T. S. Eliot | In pursuit of tradition

Donald Bernhardt McLeod

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T. S. ELIOT: IN PURSUIT OF TRADITION

by

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"We ought to admit," says a scientist in C.P. Snow's novel The Search, "... that there is an end to tradition" insofar as it represents "an inept and frightened and inefficient way of doing things."¹ It is easy now to say, after so many critical excavations, that by temper and discipline T.S. Eliot is radically hostile to such a belief. For over and above his enormous prestige as both poet and critic rests the generally acknowledged fact that he is also the foremost exponent of the traditionalist position in literature, the chief apologist for tradition's neglected claims in an age which has tended to erase or suppress or defame them.

His profound attentiveness to these claims and especially to their neglect Eliot first dramatized with a set of revulsions calculated to indicate what had been lost by recording what little remained. For this is clear: upon reading Eliot's early poetry—his confirmation into the Church of England in 1927 can reasonably be taken as the dividing line—the most persuasive discovery is that of the poet's acute dissatisfaction with the form and content of his time and his distaste for the society it represents; while the work itself is both an illustration and symptom of the whole "modern" atmosphere, with its radical fluctuations of belief, its intense egotism, its impatience with ideas.

once universally held—in a word, this output describes the more or less contemporary mass "breakdown" of traditional civilization.  

I do not wish to pass judgement here either on the origins or on the duration of this breakdown—I simply observe its extent and its presence in Eliot's work. One aspect of this he takes to be mental and spiritual death. Another is what an early essay names "the dissociation of sensibility." It is the incertitude and moral cowardice of Pur-frock, the vulgarity of Sweeney erect, the stagnant misery of Gerontien, the "paralysed force" of the Hollow Men. It is The Waste Land, where fragments—no form for triumph, as Julian Symons suggests—are the form for disorder and despair; where the poetic act becomes an instrument of dissection in territory too terrifying for direct vision, for direct statement.

But attention to this alone—to the negative, the despairing, the derisive—points to a superficial reading of the verse. A superficial reading leaves us at the level of the "world weary" artist withdrawn into the cocoon of his extreme (and romantic!) dissent—in Eliot's case, the embodiment of the fugitive Puritan recoiling from what he takes to be cultural decadence and vulgarity. I will come back to this

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2The word and phrase is derived from Robert Briffault's Breakdown, The Collapse of Traditional Civilization (New York, 1935); the simile itself is not, I admit, entirely satisfactory, for it suggests at the most a halt by the road, and no danger. Certainly much more is involved.

3Eliot describes this "dissociation" of meaning in Western culture as setting in after the peculiar unity of thought and feeling which he discerned in Donne and Marvell was destroyed; see "The Metaphysical Poets," Selected Essays (New York, 1950), p. 247.

later. Here I merely want to point out that such a reading is deaf to the undertones of the traditional in the person of the poet. To say, in other words, that his earliest work is no more than "the poetry of drouth" is to skimp over the deeper origins inherent in its texture. Eliot of course strongly emphasizes a sense of crisis in this work, but it is precisely this which impels him toward a more stable intellectual and spiritual, i.e., Christian, equilibrium; it is this which manipulates his desire to retain and cling to those privileges and values, pieties and associations (variously defined in the essays of this period as "impersonal," "orthodox," and "spiritual") which he feels are slipping away.

The fundamental point here—indeed, the fundamental point of my thesis—is that the presence of the eventual solution contained in the later poetry (from "Ash-Wednesday" on) is incorporate, explicitly and with underlying feeling, from the very beginning: the general psychic and ideological decay of society; the regeneration out of this condition through a search for some ultimate order of value and truth; and

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5 While it is always necessary to distinguish between the poet qua poet and the man Eliot happens to be, it is a common and perhaps obvious understatement to say that there is a connection between life and poetry, between a poem and the experience of the man who created it. In this sense a poem may be said to be a personal testament: it defends and formulates the poet's life; and it provides an aperture into the experience of the age which produced him. When Eliot speaks of America as "the so-called modern democracy which appears to produce fewer and fewer individuals," it is as one who has more or less successfully exchanged his native grounds for the quandaries of exile. And when he writes that tradition "cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour," it comes from one who has deliberately and systematically acquired such a tradition—as I hope to make clear.

the idea that this order is to be found by turning to the executive authority of the past, not for the present, external, values in it, but for a historical situation that has actually disappeared.

