Chapter 1

Life

Early life, 1888–1914

At East Coker in the English county of Somerset, St. Michael's parish church, situated on gently rising ground, looks out over a benign setting of trees, fields, and a scattering of ancient-seeming cottage roofs. On a warm, sunny day in late summer, it is easy to imagine oneself standing before a landscape unchanged for centuries. Only the presence of one or two cars in the church carpark and the encroachments of a new housing estate just visible in the far distance remind travelers that they are still very much in the twenty-first century. Inside, stained-glass illuminates, here and there, the dark interior. At the back, in the right-hand corner, a modest memorial marks the place in the wall where T. S. Eliot's ashes are interred. The poet himself chose this place for the deposition of his remains. The choice is significant. Here in this modest, virtually anonymous place, he enjoys eternity in an old village off the main track, in a church difficult to find, and in a place where no public sign or fanfare trumpets the presence of a celebrated author. Only when you enter the church do you know that you have arrived.

A visitor without any knowledge of the literary culture of the twentieth century might be excused for thinking that the "Thomas Stearns Eliot, Poet" remembered in St. Michael's was a minor figure, of limited importance, memorialized by an obscure parish in a small, out of the way village only for want of more famous native sons. But the visitor would be quite wrong. The obscurity of the resting place contrasts with the fame and celebrity of the man. That Eliot preferred this place as opposed to the thrust of a louder monument reveals an essential quality of the man's character. But if one

therefore believed that the meaning of this resting place shows us the modesty and, even, humility of the man, this, too, would be wide of the mark. The simplicity of the ending at East Coker contrasts with a complex life and, equally, a tangle of motivations even in the simple matter of laying one's remains to rest. The symbolism of the ending in Somerset reflects the intricacies of a life that was neither simple nor straightforward, nor even modest or humble, though modesty and humility are an essential part of the story. The first complication stems from the fact that Eliot was not a native of Somerset at all. He was born on September 26, 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri on the banks of the Mississippi River in late nineteenth-century America. East Coker was primarily an imaginary origin; a genealogical fact, to be sure, but not, for all that, any the less a self-defining fiction.

Eliot was born into a prominent family with roots in Boston and the New England of the early pilgrims. His ancestors had left Somerset in the 1650s and made their way across the Atlantic to the Massachusetts colony where, over time, they established themselves as social and cultural leaders. In St. Louis the family tradition held firm and Eliot was raised to see his destiny in terms of a life dedicated to the highest cultural ideals, manifested in an ethic of service through established social and cultural institutions. Throughout his life, Eliot never lost this sense of purpose. It perhaps explains his lifelong defence of tradition and the institutions, such as the Church, a blood aristocracy, and, of course, education, that sustain it.

When Eliot was seven he began his formal education, first attending a small elementary school operated by a Mrs. Lockwood, and then, in autumn 1898, entering Smith Academy in order to prepare for university study. In St. Louis Smith was considered an educational stepping stone to the best universities. Eliot read widely as a boy and devoted himself to schoolwork; indeed, he became a model student.

In 1905, on completing the course of studies at Smith, Eliot was destined for Harvard University and to prepare for this he was enrolled at Milton Academy, a private school near Boston, which sent many young men to Harvard. This was his first experience of being away from home for an extended period. He completed his year at Milton successfully and headed for Harvard in 1906. He excelled in this new environment and would remain there until 1914, pursuing a masters degree and doctorate. His intellectual and literary activities set him apart again, but this time in ways that were more productive. Harvard, at this time, along with other Ivy League schools, was filled with the sons of rich and powerful families and Eliot found himself in the company of many young men whose interests and life choices were rarely intellectual or literary. For most of the other students, Harvard was a

youthful deferral of their espousal of the family business, a career in politics, or a life of conspicuous leisure. Yet although Eliot's scholarly pursuits and his growing intellectual vigor set him apart from the somewhat lazy and undisciplined behavior of many of his fellow students, he was not entirely alienated from their easy and uncomplicated world. He belonged to the right student clubs and societies and participated in the quotidian activities of most other students. There was no hint yet of the bohemian poet. But Harvard was more than a social club; it was also a place of learning and of serious work and, Eliot took to that side of university life like a duck to water. In keeping with the American system of undergraduate education, he read and studied widely in several different disciplines. Being a bit of a dud in sciences, he was drawn to the traditional humanities, studying the literatures of several countries, languages, history, and philosophy.

