

**Spears Brooker, Jewel (ed.) (2004): *T.S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews*. Cambridge University Press, 600 pp.**

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This is the tenth volume in the American Critical Archives series, a collection of reference books that provide selections of contemporary reviews of major American authors. The series, which began in 1992 with a volume devoted to Emerson and Thoreau, has recently published volumes on Louisa May Alcott's (2004) and Eudora Welty's (2005) works. As Thomas Inge, the series editor, states in his Preface, this collection takes up the challenge of "document[ing] a part of a writer's career that is usually difficult to examine, that is, the immediate response to each work as it was made public by reviewers in contemporary newspapers and journals" (xi). The reviews collected in these volumes are essential reading for anyone interested in these authors' criticism and reception.

*T. S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews* is edited by Jewel Spears Brooker, one of Eliot's most prestigious scholars and the author of *Mastery and Escape: T.S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism* (1994). Although the editor acknowledges the value of earlier collections of reviews, namely Michael Grant's *T.S. Eliot: The Critical Heritage* (1982) and Graham Clarke's *T.S. Eliot: Critical Assessments* (1990), she claims her assemblage to be the most comprehensive one done so far (xxxviii). The book consists of twenty-three sections each of which includes reviews of one single work of poetry, drama or prose, followed by a checklist of additional reviews arranged in chronological order, which are not included due to space constraints. All Eliot's work is included, from *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) to his play *The Elder Statesman* (1959), except for a few brief pamphlets like *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, and late collections of previously published work. The reviews included have been published in Britain or/and the United States, to the exclusion of other English speaking countries like New Zealand or Canada. The criteria guiding Brooker's choice of reviews are varied, ranging from the reviewer's importance in Eliot's career or in the scholarly assessment of his work (Ezra Pound, Conrad Aiken; Cleanth Brooks, Helen Gardner), or their anticipation of subsequent opinion (Edmund Wilson, Gilbert Seldes); to the original, provocative or insightful character of the review itself. Reviews of specific works are preceded by a substantial introduction to the history of Eliot's critical reception and the main debates that have shaped discussions of his work. This introduction proves very useful to map out the vast gathering of reviews that follows.

The richness of Brooker's work lies in the fact that each review cluster displays different, often conflicting, responses to a given work. The *Prufrock and Other Observations* section features reviews by Conrad Aiken, Ezra Pound, Arthur Waugh, Edgar Jepson and William Carlos Williams, among others. These early responses to Eliot's work signal the debates that will shape subsequent criticism. Whereas Jepson sees his poetry as quintessentially American, "Mr T.S. Eliot is United States of the United States"

(15), Williams retaliates that Prufrock is too sophisticated and stereotypical to be a “New World type” (17). Whereas Aiken and Pound celebrate the newness of Eliot’s poetry, Waugh shows outrage at the “unmetrical, incoherent banalities of these literary Cubists” (4). Aiken describes his work as “psychological realism in a highly subjective or introspective vein” (9), questioning the objectivity and impersonality claimed by Pound and Eliot himself.

Throughout her volume, Brooker highlights the mixed nature of the responses to Eliot, probably making the point that critics have been unable to reconcile the different facets and skills of such a complex author. That Eliot spent much of the late half of his career writing plays and trying to reach an increasingly broader audience for them definitely enlarges our understanding of the author of *The Wasteland*. Not surprisingly, his revival of the poetic drama for the modern stage, specially his Broadway hit *The Cocktail Party*, generated mixed reviews. Generally praised for making poetic drama accessible to a contemporary audience and for adjusting it to modern themes, *The Cocktail Party* has been criticised for being “insufficiently poetic”, in the words of critic Brooks Atkinson (526). In the same vein, baffled by the play’s success in Broadway, William Barret argues, “the question is whether he has not succeeded by so sugar-coating his pill that very little of poetic substance remains” (532). Some critics like William Carlos Williams, however, have acknowledged the adequacy of Eliot’s poetic standards to his plays, as the title of his review “It’s About Your Life and Mine, Darling” (527) suggests. Intimations of such versatility can already be seen in the melange of styles and registers that Eliot features in *The Wasteland*.

The publication of *T. S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews* shows that traditional scholarship still coexists with projects of a more deconstructive nature in the field of American Studies. The volume provides some ‘solid’ ground in a time when the work of T.S. Eliot, alongside with that of other major American authors like Henry James, is being recontextualised. As Malcolm Bradbury has said, critics of American literature keep interrogating its nature and origin “with a deep deconstructive passion” (1996: 55). In her own career, Brooker has been able to combine traditional scholarship of the type required by the American Critical Archive series with new trends in criticism as those reflected in her edition *T.S. Eliot in Our Turning World* (2001), whose contributors examine Eliot’s engagement with race, feminism, homoeroticism and popular culture in his work. Some of the contributors to this volume have subsequently published innovative studies such as *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (2003), where David Chinitz dismisses Eliot’s elitism as a postmodern distortion of his work, questioning Modernism’s and Eliot’s detachment from popular culture. The volume’s front cover aptly features a picture of theater-goers standing in line to see Eliot’s Broadway hit *A Cocktail Party*. Cassandra Laity and Nancy Gish’s *Gender, Desire and Sexuality in T.S. Eliot* (2004) follows the same deconstructive trend. Even if at times the ongoing recontextualization of Eliot may tell us more about the new trends in criticism than about Eliot’s own authorial intentions, these works broaden the meaning of his work, increase its currency and make it appealing to twenty-first century readers. Yet traditional scholarship like *T. S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews* continues to be essential for anyone seeking to understand Eliot’s work, cultural milieu, and to chart

the course of his reputation in the first half of the twentieth century.

#### Works Cited

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