

The Intellectual and Religious Development of T. S. Eliot
 Reflected in Selected Readings of His Poetry
 with Emphasis on *Ash Wednesday*
 by David Naugle

Introduction

In the Preface to *For Lancelot Andrews* (1928), T. S. Eliot declared his faith to the world in his now famous *pronunciamento* in which he proclaimed himself to be "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion."¹ The way by which Eliot arrived at this "three-toned annunciation"² was indeed circuitous, especially religiously. Before arriving at his anglo-catholic destination, he had traveled by way of Indian thought and the philosophy of the English metaphysician F. H. Bradley. But it was his anglo-catholicism which saw him through to the end. The purpose of this paper is trace T. S. Eliot's intellectual and religious development through these three stages and to see how each stage is reflected in his poetry. This will be accomplished through selected readings of various poems culminating in and focusing upon *Ash Wednesday* which clearly embodies elements of his anglo-catholic position.

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 of T. S. Eliot: Reflected in Selected Readings
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Though it is possible to ascertain numerous influences on Eliot and his writings,³ Indian, Bradleyean, and Christian thought predominate. "Eliot presented the credentials

¹ Preface to *For Lancelot Andrews* (1928). Eliot later regretted at least the manner if not the substance of this pronouncement. Babbitt, he said, when the two of them met in London had chastised him for not making his positions plain to the public and this rapprochement led to this proclamatory expression. See Elisabeth Schneider, *T. S. Eliot: The Pattern in the Carpet*, p. 112 for the background to and nature of this statement and its impact on Eliot's poetry, especially *Ash Wednesday*.

² Roger Kojecky, *T. S. Eliot's Social Criticism*, p. 71.

³ "The most conspicuous influences on his works are: the family, Donne and the Metaphysicals and the Jacobean, the French Symbolists, Dante, Irving Babbitt, Santayana, Josiah Royce, F. H. Bradley, Bergson, German

of a wide-ranging poetic sensibility by incorporating in his writings not only the 'best' of European culture but also of Indian thought." ¹ With this we shall begin.

Indian thought in the poetry of T. S. Eliot

Eliot's interest in Indian thought came largely through the influence of his teachers at Harvard, most notably Irving Babbitt, Charles Lanman, and James Woods. The most important influence in Eliot's Harvard days seems to have been Irving Babbitt whose "system of thought was based upon the study of the Pali manuscripts, the earliest authentic Buddhist documents."² Eliot later commented that in Babbitt he found not merely a tutor, "but a man who directed my interests, at a particular moment, in such a way that the marks of that direction are still evident."³ After studying for one year in Paris which was a center for Sanskrit studies, Eliot, back at Harvard in September 1911, studied ancient Hindu literature and scriptures for two years under the guidance of Charles Lanman and also applied himself to the reading of Patanjali's *Yoga-Sutras* under the tutelage of James Woods. After the spring of 1913, Eliot ceased to study the documents from the East which, nevertheless, made a lasting

phenomenologists, Ezra Pound, T. E. Hulme, Wyndham Lewis, Middleton Murry, Rémy de Gourmont, The Criterion circles, primitive ritual and Christianity, and the Indian Scriptures." See A. N. Dwivedi, *T. S. Eliot's Major Poems: An Indian Interpretation*, pp. 1-2. These influences are also discussed in Kristian Smidt, *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T. S. Eliot*, pp. 1-33 and in Herbert Howarth, *Notes on Some Figures Behind T. S. Eliot*.

¹ Dwivedi, p. 1. For additional sources dealing with Eastern influence on Eliot, see G. Nageswara Rao, "A Famous Poet and Student of Sanskrit," *The Literary Criterion* 8 (Winter 1967); B. N. Chaturvedi, "The Indian Background of Eliot's Poetry," *English* 15 (Autumn 1965).

² E. L. Mayo, "The Influence of Ancient Hindu Thought on Walt Whitman and T. S. Eliot." *The Aryan Path* 29 (1958): 173.