In 1910 Eliot underwent the American version of that old British coming-of-age tradition, the Grand Tour. Unlike the Grand Tour, however, the Junior Year Abroad is not a tour of Europe – primarily of France and Italy, and occasionally Greece – on which the sons of aristocrats in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries whiled away a few months among ruins and classical buildings before settling down on the family estate to while away the years making life miserable for foxes, portrait painters, wives, and, in many cases, tenant farmers. Whether the sons picked up any wisps of culture or learning on their travels was at the end of the day neither here nor there. Indeed, these richly leisured tourists usually picked up nothing more than syphilis for their troubles. The American Junior Year Abroad is a different kind of ceremonial. First of all, it needs to be earnestly educational. The idea of basking in the Roman Forum among the weeds, the broken stones, and the staring lizards simply to soak up some culture has never sat well with the American temperament. Purposeless meandering is not part of the itinerary of success. The intention of the Junior Year Abroad may be similar to the Grand Tour, that is, to give the young person an expansive cultural experience of the European inheritance, but it must be organized, certified, and on schedule.

Eliot's year abroad from Harvard was not actually a tour as such; it was mainly limited to Paris, with excursions to London and Munich, but more importantly it was a year of serious study. In September 1910 he set out from America for the Sorbonne to study French literature, which in his case meant, among many authors, a steady and concentrated reading of Charles Baudelaire, Jules Laforgue, and Tristan Corbière, to all of whom Arthur Symons in a little book on French poetry had given Eliot an introduction.[1] Like many other students and people of fashion in Paris, he also attended the lectures of the preeminent French philosopher of his day, Henri Bergson, at

the Collège de France. He took French conversation lessons from Alain-Fournier, the author of a magical work of fiction called *Le Grande Meaulnes* (1913), a novel that evokes with dreamy lyricism an idyllic France. He made a close friend of another young Frenchman, a medical student named Jean Verdenal who lived in the same student *pension* as Eliot. Both these friends died in the First World War. Verdenal's death was a particularly heavy blow, and Eliot's homage to his friend was expressed in the dedication of his first book of poetry in 1917.

On his return to Boston in 1911, Eliot finished his first degree and moved on to a masters. He now seemed headed for an academic career as a philosopher, much to the delight of his father and family in general. Privately he was writing verses – mainly in fragments – while he concentrated on philosophy. It was during his M.A. studies that he attended a seminar by the British philosopher Bertrand Russell. Russell had come to Harvard as a visiting professor in 1914 and Eliot impressed him enough as a student for the famous philosopher to mention him in a letter to one of his closest English friends, Lady Ottoline Morrell, who was, in turn, to figure large in Eliot's life as well when he arrived in England in the late summer of 1914. In that letter Russell recorded being struck by Eliot's intellectual strengths and his taste, but he felt that Eliot was "ultra-civilized" and lacking in "vigour or life – or enthusiasm."[2] By that time Eliot was already looking ahead to doctoral work and a period of philosophical travel in Europe was already in the works. Russell, knowing that Oxford University was one of the stops on this intellectual itinerary, thought him well suited emotionally to that ancient seat of learning.

In the summer of 1914, bearing his new M.A. degree and with doctoral work ahead, Eliot took up a Sheldon Traveling Fellowship for a year's study at Merton College, Oxford, with Harold Joachim, the preeminent interpreter of F. H. Bradley's philosophical work, about which Eliot was to write his doctoral thesis. But before arriving at Oxford, he alighted in Europe early in the summer for some touring. This was part two of the Junior Year Abroad, and again education was as important as simple sightseeing. He was enrolled on a summer program of study at Marburg University in Germany, but on his way to Marburg he stopped in Belgium and Italy, visiting galleries and other tourist sights. He looked at paintings, visited monuments, and was mildly admiring of castles, chateaux, and stately homes.

By mid-July he had arrived in Marburg and was just settling into his course of study when the political crisis that would lead to the First World War made a German sojourn no longer possible. As war clouds gathered he deserted Marburg and arrived in London just as the ultimatums mounting among the

Western powers spilled over into declarations of war. Eliot took rooms in Bloomsbury and began to make the acquaintance of other writers and poets. Conrad Aiken, a Harvard friend and aspiring writer, had been in London the year before and had spoken to a number of people about Eliot; indeed, he had shown an early version of his poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" to Harold Munro, the proprietor of the Poetry Bookshop, who had judged the poem "absolutely insane."[3] More productively, Aiken had shown the poem to another expatriate American living in London, Ezra Pound, and had received a quite different assessment. He had therefore written to Eliot urging him to contact Pound while he was in London before going down to Oxford for the autumn term in October.

