The truth on Russell and Vivien?

by Andrew Brink

Peter Ackroyd. *T. S. Eliot*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984. Pp. 400; 67 illustrations. C$27.95.

TWO QUESTIONS MIGHT be asked of Peter Ackroyd's *T. S. Eliot*. The first is specifically of interest to readers of *Russell*, while the second is of more general literary interest: how accurately does the biography portray Eliot's and his wife Vivien's relations with Bertrand Russell, and does it fulfil its stated purpose in showing the connection between Eliot's life and his poetry? I believe that in both respects Ackroyd's book leaves something to be desired, but that nonetheless it makes an important contribution to understanding English culture in the first half of the twentieth century. Together with Lyndall Gordon's *Eliot's Early Years* (1977), Ackroyd's biography is our main guide to the life and creative experience of T. S. Eliot, undoubtedly a major figure in modern literature. Eliot's unwillingness to be the subject of an official biography hampers both writers' access to the letters he didn't burn. Ackroyd's search for sources has been more fruitful than Gordon's, and his remarks on Eliot's relations with Russell are the more daring and controversial. Eliot did himself a disservice by trying to circumvent the inevitable biographical investigation of great artists. It will take still more disentangling of the story to rid it of answerable mystery and ambiguity.

Let us look at the most controversial point: Vivien Eliot's alleged amour with Russell. It is impossible to discover in detail from Russell's *Autobiography* just what his relations with the Eliots had been. In 1914 Eliot was a philosophy student of Russell's at Harvard but, when Eliot turned to poetry, Russell seems to have been less interested, except that he believed he'd given Eliot an idea for *The Wasteland*.[1] In the *Autobiography* Russell's fullest account of the Eliots' married relationship appears in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell of July, 1915. Russell does not comment but lets the letter speak for itself: Vivien was "light, a little vulgar, adventurous, full of life" (p. 54). He became interested in their welfare, easing their poverty by giving some debentures; but he also seems to have thought that he could, in some way, ease Vivien's psychosomatic suffering. It appears from another letter in the *Autobiog-*

[1] *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1914–1944* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1968), p. 18n.

raphy that by September, 1916 Russell's special relationship with Vivien was being modified, but Russell does not explain just how (p. 74).

Fuller consideration of Russell's correspondence with Lady Ottoline enabled Ronald Clark to elaborate the mystery but not to solve it. Clark's biography remains equivocal as to just what degree of intimacy existed between Russell and Vivien Eliot, a difficult and inveigling woman who convinced him that her artistic gifts were worth salvaging. Clark sees Russell's motives as an attempt to save Eliot from a damaging marriage, and, less altruistic, his wish to distance himself from Lady Otttoline. Is this reading into the situation motives which were still more self-serving? When Russell gave the Eliots accommodation in his Bury Street flat he assured Lady Ottoline that he was acting from "the purest philanthropy", and that she need not worry about hidden designs.[2] But did he, after all, have sexual relations with Vivien? Clark first writes: "he and Mrs. Eliot did not ... become lovers. To Ottoline, to whom he never lied however much he might prevaricate, he could say, 'I never contemplated risking my reputation with her, and I never risked it so far as I can judge'" (1 Sept. 1916; *ibid.*, pp. 310–11). Yet Clark's cryptic conclusion is: "from the summer of 1916 there is little doubt that the picture is the unusual one of Russell as much pursued as pursuer" (p. 313). Clark seems to have had in mind other evidence which he was unable to document, so he left the matter hanging.

The question was taken up by a bolder biographer, Robert H. Bell, who published "Bertrand Russell and the Eliots" in *The American Scholar*. Bell paraphrases a letter from Russell to "Colette" (Lady Constance Malleson) of 30 October 1917 which he believes states that Russell's platonic relationship with Vivien Eliot gave way to a sexual one. The paraphrase runs: "Russell led Vivien to expect more if the cottage scheme materialized. At last they made love ... but for [Russell] it was hellish and loathsome. He disguised his antipathy and she seemed satisfied, but since then he has had awful nightmares that strip his self-evasions. He no longer wants to share a cottage if it means such physical intimacy".[3] As the letters may not be quoted, it is impossible to argue with Bell's inferences, except to say that they are not the only ones possible. Russell's words are ambiguous. The entire letter would have to be considered sentence by sentence, and then put in the context of other letters, to determine the meaning. Until that is done, judgments about

[2] Russell to O. Morrell, 10 Sept. 1915; Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Cape/Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), pp. 311–12.
[3] Bell, "Bertrand Russell and the Eliots", *The American Scholar*, 52 (summer 1983): 309–25 (at 317).

the relationship will remain speculative. Bell's strange change of tense in mid-paraphrase adds to the confusion. In whose voice does he speak?

Ackroyd, however, is willing to take Bell's sensational revelation virtually at face value and to make it the main feature of his portrait of Russell. Russell is labelled as being "so notorious a philanderer" as to give Eliot qualms about leaving his wife with him (p. 68), a matter which came up when Russell offered to take Vivien to Torquay to restore her failing health. With this said, it is an easy move into agreeing with Bell as to just what happened. No one disputes that Russell was fascinated by Vivien's uncertain destiny, to be a criminal or a saint, as he said (*Autobiography*, p. 56). But in fairness to Russell it should be allowed that from at least the time of his conversion in 1901 he had been deeply moved by suffering women. An extraordinary empathy with the ills of certain women made him want to help, and indeed by participating in the Suffrage movement he showed a will to help women in general to gain their political rights. (That he was also hostile to control by women, including his lovers, complicated but does not negate his urge to give help.) Russell was no trained psychotherapist, and Vivien was powerfully seductive in her neurotic way. Eliot himself recoiled from her sexuality; Russell was in some way tested by it, but the matter of his testing by Vivien should be left in abeyance until full psychobiographies can be written. To get a balanced picture, Eliot's remark of January 1916 that Vivien may owe her very life to Russell would have to be taken into account (*ibid.*, p. 58). As Eliot must have realized, Russell knew something about how to stem suicidal thinking.