It is, then, to a discussion of these themes that I want to address this paper. That is to say, it is my purpose to describe and appraise the peculiar role his early poetry played in the formulation of his tradition, the patterns of growth this formulation followed, and in conclusion—insofar as it is possible with regard to this body of work alone—to define the relative quality of its outcome.

It is necessary to admit, however, that the shapes of these themes show Eliot still in the process of crystallizing his thought, and that he didn't achieve a really definite synthesis until several years after the close of this period (signaled objectively by his conversion and by his now-famous advertisement in the preface to For Lancelot Andrewes, subjectively by the increasing use of the traditional vocabulary of Christianity in his poetry). Nevertheless, each theme has always existed in one form or another and to varying limits of exposure. Thus it is possible to record the approaches, if not the logic, of T.S. Eliot's intellectual and spiritual evolution.

7New York, 1929; his statement is as follows: "The general point of view [of his essays] may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion" (p. vii); at its worst this is merely a way of saying what he likes, at its best it is a patent declaration of commitment.
CHAPTER I

POEMS, 1917

Poems, 1917, T.S. Eliot's earliest collected volume of poetry, formulates at once the position which is the pivot for which follows—the discontent with modern society which reveals his basic ideas and attitudes. If this poetry is written in terms of disbelief and even despair (and it is), the disbelief is owing to inevitable progress, and the despair is that which comes from knowing something else apparently unattainable should be valued. Despair, then, is not the end of the line, and there occur in many of these poems moments of sudden insight which makes this statement credible.

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

As the decisive poem of the early collection—one which sets the tone and provides a key for those to follow—"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is a confession in retrospect and as such, is an interpretation as well as a description of a mental and emotional transit through the cultural ennui and insecurity of Prufrock's world. Entitled a "love song," the vocal music translates into yet another level of feeling: not only is it a paean of self-love, but also a requiem of protest and self-disgust for his sexual insufficiency on the one hand, and what is seemingly his spiritual insufficiency on the other.

As a symbol for this condition, Prufrock represents the psychological experience of a divided and impotent will, hating itself for
what it is and yet unable to be what it wants to be. But there is a saving clause: though made inactive by the fear that he will betray himself into a humiliating but nonetheless irrevocable commitment, Prufrock has a moment of vision, however brief; and if he withdraws, it is not because he has ignored the dilemma which confronts him, but because he hasn't the strength to force anything out to its conclusion. Despite his incertitude and pessimism, despite his failure to provide a possible and morally tenable solution, he does not stop short, or short-circuit the last connection; for he remains subjective (and consistent) to the end: the realization that only spiritual convictions will sustain and illuminate the futility of his life.

...  

The epigraph serves a double thematic function: it is a metaphorical sketch of Prufrock's reluctance to disclose his inmost feelings, to sing his love song; and it supplies the mood of despair within which the poem itself is framed—the world is spiritually dead, and not even a warning voice from Hell could return it to a state of grace. It is not an apology at all. It is rather a statement of fact.

The body of the poem opens with an invitation and with a physical description symbolic of the caponized world which Prufrock inhabits, as well as his own mental condition—one which is, at least, more dead than alive:

Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherised upon a table;  

1 All verse quotations in this thesis are taken from The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950 (New York, 1958).
It is a petition for the reader\(^2\) to accompany Prufrock as he pursues "an overwhelming question"—but there is a rider:

> Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
> Let us go and make our visit.

It is important to note that the contents of this aversion seem to be an uneasy mixture of fear and suppression: he knows the nature and the inevitability of the question, and that it will demand an answer which he is unprepared to give. Of the nature of these fears, however, we are given only a presentiment:

> In the room the women come and go
> Talking of Michangelo.

This illustrates Eliot's ability to express a contemporary attitude in terms that define the qualities of a valued past: the intellectualized, upstage conversation of these women forces a comparison between the potent and dynamic being of the supremely creative artist, and the barren and static present of the enervated Prufrock and of his milieu. The power of the irony and bitterness corresponds to the strength of the condemnation, and its impact cuts deep into his consciousness; the moment of censure transforms into a moment of fantasy in an attempt to escape an unpleasant fact about himself, a shift signaled by the image of the yellow fog—an image I will quote in its entirety:

\(^{2}\text{Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren believe the "you" represents "the person to whom Prufrock wishes to make his revelation, to tell his secret," as well as the generalized reader. Although I see no reason to dispute the presence of the sensual which this doubling implies, nevertheless I intend to keep it subordinate to what I believe to be a deeper level of meaning, one which makes it imperative to consider the reader and Prufrock's confidant as one—as the reader; see Understanding Poetry (New York, 1951), p. 434.}\)
The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curling once about the house, and fell asleep.