This was the year in which Eliot met a young woman, Vivien Haigh-Wood, who visited Oxford occasionally to see friends there. Much to the dismay of their families, they married after a whirlwind three-month courtship. The man responsible for introducing them was another American studying at Oxford, Scofield Thayer. Eliot had known him at Milton Academy and Harvard and Thayer would later play an important role in the early 1920s in bringing to the light of day Eliot's first great poem, *The Waste Land* (1922). It appears, that Vivien was Eliot's first experience of intimacy with a woman. At first he was attracted by her youthful vivacity but later, when the extent of her ill health became evident, his relationship to her changed dramatically.

A bohemian life, 1915–1922

Eliot and Vivien were an odd couple from the start. The quiet, studious, highly self-conscious philosopher-poet with impeccable manners found himself in the constant company of a chirpy, nervous woman suffering from both physical and psychological ailments. When well, she was animated and lively, with a taste for night life, the theater, dancing, and dining out. When ill, she was sunk in a sodden depression. For a time Eliot tried to keep up with her, but it was a losing battle and he became increasingly conscious of his inadequacy. Indeed, he may have contributed to her depression, as he grew more remote and reserved; cold and distant might be another way of putting it. As a result, she sought solace in the company of others. It is difficult to know what kind of sexual relationship they had, but it could not have been a satisfying one. It is clear now that after a time, with her marriage sinking into desuetude, Vivien entered into a sexual relationship with Russell. It is not clear whether Eliot was dismayed by this or relieved. It was probably a bit of both. Her health deteriorated in the years after their marriage and she soon

became a somewhat pathetic creature, having to endure the sympathy of her own friends and, worse, of her husband's friends and colleagues.

There has always been rumor and speculation about Eliot's influence on his wife's health, especially her mental equilibrium. It has been said, and recently repeated in a biography of Vivien,[4] that Eliot's emotional apathy, his coldness of affection or lack of feeling, undermined her sense of wellbeing and, in daily increments of disaffection, drove her mad. Without a doubt, Eliot was not an emotionally demonstrative person and this has sometimes been interpreted as a debilitating remoteness that shut his wife, and others, out of his inner life. Yet it cannot be said that Eliot was without emotions; he was a man of profound feeling and, in many respects, a man of passion. He was also highly concerned about his wife's ill health on a day-to-day basis. He stood by her in those early years of the marriage and served her devotedly. Indeed, it is a matter of record among his friends and acquaintances at the time that he went far beyond what was required in helping Vivien to cope with her ailments. He sacrificed a good deal of his time to taking care of her needs, time that he could have devoted to his writing. In this he was unselfish, and not just in this special instance of husbandly responsibility. He was not a selfish man, and although not generous in sharing his feelings with others, he was generous in many other ways.

The difficulties of the marriage were not restricted to the physical and emotional health of the couple. The Eliots, now living in London, were also constantly in need of money. They were not poor, but making ends meet during the First World War proved a full-time occupation. Russell, a man of means, helped a little with funds, and some money came from America, but not enough. Eliot was put in the position of having to earn his living, and he turned to teaching and lecturing. He was not happy in these occupations and, although he did an adequate job, not particularly successful. He was not a natural teacher for whom personal magnetism might compensate for a certain weakness of pedagogical technique. It seems he had little of either. He was, in the essentials of human intercourse, an invisible man, always having to be in character, as if he were wearing a mask. Perhaps it was temperamental, perhaps a species of protective covering for a shy, self-conscious, despairing man. This doubleness of personality, commented on by many who knew him, would become in later years a source of profound consternation for friends.