³ Quoted in Dwivedi, p. 5.

impression on him. In his Page-Borbour lectures which he gave at the University of Virginia in 1933 he made these comments about his courtship with the East:

Two years spent in the study of Sanskrit under Charles Lanman, and a year in the mazes of Patanjali's metaphysics under the guidance of James Woods, left me in a state of enlightened mystification. A good half of the effort of understanding what the Indian philosophers were after--and their subtleties make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys--lay in trying to erase from my mind all the categories and kinds of distinction common to European philosophy from the time of the Greeks. My previous and concomitant study of European philosophy was hardly better than an obstacle. And I came to the conclusion--seeing also that the influence of Brahmin and Buddhist thought upon Europe, as in Schopenhauer, Hartmann, and Deussen, had largely been through romantic misunderstanding--that my only hope of really penetrating to the heart of that mystery would lie in forgetting how to think and feel as an American or a European: which, for practical as well as sentimental reasons I did not wish to do.¹

This comment clearly shows the relationship of Eliot with Indian thought and religion. His approach to it, as described by Jain, was one of "an intellectual identification combined with an emotional detachment."²

A reading of Eliot's poetry reflects the contribution and influence of the ideas and wisdom of ancient India. As Narasimhaiah said of him, "but for Indian thought and sensibility he would have written altogether different kind of poetry."³ In his poetry, references may be found to the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Patanjali's *Yoga-Sutras*, and Buddhist literature. I will present one of the most famous examples of Indian thought in Eliot's poetry as it is found in *The Waste Land*.⁴

¹ T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, pp. 40-41.

² Sushil Kumar Jain, "Indian Elements in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot." *The Aryan Path* 40 (1969): 67.

³ C. D. Narashimhaiah, "Introduction," to *Indian Response to American Literature*, p. 5.

⁴ For the Indian influence in *The Waste Land*, see C. D. Narasimhaiah, "An Indian Footnote to T. S. Eliot Scholarship on the Waste Land," *The Literary Criterion* 10 (Summer 1972): 80; G. N. Rao, "The Upanishads in the Waste Land," in *Asian Response to American Literature*.

In *The Waste Land* there are two well-known examples of Hindu influence both coming at the end of the poem in the section entitled "What the Thunder Said." At the very end we find the triple use of the word "*shantih*" which is "both Vedic in origin and Upanishadic in content."¹ In his notes on *The Waste Land*, Eliot himself offers this explanation of the word: "Shantih. Repeated as here, a formal ending to an Upanishad. 'The Peace which passeth understanding' is our equivalent to this word."²

Preceding this word and yet in the same context is the threefold message of the thunder—*Da Da Da* which Eliot drew from the *Brihadaran-yaka Upanishad* (5,1). These three words stand for *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, *Damyata*, respectively meaning "Give, Sympathize, Control." In the Upanishadic context, the meaning is symbolic. The terms sum up Prajapati's teaching to three kinds of his disciples, gods, men and demons. After their formal education, they ask him what kind of virtues they should obtain to lead a meaningful life and Prajapati responds with the same word, *Da*, three times each with a different meaning. To the gods it means *Damyata* -control yourself; to the men it conveys *Datta* -give in; and to the demons it suggests *Dayadhvam* -be compassionate. These words at the end of the poem, along with *shantih*, have elicited numerous interpretations. Dwivedi suggests that

the clear-cut hint of Eliot in using this highly symbolically event from the Upanishad is at the prevailing sterility in the *Waste Land*, which can hardly be turned into an oasis unless the virtues exhorted by Prajapati are earnestly

¹ Dwivedi, p. 10.

² Elizabeth Drew thinks that "it is impossible to feel peace in the concluding passage. It is a formal ending only." See her book, *T. S. Eliot, the Design of His Poetry*, p. 116. Narayana K. Chandra in "'Shantih' in The Waste Land," *American Literature* 61 (December 1989): 681-3, believes that the last line is fragmented in the sense that "'Shantih' becomes a benediction only when 'Om' precedes it" and "as a poet whose ear was ever so finely attuned to the resonance of the word, Eliot could hardly have missed the mystical nuances of the Hindu Word." He concludes that the poem itself, like the ending, is "a medley of half-heard echoes from a variety of literatures."

practised by mankind. It shows also that Eliot wanted the poetic fragments of the Hindu Scriptures incorporated in *The Waste Land* to be read and understood in a way alien to Western habit of thought.¹

In a similar vein, it seems that for the crumbling world of Eliot's day— "Shantih, shantih, shantih,"—is the only hope drawn as it is from the wisdom of the great Indian cultural tradition. Smith offers draws together Eliot's use of *Da* and *Shantih* at the end of *The Waste Land* and makes this observation: "Over against the prospect of its irremediable calamity stands the counsel of the Aryan myth, to give, sympathize, and be controlled, that all may come at length to peace."² When peace is established in the world, Hieronymo's madness will be defeated and peace will eliminate calamity and lead to God.

