and any of the voices that may inhabit the poetry. It is no surprise that the work of a writer who could define great art as impersonal art should seem to require exceptional treatment.

The latest book by Ronald Bush, associate professor of literature at Caltech, shows, however, how our understanding of poetry can be broadened by just such an account of the poet's career. The study moves effortlessly through a wide range of material, much of it unpublished, to demonstrate that the poet's genius carried out what his character demanded. Familiar with such diverse poets as Dante and the 19th-century French *Symbolistes* whose figures hover around Eliot's poetry, with Eliot's own literary criticism, lectures, and early drafts of his poems, as well as with a wealth of biographical documents, Bush uses his scholarship to persuade us that, in the

words of one of Eliot's poems dreaming of life's harmony, the end is in the beginning. For Bush, the poetry Eliot wrote throughout his life, despite its variety and conflict, essentially develops a potential present from the outset in the tensions in his personality — tensions that have to do with exactly the degree to which feeling and form, personal or impersonal considerations, would predominate in Eliot's life and art. Bush conceives of the poetry as progressing from a precarious balance in Eliot's early period between romantic honesty and classical order, between internal monologue and an encompassing mythology, to a tilt in favor of impersonal form, after 1922 and Eliot's breakdown and conversion to Anglicanism. But long before the poet began to think of this struggle as presenting a stylistic choice between self-dramatization in the lyrical monologue and self-effacement through the music and incantation of highly structured verse, the man had already endured this strife within himself.

Bush's account of Eliot's life, narrated as counterpoint to the poems throughout the chronological study, may fairly be called a ghost story, a story of the demons haunting Eliot's psyche and shaping the emotional logic of his poetry. It begins with the fateful effects on the young Eliot of the ancestral spirit presiding over his New England Unitarian family: his paternal grandfather, a minister of Puritan descent whose devotion to duty, self-denial, and self-improvement and whose distrust of emotional expression and the value of the self were held up by the family as exemplary and were unavoidably internalized by Eliot. The spirit of the Eliot family nourished his ambition but deprived him of the satisfaction of success. The source of a continual oscillation between a rebel-

lious exploration of the emotional life and a recoil from such indulgence, this demon left Eliot in a state of despondency which could only lead, Bush contends, to despair or to God. The despair, deepened by his unhappy marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood, another ghost in Eliot's life, would lead to his breakdown and to his poetic monument to desolation, *The Waste Land*. The stillness and peace of the contemplative, religious life would require a disciplining and suppression of insistent personality in the musical structure of *Four Quartets*, when a middle-aged Eliot would include in his meditations the ghost of his past self among the shades crowding around him.

Although Eliot's personal struggles provide Bush with his framework for interpreting the poetry, the biographical plot is not deterministic in any simple sense. Bush is too skillful a literary critic, too sensitive to the linguistic intricacies of the poems, to allow them to become merely corroborating biographical documents. Whether a poem dramatizes the mind's remarkably agile feints, its approaches and evasions of unconscious fears or desires, or presents a controlled vision of spiritual fulfillment, Bush remains primarily concerned with how the diction, syntax, prosody, rhetoric, and network of literary allusions and ancient myths interact to create perhaps the finest specimens of modern poetry.

T.S. Eliot once said that no biography, however full and intimate, could rival the ability of poetry to render the undertones of personal emotion, the personal drama and struggle. While this may be true, Bush's literary biography goes a long way toward deepening our understanding of the poetry and its emotional power. □ — Neil Saccamano