In addition to teaching, Eliot took to book reviewing as a way of supplementing his income. At this he was far more successful than he was at teaching, not in terms of income but in terms of experience. He reviewed for a number of journals but principally for the *Times Literary Supplement*

and, through Russell's good offices, the *International Journal of Ethics* and the *New Statesman*. Some of his most important critical and literary historical formulations, later developed into essays of great consequence, were first adumbrated in these periodicals. The reviewing business had a number of other beneficial effects. For one thing, he had the opportunity to read widely in a number of fields and to keep abreast of developments in philosophy and adjacent disciplines after his professional interest in philosophy began to decline. Reviewing also clarified his writing style, stripping from it the remaining mannerisms of the academy. Literary journalism gave him an opportunity to talk directly to other writers, editors, and critics of London's literary scene. Unlike the cloistered virtues of scholarship, the literary review thrust Eliot into the commotion of public debate. On this new terrain he honed a polemical style of great power and authority. Apart from his subsequent influence as a literary critic and theorist, his refinement of several writerly virtues – clarity, concision, concreteness – made him, in addition to his poetry, one of the great prose stylists of the twentieth century.

Teaching could provide sufficient income to survive, but it required a greater personal commitment and level of energy than Eliot was able to give it. He did owe teaching one important influence on his prose style, however. In his critical writings he adopted, as a kind of satirical mask, the schoolmasterly fastidiousness in definition of terms (see the opening pages of *The Sacred Wood*, on the words "organized" and "activity"). This early concern with denotative precision was one small step in creating a professional critical persona. Slowly, the schoolmasterly manner evolved into the more serious persona of cultural sage. But that was to come much later. In order to establish a more authoritative gravity than was possible with the droll figure of the tsk-tsking schoolmaster, Eliot had to pass, somewhat improbably, through the world of banking and business. Vivien's family connections helped Eliot to find a place with Lloyds Bank in the financial heart of the British capital, the area known as the City. In March 1917 he joined the Colonial and Foreign Department and began an eight-year career in banking. It was a secure job with a good income, less taxing than teaching, and with an aura of respectability that contrasted rather unusually with Eliot's activities as a poet, especially a poet with bohemian affiliations. Within a few months of joining Lloyds, his first book of poems, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock and Other Observations*, was published by the Egoist Press, under the control of Harriet Shaw Weaver, a patron of the avant-garde arts. *Prufrock*, as one of the key books of early modernist literature, had been preceded at the press by two other modernist classics, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and Wyndham Lewis's *Tarr* (1916).

Eliot's work at the bank continued to provide him with a steady income as his literary activities increased in volume and significance. He began to appear regularly in the literary periodicals and reviews. At Pound's urging he accepted an assistant editor's position with the *Egoist* magazine, and he also contributed to it. His circle of friends and colleagues in London widened and soon he was on friendly enough terms with Leonard and Virginia Woolf to have them publish under their Hogarth Press imprint his next book of poems, called simply *Poems*, in June 1919. The volume was also published in America by the most important publisher of modernist work in New York, Alfred Knopf. This volume gathered together his most recent work, including a small number of French poems that brought the influence of the *symbolistes* to fruition. The book also contained poems written in traditional quatrain stanzas, the product of experiments in verse that Eliot and Pound conducted as together they studied the prosodic sophistication of the nineteenth-century French poet Théophile Gauthier.

With the composition of "Gerontion" in the spring of 1919, Eliot entered one of his most fertile periods, culminating in the publication of his greatest early poem, *The Waste Land*. His personal life was by then a shambles, his marriage clearly a failure. Both his health and Vivien's had deteriorated. Eliot's ailments were psychological and emotional; worry and exhaustion led to bouts of depression as well as severe headaches all through 1919 and 1920, though occasional trips to France helped to invigorate him and contact with other pioneering writers of his generation, such as Lewis, Joyce, Pound, and others, afforded him the right kind of literary conversation and contacts. Yet he was never able to shake off the depression entirely. The routine life of the banker, though stable, rankled. It took up a great deal of time, time that could have been devoted to writing. For some, this emotional climate might have dried up the creative juices. Eliot did occasionally slip into arid periods, but, oddly, between 1919 and 1922 he was remarkably productive. In 1919, he composed "Gerontion" and other fragments that eventually became *The Waste Land*.

With the end of the First World War in 1918, Eliot's financial and domestic position had not changed. Worries over money, his wife's abdominal disorders, her increasingly fragile mental state, and his own feelings of nervous exhaustion fed a growing sense of despair. The immediate postwar situation in Britain and Europe added to the sense of collapse and chaos. In a letter to Richard Aldington, a writer friend, Eliot expressed fear and loathing of the contemporary social and economic scene. In this gloomy atmosphere he began work on pulling together the fragments of a long poem that he called, provisionally, "He Do the Police in Different Voices."