Whatever the precise meaning of these terms, it is clear that Eliot wanted them to be understood in an eastern rather than in western sense. As Aiken has asked:

Why, again, *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, *Damyata* ? Or *Shantih* ? Do they not say a good deal less for us than 'Give: sympathize: control' or 'Peace'? Of course; but Mr. Eliot replies that he wants them not merely to mean those particular things, but also to mean them in a particular way—that is, to be remembered in connection with a *Upanishad* .³

In other words, Eliot's concern in *The Waste Land* was universal and he expresses his concern for world peace as the remedy to the inferno of modern life in Hindu terms to convey his global outlook. Dwivedi concludes his Indian interpretation of *The Waste Land* on this exact note.

It appears from the bulk of *The Waste Land* that the poet was terribly moved by the chaotic world-order created by the World War I,—the result of 'modern millions live alone'. To escape from this lamentable situation, he turns to the wisdom of

¹ Ibid., p. 11.

² Grover Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning*, p. 98.

³ Conrad Aiken, "An Anatomy of Melancholy," *The Sewanee Review* 74 special issue (Winter 1966): 193.

India. Further, the poet of *The Waste Land* "speculates on human destiny" which concerns the entire globe, and which transcends the man-made barriers of caste and creed, of colour and sex, of nationality and religion. The inclusion of Hindu religion and thought in *The Waste Land* constitutes a part of the poet's international outlook.¹

At this point a significant question arises, namely, why did Eliot give up his pursuit of Indian religions and philosophies? Two answers are possible. One, as he said in his lecture to the University of Virginia quoted above, he was not prepared to give up his American and European identity "for practical and sentimental reasons." Two and perhaps more importantly, in June of 1913 Eliot purchased a copy of F. H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* at the Coop in Harvard Square and from that time on he was thoroughly absorbed in the study of Bradley's philosophy. As Howarth has said, "The withdrawal from Indics was an act of radicalism."² To the influence of Bradleyianism on Eliot's poetry we will now turn.

The philosophy of F. H. Bradley in the poetry of T. S. Eliot

Though some critics believe that F. H. Bradley, the "British neo-Hegelian," was only of marginal influence on the poetry and criticism of T. S. Eliot,³ there are a number

¹ Dwivedi, p. 57. The internal quotation is from A. G. George, *T. S. Eliot: His Mind and Art*, p. 118.

² Howarth, p. 208. Dwivedi points out, however, that despite the radical break with Indian and related thought, its influence remained nevertheless. "The withdrawal [from Indian ideas] cannot be said to have been total. *The Waste Land* (1922), . . . definitely incorporates in its texture some accurate Sanskrit words pregnant with symbolic significance and pointed relevance. Stray references to Indian philosophy continue to appear in Eliot's poetry until the climax is struck in *Four Quartets*, "To the Indians Who Died in Africa," and *The Cocktail Party* (a poetic play). Even a casual reading of these works convinces one that the poet could never write off his school-day impressions of Indian religions and philosophies, and that his interest in them revived when he came to compose his poetry" (p. 18).

³ Lewis Freed in his book *T. S. Eliot: The Critic as Philosopher*, pp. 44-45 shows that writers such as Herbert Howarth, (*Notes on Some Figures behind T. S. Eliot*, 1965), Northrop Frye (*T. S. Eliot*, 1963) and John D. Margolis (*T. S.*

of writers who believe that Bradley's impact was substantial. Freed believes that "Bradley is not a marginal but a central influence on Eliot as critic"¹ and Bolgan who wrote her dissertation on Eliot's involvement with Bradleyian metaphysics ["Bradley is the way to understand Eliot" and "there is no easier way"] states the following in the introduction to her thesis.