The new formulations will also have to take into account how it was that on 21 April [1925] Eliot wrote to Russell almost pleading to see him and saying that his predictions about the marriage's ill fate were entirely accurate: "You are a great psychologist" (*ibid.*, p. 173). On 7 May Eliot asked for "the help of someone who understands her" since her health had further deteriorated (*ibid.*, p. 174). These letters give evidence of a richer and humanly more important state of affairs than Ackroyd allows when he says that Russell was attempting self-extenuation when he put these, and not other letters, into the record of his life. The danger of this sort of attempt to clear up Russell's confusion for him is that it doesn't take into account enough factors to result in more than a Don Juan sterotype. Russell's walk-on parts in the recent biographical renderings of Bloomsbury are not helping the truth about him since, when another figure or figures are given centrality, it cannot be expected that Russell's psychological subtleties will be examined. Without a subtler understanding of his feelings about women, his attractions and loyalties to intellectual men, and the origins of ambivalence, the priapist stereotype

will go on building and we will miss most of what makes Russell a greater man than, for example, T. S. Eliot. By that I mean that from the First World War on, Russell's answer to modern pessimism was far more socially and politically viable than was Eliot's, or that of any modernist among the poets. The man was complicated, but not unsympathetic as he is presented here.

In certain respects the early Eliot resembled the early Russell: Protestant, priggish, attracted by Bradley's neo-Hegelian philosophy, intellectually ascetic with inner strife requiring a "conversion" to release feeling into humane channels. But they moved divergently: Russell away from revealed religion and Eliot deeper into it, until his life and art were dedicated to the Christian church. (This contrast, and their curious literary relations, are studied by Gladys Leithauser and Nadine Dyer in "Bertrand Russell and T. S. Eliot: Their Dialogue", *Russell*, summer 1982.) The matter could be pursued, but let us ask here whether Ackroyd's biography convincingly links Eliot's art to his life of stressful relationships and to his wish for release into religious certainty. The test is in the account of *The Waste Land*, Eliot's bleak envisioning of post-World War I society in decay, which poem nonetheless struggles toward a vision of peace.

No critic denies that *The Waste Land* is probably a great poem. But it may also be read in parts as a personal document. The poem may be thought of as "Tom's autobiography", for "the relief of a personal grouse against life", as reports have it.[4] Gordon reads the poem as evidence of Eliot's wish to know whether sainthood is possible in the modern world. Can revelation occur in an age which gives centrality to selfhood? Gordon also sees parts of the manuscript poem as having to do with a mismatched couple, reworking in a context of social decay Eliot's questions about the viability of relations between men and women, and especially about sexual guilt. Gordon studies the poem as "a psychological hell in which someone is quite alone" (p. 106), but this is not at all Ackroyd's emphasis. Repeatedly he steers the reader away from associating events in Eliot's life with symbolic enactments or reflections in the poem. He prefers to let stand Eliot's own (protective) opinion that the poem means whatever any reader wants it to mean (pp. 120, 309). Ackroyd is thus spared from making autobiographical interpretations of the "supposedly autobiographical sections of the poem" (p. 114). He does, however, defend *The Waste Land* against imputations of homosexuality because of its cancelled misogynistic passages; but no clear account is given of Eliot's persistent sense of guilt and his ambivalence about women, which

[4] Gordon, *Eliot's Early Years* (Oxford U.P., 1977), p. 86.

must have something to do with taking up with Vivien in the first place. In one passage Ackroyd gives as a reason for the poem not being autobiographical the fact that Vivien wrote "wonderful" beside some possibly compromising passages in "A Game of Chess" (pp. 114–15); yet later he notes that the poem's publication "had been rather terrible for her since it seemed so much a part of her, and she of it" (p. 129). Ackroyd doesn't resolve this contradiction, nor does he directly addresss Gordon's challenge to see a confessional urge of the poet's own being worked out in *The Waste Land*. Ackroyd's "Prelude" promises to connect Eliot's life and work, "to elucidate the mystery of that connection"; but the mystery is scarcely penetrated.

Eliot was an extremely private person whose psychological troubles threatened to collapse him. He had a terrifying sense of "the void" and seems often to have experienced persons as unreal; he was remote, avoiding and frequently unsure of his own accomplishments. He abhorred biographical revelations and upheld an explicitly impersonal doctrine of poetry. All his life Eliot sought help: from friends such as Lady Ottoline Morrell, from the psychotherapist Dr. Roger Vittoz, but mainly he looked to the ministrations of the Christian church of which he was to become a distinguished adherent. While the analysis with Dr. Vittoz helped Eliot to bring *The Waste Land* to a satisfactory conclusion (p. 116), Anglican devotion quickened the creative impulse in his later poetry and even drama. Eliot was an uncertain literary pilgrim, wandering between two traditions, the old Christian order and a secular "tradition of the new", unclear in its values and radically individualistic. Unlike Russell, Eliot chose to affirm revealed religion, trying to remake it plausibly in an alien age. The thought of Russell and Eliot ended sharply in contrast as to radical and reactionary beliefs. To contrast them in full would make a stunning study in twentieth-century English culture. Peter Ackroyd's task is simpler: to gather as much biographical information as possible and to begin to make sense of it. The biography is a valuable opener, full of questions which will prompt still more questions about the relations of life and art.

Department of English, and
The Bertrand Russell Editorial Project
McMaster University