

reserve per se, but to a lack of desire for women. The poet had been in love with Verdenal, and his anguish over his beloved's death can be traced through a number of knotty passages in his poems.

This is a subject well worth exploring—Eliot's poetic images of sexuality are alarming enough to invite a host of theories—but doing so is doubly difficult: Eliot thwarted biographers by locking up many of his letters for decades and destroying others; and arguments for repressed homosexuality in figures from the past naturally have to be built upon ambiguity and indirection. Miller devotes a great deal of energy to his argument, but, in the end, the evidence falls short.

To begin with, Verdenal's letters (available since 1988) are ardent enough, but only as bouncy, self-conscious performances. They indicate a companionship based on youth, wit, and compatible literary opinions, and employ throughout the formal *vous*. Internal evidence from the correspondence suggests that Eliot didn't often write back. It also deflates a couple of Miller's 1977 conjectures: that Eliot and Verdenal traveled together in Europe, and that Eliot knew of Verdenal's death when he married Vivien Haigh-Wood—on the rebound, as it were. Moreover, Eliot's letters to others don't indicate much distress over Verdenal's death. He seems not to have heard about it until several months after the fact, and in a 1916 letter to Conrad Aiken, he assigns it fifth place in a list of personal news—after where he's teaching, what he's working on, how bad his finances are, and how his wife is feeling—and he goes on to say, "I am having a wonderful life nevertheless."

In dozens of places, citing evidence from the poems as well as the letters, Miller overargues his case. One especially stark example involves lines that Arnaut Daniel speaks in Dante's *Purgatorio*, Canto XXVI. Miller notes that one draft of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (which, he argues reasonably enough, is in part a self-portrait) includes as epigraph two lines from the Arnaut passage. Miller declares this "perhaps the most important revelation of the manuscript of the 'Love Song,' linking Prufrock to the band of those brought

together in Purgatory for the sin of same-sex lust." But this is simply wrong: Arnaut's group is atoning for excesses of *heterosexual* passion.

In the best parts of this book, Miller stops trying to shore up the ruins of his Verdenal theory and instead takes a lengthy, digressive look at the philosophical and literary influences on the early Eliot. He allows himself more than twice as many pages for this period as the previous best biography, by Lyndall Gordon, and thus can quote much more extensively from letters, poems, and the guesswork of other scholars. For a figure as elusive as Eliot, whose runic remains no two readers interpret the same way, this makes for a valuable compendium—a kind of do-it-yourself portrait kit.

—Brian Hall

The Soul of Technology

IN THIS DENSE, LEARNED, AND eclectic study, John Paul Russo sounds the alarm, loud and long, about what ever-burgeoning technology is doing to our civilization and our very souls. "The future," he proclaims, "has taken shape." "The great transition" predicted for so long by figures such as Matthew Arnold "is finally over," and the world "powerless to be born" has settled upon us. Not that there's much to cheer in this dehumanized world. What class conflict was for Marx and instinctual urges were for Freud, the technological imperative is for Russo: the ultimate cause, the engine always running in the background, the underlying reality beneath all the visible phenomena.

Technology, in his view, has grown so pervasive and so minute in its regulation of our existence that we're rapidly losing the ability to imagine what we would be, and once were, without it. Computers and cell phones, along with a host of ever more powerful simulations of reality, have become the media in which we "live and move and have our being." And the consequences of this technological regime are almost entirely pernicious for the life of the mind.

**THE FUTURE
WITHOUT A PAST:**
The Humanities
in a Technological
Society.

By John Paul Russo.
Univ. of Missouri Press.
313 pp. \$39.95

Technological values have “trumped all others,” “decimated historical memory,” and “infiltrated education to the point of limiting the humanities and undermining their force.”

There’s a considerable intelligence operating in these pages. An English professor at the University of Miami, Coral Gables, Russo brings to his task an astonishingly wide range of reading, from ancient philosophers to modern novelists. He joins a well-established tradition of cultural critics who have shared many of the same concerns, including Henry Adams, Lewis Mumford, Jacques Ellul, Neil Postman, and Wendell Berry. He’s especially perceptive about the ways

The Future Without a Past is especially perceptive about the ways technology may have led us into a predominantly visual culture.

technology may have led us into a predominantly visual culture, a culture whose inattention to “the word” has left language devalued, and whose sense of connection to the past has atrophied almost beyond restoration.

The irony is that the decline of the humanities has been facilitated by the fecklessness of the disciplines’ most visible and honored practitioners.

Though stimulating, Russo’s book has some weaknesses. Its allusiveness and amorphousness combine to make it a challenging read. Moreover, Russo sometimes seems to assume what he wishes to prove. He takes the pervasiveness of the omni-technological life-world as a given, without providing the sort of evidence and argument that might persuade skeptics. Nor does he offer practical prescriptions for remedying the unfortunate condition he diagnoses. (More than once, he mentions monastic withdrawal as a method that worked in the past and might work now—though, to his credit, he acknowledges that such an approach may be “far-fetched.”) And he doesn’t help his cause when he gives in to hyperbole: “Never in the 500-year history of humanism in the academy has it been more disadvantageous to be a humanist—intellectually, socially, culturally.”

Still, the book’s failings are inseparable from its

considerable virtues, which in the end outweigh its faults. *The Future Without a Past* deserves a wide reading, particularly by those who believe that our technological enmeshment will substantially influence the future of our discourse, and who fear that, as Ralph Waldo Emerson long ago put it, “things are in the saddle and ride mankind.”

—Wilfred M. McClay

CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

Warily Watching China

TO THE DISCOMFORT OF MANY Asia-watchers in the United States, China is rapidly expanding its influence in Asia. In this new book, Robert Sutter, a former Asia specialist with the U.S. government who now teaches at Georgetown University, carefully explores Beijing’s growing regional presence and what it may mean for the United States.

**CHINA’S RISE
IN ASIA:**
Promises and Perils.

By Robert G. Sutter.
Rowman & Littlefield.
297 pp. \$24.95

China has plainly become a major regional actor, but not necessarily a menacing one. As Sutter sees it, China today is less a challenger to the status quo



George W. Bush, shown here with first lady Laura Bush on the Great Wall in February 2002, has visited China three times during his presidency, but the future of U.S.–China relations remains uncertain.