It is the specific objective of this dissertation to assert that every major critical concept which appears in Mr. Eliot's literary criticism—many of which initiated such stubborn controversies—emerges from his radical absorption in and criticism of Bradley's philosophy, and the content of my dissertation is but a demonstration of the way in which these notions and concepts originate in Bradley, are digested and recorded by Eliot as he writes his own Ph. D. dissertation between 1914 and 1916 and reappear beginning a year or two later, now in new, full, literary dress in Mr. Eliot's reviews and essays.²

But of all commentators, Kristian Smidt is the most forceful in his acknowledgment of Bradley's influence on Eliot, and not only as a critic but especially as a poet. He writes

We are not surprised to find that the philosophy which seems to have exercised the strongest influence on Eliot's poetry is that which he studied with the greatest application, namely that of Francis Herbert Bradley, particularly Bradley's theory of knowledge. His entire poetical output may be regarded, if one chooses, as a quest for knowledge—not necessarily of a rational kind—and one frequently recognizes in it Bradley's ideas in poetic costume. They are often indistinguishable from those of Royce and other Idealists, but, recognizing the

Eliot's Intellectual Development, 1972) give short shrift to the role that Bradley played in Eliot's philosophico-religious quest.

¹ Freed, p. 45. In addition to the citations in the text of this paper, the following writers also believe that Bradley's Ideal Absolutism was of great importance to Eliot. E. P. Bollier, "T. S. Eliot and F. H. Bradley: A Question of Influence." *Tulane Studies in English* 12 (1962): 87-111; J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality*, pp. 131-89; George Whiteside, "T. S. Eliot's Dissertation," *ELH* 34 (1967): 400-24.

² Anne C. Blogan, "What the Thunder Said: Mr. Eliot's Philosophical Writings," (Toronto, 1960), quoted by Freed, p. 44. The inserted quotation in the introductory sentence is from Anne C. Bolgan, "The Philosophy of F. H. Bradley and the Mind and Art of T. S. Eliot," p. 257 also quoted by Freed, p. xvii.

importance of Bradley to Eliot, we may let his name stand for them all where they are in general agreement.¹

Best of all are Eliot's own words to the effect of Bradley on his work. In "To Criticize the Critic" Eliot wrote, "But I am certain of one thing: that I have written best about writers who have influenced my own poetry. And I say 'writers' and not 'poets,' because I include F. H. Bradley, whose works—I might say whose personality as manifest in his works—affected me profoundly."²

Thus the significance of Bradley on Eliot's poetry is hard to escape. Consequently, Bradley's metaphysics is of great importance if we are to understand those portions of Eliot's poetry that reflect it.

Bradley's metaphysics is primarily set forth in *Appearance and Reality* (1893) the main argument of which is quite simple. It is divided into two books the first of which is entitled "Appearance" and is about the contradictory character of mere appearances. Certain common-sense concepts (e.g., relation, cause, space, time, etc.) are declared to be self-contradictory and are in consequence "degraded to the rank of mere appearances." Book II is entitled "Reality" and is about the Absolute. Acton summarizes Bradley's notion of the Absolute or Reality in these words.

¹ Smidt, p. 129. That Eliot's "entire poetical output may be regarded, if one chooses, as a quest for knowledge," is a fact reiterated by George T. Wright, *The Poet in the Poem*, pp. 63-64, who asserts that "among all the possible roles, Eliot has chosen mainly to portray that of the quester, man in his role as seeker for meaning, truth, reality, virtue, the good life. All the events of Eliot's verse take their meaning from their relationship to this quest, and all the characters must be interpreted according to the ways in which they fulfill this role." And additionally, "He sees man as primarily engaged in a quest, seeking, through the various modes of conventional activity, satisfactory terms on which to live with the cosmos."

² T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings*, p. 20. In harmony with Eliot's own words is Thompson (p. xxi) who believes that "Eliot's beginning as a poet is a philosophical standpoint; Eliot's philosophical education was ultimately motivated by the need to be a poet; and Eliot's unique achievement is to be a philosopher poet in an age of unbelief."

