

plays, and engaged in world-class brawls with producer Sam Goldwyn. She tried her hand at other genres, too, collaborating (if Hellman the dictator could ever be said to have collaborated) with her friends Leonard Bernstein and Richard Wilbur on a musical production of *Candide*.

Though adept at self-promotion, she took writing very seriously, as both a teacher and a reader. Chekhov, she wrote in the introduction to a 1955 collection of his letters, was “a man of deep social ideals and an uncommon sense of social responsibility”—her highest praise—as well as a “workman” playwright for whom “the smallest stage movement has an end in view and is not being used to trick or deceive or pull fashionable wool over our eyes.”

In 1939, using the profits from her plays and screenplays, she bought a 130-acre farm in Pleasantville, New York, now a suburb but then deep country. There, she cooked, entertained constantly, farmed, gardened, hunted and fished, and raised chickens and other livestock, seeming to master her new environment instinctively. Later she would hold court on Martha's Vineyard for everyone from Norman Mailer to James Taylor. Mary Mahoney, a young woman who kept house for Hellman on the Vineyard one summer, wrote a cruel but no doubt largely accurate portrayal of her as litigious, insanely demanding, paranoid, monstrous; but then, no man is a hero to his valet.

Nearly every other aspect of Hellman's life has been disputed, including how much Hammett helped with *The Children's Hour* (Martinson convincingly shows his editorial guidance to have been critical), her overlong defense of Stalin and the Soviet regime (she finally recanted, but without much vigor), and the truthfulness of her three autobiographical memoirs, *An Unfinished Woman* (1969), *Pentimento* (1973), and *Scoundrel Time* (1976). Of the last, Mary McCarthy famously told Dick Cavett, “Every word she writes is a lie, including ‘and’ and ‘the.’”

What no one can deny is that Hellman drank more, laughed more, smoked more, fought more, and had a whole lot more sex than anyone does today. The pace and ferocity remained truly

staggering until her dying days, when she asked a friend at her bedside, “I was fun, wasn't I?” So even if Martinson isn't really telling Hellmanites anything they don't already know, readers encountering the fiend for the first time are guaranteed a fast ride as well as a realistically complex portrait. The worst thing about this book is Martinson's writing, which belabors certain themes ad nauseam (e.g., Hellman's “eroticism”) and serves up such doozies as “success separated herself from herself and others.” Were Hellman around to read it, one can imagine her imperious scorn.

—Ann J. Loftin

T. S. Eliot's Love Song?

IN 1952, A CANADIAN professor named John Peter published an article in *Essays in Criticism* arguing that the narrator of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* had at some time fallen in love with a young man whose death by drowning he now

mourned. Eliot reacted furiously, proclaiming his “amazement and disgust” and threatening legal action if Peter disseminated the article further. In 1969, after Eliot's death, Peter republished his essay, along with a postscript that tentatively identified the narrator's lost love as Jean Verdenal, a French medical student whom Eliot had known in Paris in 1911. Verdenal was killed in World War I, and Eliot dedicated *Prufrock and Other Observations* to him in 1917.

Another scholar, James E. Miller Jr., of the University of Chicago, supported and extended Peter's interpretation in *T. S. Eliot's Personal Waste Land: Exorcism of the Demons* (1977). Since then, more biographical material has become available, including seven letters to Eliot from the hitherto virtually unknown Verdenal. Now Miller is back, with a biography that seeks to extend his argument about *The Waste Land's* narrator to Eliot's own early years. In Miller's view, Eliot's obvious distaste for sexual intimacy was due not to extreme fastidiousness and

T. S. ELIOT:

The Making of an American Poet, 1888–1922.

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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
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The Humanities
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Society.

By John Paul Russo.
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