As interpreted by Brooks and Warren, the fog "emphasizes(s) the isolation of the drawing room from the outside world," and further, that it "involves the relaxed, aimless quality of Prufrock's world." But it is even more: this image is the first allusion to the other world that Prufrock has occasional insights to but can never reach. The indolent cat-like fog curling about the city suggests the semi-active, subaqueous world of the mermaids at the end; it is spontaneous and, above all, natural. It contrasts directly to the streets of insidious intent and to the room where the women come and go, emphasizing by its difference the quality of Prufrock's world.

The echoing cadence of "There will be time, there will be time," now punctuates the urgent nature of Prufrock's dilemma on the rhetorical level, and his readiness to waive, or at least postpone, its consideration. There will be time to create a double for himself, a new mask which is no longer bound to one face; and he bitterly realizes that he is too weak and spineless either to murder or create: acts which would involve deliberate choice, as well as a spontaneity in behavior and feeling. Nevertheless, the dilemma is no less critical despite his attempts to avoid receiving the full impact of this truth—despite possible visions and revisions which might again translate reality

\[\text{Ibid., p. 135.}\]
into fantasy, fear into security. The answer remains cloaked but the question is inescapable.

At this point an invitation to afternoon tea takes Prufrock out of the nervous confinement of the city streets, into the banal and restrained sophistication of a drawing-room. In the background the shapes of the women move transparently through the room, proving his fears in returning to memory the question which he must soon face. His apprehension immediately reasserts itself:

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"
Time to turn back and descend the stair.

to the insular security of an existence which believes itself exempt from matters of choice simply because it prefers not to consider them.

But his all-too-personal self is trapped by the local circumstances of his position: to continue is to force the question into the open; to turn back is to expose himself to the dismembering criticism of the beau monde. There is bound to be egoism, bound to be something personal and self-enclosed about his thinking, but there is also something more:

Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

By affirming the universality of the question, Prufrock recognizes his limitations and sees beyond them—he knows that some other point of view is possible, one that is impersonal and objective. But it is an affirmation without commitment, for there invariably exists the loophole of political reversal. He is too timid to rebel, he cannot bring himself to attempt it—he doesn't dare. At the same time, however, he feels some degree of guilt for his crippled outlook and for
the commonplace and coarser forms of his life; guilt for his involvement in a social mise en scène measured by externals: by coffeespoons as incidental and meaningless as the conversation and music against which they are placed; by eyes of refined cynicism which can transform him—because of his terrible insignificance—into a squirming, Kafkaesque insect; and by the arms which represent the longing Prufrock has for the sensual and the exotic. It is, in short, a life measured by the proprieties of a highly sophisticated society considered to be attractive, but found to be corrosive at the core. Not yet the alkali labyrinth of the later poems, but one which is fashionable and which sets in motion by its disturbing presence, the self-examination marked by the rhetorical, "And how should I presume?"

But this is incomplete and Prufrock knows it; the confession of guilt becomes one of personal regret:

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? . . .

He, too, has lived alone, not only without women, but without comforts and supports of any kind except those which are—as the pipe smoke in part suggests—somnolent, lonely, unsubstantial. And coupled with the remorse for what is and what has gone before is the fear that it will conform to that which is to come after. But though Prufrock identifies the nullity of this condition with himself, the ellipses imply that something else should be said—and desired:

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

This is important, for it is an explicit contrast between what he is and what he feels he should be: the crustacean is natural,
Prufrock is not. Living within the shell of such a society, the empty and meaningless routines of life have so externalized the individual that he has lost the feeling and passion for real existence (Prufrock is nearly inanimate, the crab can move despite his shell). And having lost the meaning of life, nothing less than the presence of something beyond himself can restore it. The crab hints at a source for such regenerative strength: it relates backward to the naturalness and spontaneity of the fog, as well as forward to another level of the same idea—the non-human world of the mermaids. Furthermore, the contrast between the natural and the artificial is enforced by the correspondence between a crab's physical actions and the mental maneuvers of Prufrock: his thinking is "lateral" in that he would prefer to evade the issue at hand rather than confront it.