In Book II, it is argued that if it is being self-contradictory that degrades mere appearances, then reality must at least be not self-contradictory, but consistent and harmonious. Furthermore, reality must also be of the nature of experience, for what is not experience cannot be conceived of without self-contradiction. Finally it is clear that reality must be comprehensive and include all that is. If reality is a consistent and harmonious and all inclusive experience, then it cannot be a plurality of independent reals, for whatever is related to anything else must be to some extent dependent on it. Plurality and relatedness are but features and aspects of unity.¹

Bradley's philosophy provided much for Eliot. As Kenner says, "A view of the past, a view of himself and other persons, a view of the nature of what we call statement and communication: these delivered Eliot from what might have well been, after a brilliant beginning, a cul-de-sac and silence." Kirk suggests that Bradley helped Eliot see that the past is not a frozen thing, but lives in on individuals; that he provided Eliot with defenses against the prevalent utilitarianism of his age and with arguments that distinguish the person and the claims of art and science from the claims of social life; that he gave Eliot a glimpse of the Self as distinguished from what is customarily called personality; and finally he led Eliot toward an understanding that the world is real, but the self perceives the world only in a glass darkly.² These Bradleyan ideas served as a groundwork on which Eliot constructed the edifices of much of his poetry. And as Smidt notes, "It is remarkable that the main line of development of Eliot's poetry follows the main trend of Bradley's philosophy: the early poems roughly correspond to the demonstration of everything as appearance, and the latter poems correspond to the phase, or aspect, of reality."³

¹ H. B. Acton, s.v. "Bradley, Francis Herbert," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* I: 362.

² Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, pp. 42-44.

³ Smidt, p. 137.

Perhaps one of the clearest reflections of a Bradleyan dualism between appearance and reality is found in the final section of "The Hollow Men," that poem "where the poet seems to be taking down the last gasps of the human spirit."¹ The text reads as follows:

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow

Life is very long

Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

It is possible to give a Bradleyan reading to these rather enigmatic lines, especially in the first and last portions of the preceding text. Perhaps Bradley's philosophy or at least Eliot's version of it stands in the background here. Between idea and reality falls the shadow; between the essence and the descent falls the shadow. According to Bradley/Eliot, thought or truth is not and never can be reality. There is a dualism of "that and what," of "fact and ideality," of "existence and idea." Though human thought attempts to overcome this dualism and attain to reality, it can not succeed without losing its character as thought. Bradley himself says of thought or

¹ Eric Thompson, *T. S. Eliot: The Metaphysical Perspective*, p. 132.

truth, "It implies that dualism which, involved in truth's essence, for ever stands between it and its goal."¹ Thus:

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow
For Thine is the Kingdom

Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the Shadow²
For Thine is the Kingdom

Consequently, everyone inhabits the world of appearance and in the case of the *Hollow Men*, it is a means of escaping ultimate reality. In the context of the entire poem, Kirk suggests that "these Hollow Men dare not meet those Eyes—Christ's, or the reproachful eyes of Dante's Beatrice—that would demand repentance and the ordeal of regeneration; fearful, they hide in 'death's dream kingdom,' *preferring illusion to transcendent reality*."³ And life in illusion or the world of appearance, that is, an occupation with self, things and other persons, is the barrier between man and God. As Maxwell writes,

The Shadow is the 'attachment to self and to things and to persons', of which Eliot speaks in *Little Gidding*. Particularly to self, to the gratification of personal impulses which was presented in *The Waste Land* as the barrier between man and God. With the hollow men, though, it is not even a full-blooded attachment, but rather an indifferent acceptance of the easy way. By this they behave 'as the wind behaves', blindly and without purposes aim. They experience the ideas, and motions, the conceptions and the emotions, but between them and their

¹ Quoted in Freed, p. 59.

² B. C. Southam, *A Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot*, p. 107, interprets this passage philosophically by saying that "in platonic philosophy, the essence is the inapprehensible ideal, which finds material expression in its descent to the lower, material plane of reality."