The title came from a phrase in one of his favourite novels, Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, which he would use again in *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939). He was working on the poem in late 1920 and early 1921. By February 1921 he had already shown what was then a four-part poem to friends. He was still at work on it in the summer when his mother Charlotte and sister Marian arrived from America for a visit. He had hoped to have made progress, indeed even to have finished it, by June, but the poem was proving unruly. He struggled with it into the autumn, but was still not satisfied. His life grew increasingly complicated and this interfered with the creative process.

His mother's visit was a distraction in a number of ways. His American relations were not happy with his decision to stay in England and they held Vivien partly responsible for this. The relationship between his wife and his mother was fraught with palpable dislike. There was tension also between Charlotte and some of Eliot's artistic friends and acquaintances. The sober Puritan from New England did not like the rather more colorful members of her son's acquaintance. These strains made it very clear to Eliot that he had, for good or ill, slipped out of the emotional and intellectual orbit of his family in America. Yet it was also clear to him that he had not as yet entered into a new sphere of national and cultural loyalties either. He was, as it were, a figure in exile in England, a resident alien, or to use his term for this condition, *metoikos*. This Greek word referred to residents of a Greek city, say Athens, who had the right to live and work in the city but, because they were foreigners, did not have full citizenship rights. Although Eliot would eventually integrate more fully into British life, this sense of being an outsider, a *metoikos*, never left him completely.

These domestic issues were not the only impediments to the completion of the new poem. In the summer one of Eliot's friends, Sidney Schiff, introduced him to the wife of the proprietor of a major London newspaper, the *Daily Mail*. Lady Rothermere fancied herself an important patron of the arts and was particularly interested in the founding of a literary review, among other possible ventures. She saw in Eliot a potential editor and he was interested in a venture that would give him access to a periodical. Through it he could propagate not only his ideas about literary criticism but, and perhaps, more significantly for him, his ideas about social and cultural life as well. He was still relatively young, keenly intelligent, well connected in avant-garde circles, and, from the perspective of a rich patron, a reliable man, a steady employee of Lloyds Bank. Although the conversations and negotiations with Lady Rothermere were not easy, they were concluded more or less successfully and the first number of the new review

was scheduled for January 1922. In fact, it was not launched until October of that year.

As the summer of 1921 progressed, the unfinished long poem still hung over his head. As well as the domestic and literary distractions, there were important aesthetic experiences that helped to shape the work to come. One was Eliot's awareness of Joyce's *Ulysses*, which was in the process of being readied for publication that summer. Eliot knew of its content and method from personal contact with Joyce. It was the book's method that particularly caught his eye. In a subsequent review, after the novel's publication in February 1922, Eliot wrote that Joyce's greatest achievement was his use of the "mythic method," that is, the use of ancient myth as a way of looking at the present time.[5] It was a way of making sense of or bringing order to the chaos and confusion of the contemporary world. This insight had far-reaching consequences, both for our understanding of the nature and status of myth and for the evolution of a cultural conservatism that took the inherited conservatism of blood, land, and tradition to a new extreme. It was an insight that would reach its most toxic form in the myth-drenched politics of European fascism.

Myth was also at the core of Eliot's other memorable aesthetic experience in that fateful summer. He attended a performance of Igor Stravinsky's ballet *Le Sacre de Printemps* and he afterward reported that at its conclusion he was overwhelmed, so much so that he stood up and cheered. The primeval pulse, expressed in the music's rhythm and dissonance, running like an electric current through the piece, seemed to make the very same ancient connection as *Ulysses*, but in sonic terms. All the triviality, perplexity, and muddled turmoil of the modern world were for a moment swept aside by an artistic vision grounded in an ancient fertility ritual by the brusque beating of a primitive drum. This alertness to the proximity of the primitive and contemporary had its origins no doubt in his experiences of late nineteenth-century Missouri. With frontier society still within living memory, the fusion of savage and city, as Robert Crawford has suggested, provided Eliot not only with an important theme but also with a whole way of perceiving modernity.[6]

With the coming of autumn, Eliot had still not made sufficient progress on "He Do the Police in Different Voices." A very bad bout of flu had been followed in September by a series of migraine-like cluster headaches. He was physically very tired and suffering from anxiety disorders bordering on panic attacks. His doctor feared that he was heading for a nervous breakdown of some kind and advised that he take a three-month rest cure. Eliot, though reluctant at first, decided to heed this advice. The bank gave him a three-month leave of absence in October and Eliot and Vivien went to Margate on