At this point we have the condition of a man trapped among three worlds and three claims: the real world which he inhabits but from which he cannot help but feel alienated because of its social enmity and his incertitude; a past world of power and vigor and decision (symbolized thus far by Michangelo); and the metaphysical world of his profoundest wishes and desires. Such an estrangement spawns the presentiment of continued failure—a presentiment ratified by fact in the following stanza:

Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head grown slightly bald brought in upon
a platter,
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.
The languor of his reverie coincides with his physical mood as the crisis is at hand; and in the very moment and lifetime in which a choice should have been made, he fails abjectly. It is a critical failure, for it confirms his doubts in a moment of acute insight. Thus Prufrock's attempts to escape the unpleasant truths about himself prove a fiction inasmuch as such things cannot be changed or mitigated, nor do they cease to exist because they are ignored. Their manipulation has resulted in only private feeling, but no feeling in common strong enough to initiate positive action. In the absence of any other alternative he must acknowledge defeat.

What is more, because this defeat is a moral one, it is an unheroic gesture— one common to a world where tragic actions become emotional situations, where such minutiæ as tea and ices measure the daily round of experience— a world, in short, where human vitality must suffocate while social exigencies flourish. Moreover, Prufrock is aware that such a world is not the most ennobling, or even, ultimately, the most human one. And his self-comparison with a man of action— again energized by a tangible past— stands as an implicit rebuke to his desire for security within this world. True, Prufrock had given thought to various religious devotions, but the suggestion is that he has done so with the lack of vitality which defines his character, and which stands in contrast to the germinal energy of John the Baptist: "I am no prophet— and here's no great matter." And he echoes the acceptance of his role as the sudden intimation of death— in the image of an obsequious footman— mocks him for his inadequacy, indicating that such a fate is derived from the very nature of his world. He is up against social
conventions and forces which, in destroying physical and spiritual vitality, destroy life itself—the monopolizing death-in-life morbid mortality first suggested by the image of the etherised patient.

This being so, the stature of guilt enlarges: by choosing to give way to his fears of self-impotence and ridicule (or, if you will, by accepting, point-blank, these conditions as inevitable and inescapable), Prufrock's spiritual arc falls and goes flat around him. To this moment he had known no more than the disenchantment of living but now, suddenly, the imminence of death is imposed. And in the final line, "I was afraid," is summarized the whole tragedy of modern life—that men lose their lives in living them because they no longer have the desire or the courage to make a moral decision, that is, to commit themselves to anything beyond their own temporal and parochial outlook.

But if his confession is a cathartic to dissipate the pain of anguish which is its result, it is doomed to failure: the monotonous fugue of the question returns and with it, another historic figure of vigor and decision to index the quality of his failure:

Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—

Unlike Lazarus (and Michangelo and John the Baptist and, later, Hamlet), Prufrock knows he hasn't the strength to act, to commit himself to a single course of action—nor does he wish to. With the reluctance of Guido da Montefeltro—the speaker of the epigraph—he would prefer not to project his inner nature on a screen (l. 105); perhaps even the mere
gesture of a decision would be misunderstood. Hence the continuing refrain of regret:

"That is not it at all,  
That is not what I meant, at all."

The curve of emotion comes to a full stop at this point, and the self-examination which follows is steady and appropriately dispassionate. Without conviction or belief, Prufrock lacks the motivation of Hamlet for whom "the readiness" was all. He is, instead, Polonius—an attend­ant lord, an impotent Pooh-bah who may be, at any moment, ignobly cut down in his ignorance. The very resemblance is mocking as Prufrock anticipates the fatuity of such a death—a death which would be essen­tially no different than the life he is living:

I grow old . . . I grow old . . .  
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Followed by the recollection of the crucial moment: "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each." And then the pathos of regret and the final acceptance of his dispensation: "I do not think that they will sing to me."

In preferring to remain free from any commitment, Prufrock has refused to take the moral risks necessary: the difficulties appear immense, and the one alternative other than abject resignation seems to be a commitment as a leap into the unknown—into the illusive sea-world of the mermaids—a leap which he hasn't the moral courage to take. He dreams of this as the poem closes:

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves  
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back  
When the wind blows the water white and black.

And with his enlargement it is, of course, not the concealed and
personal, but the societal world—as well as himself—which stands accused and guilty:

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

With the impingement of a reality he must accept, the dream is destroyed, and Prufrock is left with only the imagination of fulfillment.