³ Kirk, p, 130 (emphasis added).

fulfillment lie indifference and surrender without thought or struggle to the least spiritual of desires.¹

"The Hollow Men" are not tragic because of the passion of their craving for what does not exist, "but the irony of human mismanagement of the craving for a transcendent reality that does exist. The theme is metaphysical blindness in a world of light."² Hence, there is a possible Bradleyan influence here in these lines in "The Hollow Men." Despite the influence of Bradley on Eliot, the occupation of at least a decade, it proved not to be the final destination for Eliot in his intellectual quest.³ There are several reasons why he departed from Bradley and ultimately embraced Anglo-Catholicism. As Whiteside concluded after his study of Eliot's dissertation,

What has this survey of Eliot's dissertation taught us about him? Many things, but in my opinion one above all: that Eliot hungered for but lacked a sense that all things form a whole. The hunger made him embrace Bradleian monism, but the lack kept him unconvinced of it. This absence of conviction can explain why Eliot eventually gave up monism. And the hunger can account for his subsequent participation in the Christian unity.⁴

Eliot's conversion to Christianity, as we shall now see, had important poetic implications for "Then he becomes a Christian and begins to write Christian poetry."⁵

Christianity and the poetry of T. S. Eliot

¹ D. E. S. Maxwell, *The Poetry of T. S. Eliot*, p. 141.

² Thompson, p. 15.

³ Smidt (p. 157) believes "that there is something like a closing of accounts with Bradley and Absolute Idealism in the *Quartets*. The human reason, which "was believed in as the most reliable" has failed."

⁴ Whiteside, p. 424 quoted by Freed, p. 51.

⁵ Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry: Vol. V, God of a Changing Poetry*, p. 564, quoted by Kirk, p. 142.

As Robert Sencourt describes it in his *T. S. Eliot: A Memoir*, Eliot asked William Force Stead, man of letters and Chaplain of Worcester College, Oxford for a favor: could he be confirmed in the Church of England? "He [Eliot] felt that through his new Trinitarian sacramentalism he would be incorporated into the supernatural life which was the goal of all the religions he had studied."¹ But Stead had to explain that it was not a matter of confirmation but of baptism to which Eliot responded: "William, I want to be baptized into the one true fold of Christ." On the afternoon of June 29, 1927, St. Peter's Day, Stead and Eliot along with theologian B. H. Streeter and historian Vere Somerset entered the little church at Finstock where the baptismal waters of regeneration were poured over the head of one of the Church's most famous converts.² On the next day, Thomas Banks Strong in the chapel at Cuddesdon confirmed Eliot in the Church.

When discussing the forces that bore on entry into the Church of England, Eliot described the decision as a process that occurred "perhaps insensibly, over a long period of time."³ At least one major factor in Eliot's considerations was the Christianity was the only religion that seemed to "work."

¹ Robert Sencourt, *T. S. Eliot: A Memoir*, p. 131. In the Foreword to this book by Donald Adamson, Sencourt himself is described as one who "also was a major influence in Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism."

² Other notables had made a journey similar to Eliot's as Kirk points out (pp. 137-38): "Eliot's journey toward Christian faith was no peculiar phenomenon in his time, of course: that pilgrimage had been or was being made, by men of letters so diverse as G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, Roy Campbell, Charles Williams, Edwin Muir, Paul Elmer More, and Evelyn Waugh."

³ Quoted in Margolis, p. 105 who also points out on page 106-07 that at least one factor in Eliot's thinking was the intellectual rigor of a religion: "We demand of religion some kind of intellectual satisfaction—both private and social—or we do not want it at all." And for Eliot, "A church is to be judged by its intellectual fruits, by its influence on the sensibility of the most sensitive and on the intellect of the most intelligent, and it must be made real to the eye by monuments of artistic merit." Eliot's own writings subsequent to his conversion sought to further that achievement.