Reflecting the aberrant state of modern consciousness, the poem thus becomes a spiritual as well as a geographical journey. And Prufrock never wholly convinced, never wholly or finally the doubter, is hung between action and contemplation, metaphysical consolations and social comforts, the legendary qualities of the past and the ennui and futility of the present, and makes the wrong decision. That he hadn't the strength to face the moment of crisis, and the awakening again into reality, in short, the suggestion of no hope, would seem to imply that given his present situation, Prufrock had no choice but to submit to his private fears. But though unable to escape, the moment of crisis transforms him from easy self-delusion to anguish in self-knowledge: he knows the mermaids will not sing to him, but he has heard them sing, and there is in this vision evidence for him to react to. One may recall Guido's ominous warning that for the spiritually dead there could be no recovery of the state of grace. But Prufrock is not, after all, like those lost souls—he is aware of his failure of nerve and he suffers in remorse. Though he may believe otherwise, he is not spiritually dead. For his dilemma is not that he is weak but that he realizes it, and this is frequently enough for the beginning of absolute belief.
The Portrait of a Lady

Written some months before the beginning of "Prufrock," this poem is, as one might guess, a description of essentially those protests, attitudes, and half-visions of possibility predicated—more acutely, less objectively—by the later poem. Again we are given a vignette of an experience occurring within a society in shallowness rather than in depth; an experience which springs, not from a valued past, but from a current body of thought which makes morally legitimate the pressures of a merely "expedient" social ethic against the individual—"expedient" because it sophisticates out of existence all those factors which are not seen as immediately relevant to personal privilege and private belief. And again we have the uneasy position of a man governed by such an ethic, but sensing, however dimly, that something else is to be valued and desired.

The portrait of the lady is sketched within an enclosed, crypt-like atmosphere which, like the beginning of "Prufrock," is symbolic of a world more dead than alive, one buried beneath layers of social cant and formulae—Juliet's tomb fabricated out of the trappings of an atrophied social organism; the modern Juliet found to be culturally frigid, physically loveless, and, to a degree, emotionally numb. This qualification is made necessary by her need to furnish some ray of hope in this hopelessly languid landscape, a need to "resurrect" a friendship

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with the young man no matter how tenuous and feeble. Her conversation begins and turns in circles around this fact:

"You do not know how much they mean to me, my friends
And how, how rare and strange it is, to find
In a life composed so much, so much of odds and ends,
(For indeed I do not love it... you knew? you are not blind!
How keen you are!)
To find a friend who has these qualities,
Who has, and gives
Those qualities upon which friendship lives."

It is her perception—not her companion's—that life is fragmentary, composed of broken relationships which make life a nightmare, a "cauchemar." But though she speaks of her prizing of their friendship, it is with ironic overtones. She is not deceived by his consent of silence, knows that he is pretending what he does not feel, and mocks him with "How keen you are!" In this awareness is situated the bitter premonition of the hopeless end to which their liaison is destined, an awareness underscored by the young man in the following stanza:

Among the windings of the violins
And the ariettes
Of cracked cornets
Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins
Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own,
Capricious monotone

He feels no sympathy for her regrets and wishful consolations, and hears music more primitive, less ordered, than her own. There is, however, a "false note," an innuendo that his feelings in this "affair" are not what they should be. But such a note is disquieting and significantly pushed aside by his inviting the lady to:

... take the air, in a tobacco trance,
Admire the monuments,
Discuss the late events,
Correct our watches by the public clocks.
Then sit for half an hour and drink our bocks.
Prefiguring the wasted actions of the lonely men in "Prufrock," this image epitomizes and pillories the condition Eliot is exposing: the aimlessness, the indifference, the habitual self-deception which characterizes the modern social ethic. The narrator prefers to be committed to no more than this, for such inaction poses no questions which cannot be easily answered or forgotten.

Significantly, the seasonal cycle now pivots from winter to spring, providing an interim of hope relevant to the change itself. Its basis is fragile and imperfect: the young man continues only because he has neither the degree of brutishness nor the delicacy to terminate the affair; and because, in his vanity and cowardice, he fears a scene. On the other hand, the woman continues because his friendship, such as it is, represents her only hope in the face of possible dissolution. Nevertheless, she has the courage to speak reprovingly and with regret of the cruelty and insensitivity of youth and of her friend:

"Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know
What life is, you who hold it in your hands";

"You let it flow from you, you let it flow,
And youth is cruel, and has no remorse
And smiles at situations which it cannot see."

He smiles obligingly as she twists the appropriately dead lilacs in her hand, exhuming memories from her past:

"Yet with these April sunsets, that somehow recall
My buried life, and Paris in the Spring,
I feel immeasurably at peace, and find the world
To be wonderful and youthful, after all."

One had better say quite bluntly that in terms of the poetry itself this is little more than a romantic recreation, a looking backward in nostalgia. But the life which has flowed from her and which she
is sensitive enough to see flowing from the young man is, on another level, a "buried stream" of energy (to put it in the necessarily Arnoldian way), which by its spontaneity is capable of awakening the sense of the incalculable, vital principle beneath all appearance. In essence, its function is that of the seascape in "J. Alfred Prufrock."

A typographical break emphasizes the difference in their temper and feeling: he is disturbed and made uneasy by an imputation laying to his charge indifference and impassivity; she remains composed, mocking again with:

"I am always sure that you understand
My feelings, always sure that you feel,
Sure that across the gulf you reach your hand."

He is merely going through the motions and she knows it, believing him to be young and callous enough to succeed:

"You are invulnerable, you have no Achilles' heel.
You will go on, and when you have prevailed
You can say: at this point many a one has failed."

But this also cuts another way, for if he is invulnerable she is not. She has a sudden sense of collapse and of the meagerness of her attraction for him, one which he finds to be empty and futile. Resignation is her side of the coin: "I shall sit here, serving tea to friends . . . ."

Though he may mistake her meaning he is not so callow and obtuse to be insensitive of his own impropriety and of the falsity of his position. He names it to himself:

I take my hat: how can I make a cowardly amends
For what she has said to me?

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5 I take my clue from what I believe to be Arnold's meaning in his poem, "The Buried Life."
But he refuses to confront it more specifically than this, again escaping into the street. And in the next few lines this moment of decision, if such it was, passes as such moments do, amid irrelevancies which are temporarily more real than the question of commitment and the demand for action and positive decision:

You will see me any morning in the park Reading the comics and the sporting page. Particularly I remark An English countess goes upon the stage. A Greek was murdered at a Polish dance, Another bank defaulter has confessed.

Instead of solving the problem he has avoided it in a simple, habitual manner: he turns to the frivolous, undisciplined melodrama of the daily paper. Here he can take refuge from his private problems in the overt narrative of other desires and inhibitions, anxieties and predicaments which are essentially the same because equally formulated and simplified; and reflecting by their informality nothing so much as an ultimate unconcern for life, and by their contents the leveling down of human differences to fit the immediate pattern of separation and social decay. It is a solution in which feeling and emotion are pigeonholed. The trouble is that occasionally such things try to squirm out of the slot one puts them in: labels that look neat and immutable come off.

Note:

I remain self-possessed
Except when a street piano, mechanical and tired
Reiterates some worn-out common song
With the smell of hyacinths across the garden
Recalling things that other people have desired.

The vision of the mermaids provided Prufrock with an aperture into an ideal and valued world; here the young man never experiences such a vision—this is as close as he comes. His wholly emotional
response to the music and the scent of flowers revives for him the memories of the woman's "buried life," a moment which shakes him from his impassivity and faces him with a decision and a question of values: "Are these ideas right or wrong?" Should he, in other words, accept the emotional claim which the lady would like to extend, or should he remain uncommitted? The responsibility of choice is his alone—as it has been without exception—and the section closes on the apparent impasse of indecision.

The memories, doubts, and half-regrets which occurred to him in the spring have slipped past and are lost in the fall. We learn that a decision has been made: the young man shall dissolve any hope for a durable relationship by fleeing to the Continent. But again, as such decisions are not deliberate, it is not. That is to say, his breaking away is not so much rebellious, but basically submissive, clinically passive—it is prior to action. Fear of embarrassment is the dictating factor, fear and the whole complex of his character which is, because of the prevailing social apparatus, outside of his present ability to control. There will be difficulty in the telling of it:

I mount the stairs and turn the handle of the door
And feel as if I had mounted on my hands and knees.