Towards any profound conviction one is borne . . . by what Newman called 'powerful and concurrent reasons.' . . . In my own case, I believe that one of the reasons was that the Christian scheme seemed to me the only one which would work. . . . The Christian scheme seemed the only possible scheme which found a place for values which I must maintain or perish. . . , the belief, for instance, in holy living and holy dying, in sanctity, chastity, humility, austerity.¹

Whatever the reasons, this "most highly publicized event in the life of Eliot" resulted in "a group of new and very different poems."² This is to be expected since as Hynes has pointed out, "A man's theory of the place of poetry is not independent of his view of life in general."³ And with those who asserted that religion depreciates science and art, Eliot had nothing but disdain: "And if he [Foerster to whom he was responding] thinks that religion depreciates science and art, I can only suppose that his religious training took place in the mountains of Tennessee."⁴ This new religious influence in

¹ T. S. Eliot, "Christianity and Communism," *Listener* 16 (March 1932), p. 383 quoted by Margolis, p. 106; In relation to Eliot's quest for chastity, T. S. Matthews in his book *Great Tom* (pp. 101-103) alludes to the notion that one reason why Eliot converted to Christianity was that it supplied the power needed to curb sexual appetite and desire. Reactions to his conversion among literary circles were for the most part negative; Virginia Woolf, in writing to her sister about the event is representative: "I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us from this day forward. He has become Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to Church. I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is." *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 3: 457-58 quoted by Burton Raffel, *T. S. Eliot*, p. 110. Additionally, it is interesting to note in this regard that according to Sencourt (pp. 136-37), Eliot's wife Vivienne also held his conversion in disdain. "Indeed, she seems to have been positively hostile to his new found church affiliations, deriding them as 'monastic.'"

² Schneider, p. 108.

³ Samuel Hynes, "Trials of a Christian Critic," in *The Literary Criticism of T. S. Eliot*, edited by David Newton de Molina, p. 64.

⁴ Quoted by Schneider, p. 110. This jab was made with the memory of the Scopes Trial fresh in mind.

Eliot's poetry is first seen in *Ash Wednesday*, a poem which is "the culmination of years of religious hope and despair" and one in which embodies Eliot's "realization of the Christian vision."¹ To a reading of part five in this poem we will now turn.

A Reading of Part Five of *Ash Wednesday*

Sencourt suggests that "it is only the total effect of *Ash-Wednesday* which is capable of systematic exposition."² If this is indeed the case, then what Kirk believes to be the essential thrust of the poem proves helpful: "Only by experiencing afresh the reality that once brought forth the old symbols can modern man regain faith, 'the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things unseen.'" Just that expression anew of transcendent experience was Eliot's achievement in *Ash-Wednesday*.³ Indeed *Ash-Wednesday* turned many in its generation toward Christianity (and away from communism) since the poem "made it possible to believe in Christian insights—and yet to remain within the pale of modern intellectuality."⁴ Eliot himself was the paragon of such a posture.

A man of genuine intellectual power and broad learning might believe in dogma, it was clear; more important, he might experience something of the transcendent, and might express that experience in a mingling of old symbols and new. The intellectual public, or some part of that public, was moved.⁵

¹ Tobin, pp. 55, 61. It is generally recognized that *Ash Wednesday* is the first of Eliot's major religious or Christian poems. Thus Kirk (p. 142): "From "Prufrock" to "The Hollow Men," he had described the evil half-life of fallen man in this age. With *Ash Wednesday*, he would begin to describe the possibilities of regeneration."

² Sencourt, p. 144.

³ Kirk, p. 178.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

In the fifth section we have the following basic outline. The introductory stanza has behind it the gospel of John 1: 1-14 and Lancelot Andrews' nativity sermon of 1611. Its substance is at the core of the poem: "it is an assertion of the truth of Christ as the Word, an assertion that this is the Reality even if one has not brought oneself to acknowledge it fully."¹

And the light shone in the darkness and
Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled
About the centre of the silent Word.

In the next stanza, Eliot asks: "Where shall the word be found, where will the word Resound?" The answer is seemingly nowhere:

Not here, there is not enough silence
Not on the sea or on the islands, not
On the mainland, in the desert or the rain land.

For those who reject the word out right, "for those who walk in darkness" there is neither a place of grace nor a time to rejoice; life is still a waste land.

For those who walk in darkness
Both in the day time and in the night time
The right time and the right place are not here
No place of grace for those who avoid the face
No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and
deny the voice.

Next a prayer is requested of the veiled sister on behalf of those "who chose thee and oppose thee," seemingly a reference to those who have called themselves Christians but who deny it in practice and whose souls are evidently not fully committed to their confession.

Will the veiled sister pray for
Those who walk in darkness, who chose thee and oppose thee,
Those who are torn on the horn between season and season,
time and time, between
Hour and hour, word and word, power and power,

¹ Schneider, pp. 122-23. Raffel (p. 118) summarizes the essence of section five thusly: "We may not listen to the Christian message, but it remains available to us."

those who wait
 In darkness? Will the veiled sister pray
 For children at the gate
 Who will not go away and cannot pray:
 Pray for those who chose and oppose.

In the final stanza of part five, prayer is again requested of the veiled sister: "Will the veiled sister between the slender Yew trees pray" for those who again deny their profession of faith—"the struggle of a man dealing with his own cowardice, conscious of the disparity between the outward allegiance and the inner betrayal,"¹ that is, "for those who affirm before the world and deny between the rocks."

Twice in this section, there is the refrain: "O my people, what have I done unto thee." This text is taken from Micah 6: 3 wherein the Lord cries to the people reproaching them for their departure from the ways of virtue and faith. These words have been incorporated into the liturgy of the Roman Catholic mass for Good Friday, the day of crucifixion, and are a part of the Reproaches, a liturgy in which Christ on the cross speaks to the people: "O my people, what have I done unto thee? Or in what have I grieved thee? Because I brought thee out of the land of Egypt, thou hast prepared a cross for thy Saviour."

In essence this portion of *Ash Wednesday* reveals the difficulty of turning to and remaining faithful to God. This may be the meaning of the rather desperate cry of the last exclamation of the Word: "O my people." Williamson has summarized this phrase in the context of the entire section.

The final exclamation of the Word is both a sharp reminder and an affirmation of his disposition toward man. Thus the world exiles us from the Word, though the world turns upon the Word; and man is tortured on the rack of this antithesis. The word is here, though the world is against it, and man both for and against; his will is too weak to realize faith. But the speaker has now asserted the dire

¹ E. E. Duncan Jones, "Ash Wednesday," in *T. S. Eliot: A Study of His Writings by Several Hands*, p. 54.

need for grace, confirmed the presence of the highest love, and expressed the most agonized concern for his dilemma.¹

The poem however does not end in desperation; as a matter of fact it "describes stages of despair, self-abnegation, moral recovery, resurgent faith, need of grace, and renewal of will toward both world and God." Furthermore, "emotionally *Ash-Wednesday* develops his [Eliot's] experience of love in relation to its various incarnations, marked by ascent from lower to higher. Intellectually the poem may be understood as a reflection of his remark on Pascal that 'his despair, his disillusion, are . . . essential moments in the progress of the intellectual soul; and for the type of Pascal they are the analogue of the drought, the dark night, which is an essential stage in the progress of the Christian mystic.'²

Conclusion

Eliot's intellectual journey took him down various paths, most notably through Indian thought, the philosophy of F. H. Bradley and finally into Christianity. *Ash-Wednesday* in the fifth section clearly states the poet's ultimate resolution to the enigma of life in the reality of the Word: "Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled about the centre of the silent Word." Eliot was truly a modern man in search for meaning, a complex man who experienced afresh the reality of traditional faith and who expressed that faith in terms, symbols and images in his poetry such that other moderns equally complex can also experience the same.

In the following poem, Cecil Day Lewis celebrates the memory of T. S. Eliot in words which capture the appearance of the man, the subtlety of his personality and the deep happiness he experienced at the end of his life. With this text I will close.

We rejoice for one

¹ George Williamson, *A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot*, p. 182.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 184-85.

Whose heart a midsummer's long winter,
Though ashen-skied and droughtful, could not harden
Against the melting of midwinter spring,
When the gate into the rose garden
Opening at last permitted him to enter
Where wise man becomes child, child plays at king.

A presence, playful yet austere,
Courteously stooping, slips into my mind
Like a most elegant allusion clinching
An argument. Eyes attentive, lined
Forehead—"Thus and thus runs," he makes it clear,
"The poet's rule. No slackening, no infringing
Must compromise it."¹

¹ Cecil Day Lewis, *At East Coker*, in *The Whispering Roots and Other Poems* quoted by Sencourt, p. v.