Crippled by fear and somewhat penitential (as his analogy suggests), he is prepared for the worst—but unnecessarily. Even though the lady is at once significantly aware of the reasons for his present coming as well as his imminent going, and even though this awareness is painful and despairing ("And so you are going abroad; and when do you return?/But that's a useless question."), she doesn't reproach him for his defection; she merely regrets that their friendship is to be severed,
hoping, nonetheless, that "perhaps it is not too late." But this is a cover-up—a way of concealing the failure of her expectations; and she assumes now that her chances depend on social fate alone. And she understands that she, too, has failed—failed to provide an emotional attraction sufficiently strong enough to attract the young man, her ability to do so too deeply buried beneath the accretions of the social terrain. But it could be said that such an ability may well have been wasted: in the young man she is up against a reaction that is fundamentally intellectual, oscillating and deadened as that intellectuality may be; it is founded on a rational consideration of values ("Are these ideas right or wrong?"), not on instinctual acceptance.

The awareness of difficulty and a sense of inadequacy suddenly give to the narrator a new perspective:

I feel like one who smiles, and turning shall remark
Suddenly, his expression in a glass.
My self-possession gutters; we are really in the dark.

Her composure has shattered his own to the point that he becomes for the first time aware of what he is, his personality extricated from behind the conditions of its temporal existence and revealed behind the vision of external things:

And I must borrow every changing shape
To find expression ... dance, dance
Like a dancing bear,
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.

To escape he creates new doubles for himself, invents identities whose acts spring from the requirements of each new situation. It is an adolescent mimicry which has back of it the lack of his never having any firm reality—he is always moving away from situations which would reveal what he is, towards those which feign what he is not. He is
continually the puppet of such consolations; and the truth for him
appears to be that which he is immediately, that is, objectively, aware.
It is an evidence to which one reacts or to which, out of hypocrisy or
cowardice, one fails to react. And in the end he cannot entirely evade
the implications which this evidence suggests: if she dies, what then?
At such a moment there would be no assurance that his choice had been
morally the right one; indeed, there would seem good reason to believe
that it would somehow hold him accountable for her death. 6

Bloodless as this reflection may be, it leads to a new valuing,
an action of understanding and recognition: the chamber music and the
song which disturbed him in the park become "successful with a 'dying
fall'! Now that we talk of dying--." But nothing is resolved, and the
result for him (and perhaps for the reader) is an obscure one--obscure
not because it can't be elucidated (it can), but because it carries a
weak conviction. On this note the poem ends:

And should I have the right to smile?

As the conclusion then suggests, and as a reflection on the nar­
rator's actions show, Eliot is asserting that such a life is socially
destructive; that certain of its ascertainable conventions act as irri­
tants rather than supports; and, finally that the morality which it
lives on is a falsification which can neither deepen our perceptions
nor alter our attitudes--not even when such things are known to be faked
and incidental. But although this task of deepening and altering would

6Since writing this sentence, I have re-read George Williamson's
A Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot (New York, 1957) and have discovered that
my diction is partially derived; he says of the narrator at this point:
"the issue is by no means certain, either in the rightness of his action
or the quality of his feeling." (p. 73).
seem practically impossible, one can see that here, as in "J. Alfred Prufrock," Eliot is in search of a way to repudiate the implications of this belief. And, as we might expect at this early date (1910), the answer is necessarily incomplete and no more than marginal: one must somehow catch hold of those half-echoes of vitality and spontaneity which now and then and without warning, shake a man out of the somnolence and depthless present of his daily living. This need is suggested almost by its vagueness, but enough of something like it comes in and comes back to show how great this need is.

The Lesser Verse of Poems, 1917

No more than this can be said of the other poems written at this time: "Preludes" and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night." Both are shaped by the impassivity and commonplace of the present; both end somberly; and yet in both can again be found what Hugh Kenner labels "the potential redemptive vision," the presence of a saving force positioned outside the boundaries and strata of contemporary society. In "Preludes," for example, a running series of squalid and somnolent images of actuality are momentarily penetrated by "the notion of some infinitely gentle/Infinitely suffering thing." And in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" this force is interconnected with memory, a faculty which can somehow furnish the key of escape from images even more sordid than before (the fetid decay of butter, for example, or the coarse and frowzy odor of a bawd).

But if such a force is present it remains, as it has been suggested, no more than potential, for both poems end where they begun. The worlds are, after all, empty and withered; and memory is, in the
end, confined to the bleak recollection of the present only—in terms of
the poetry this is the final and most mordant twist which can be given.

The remainder of the so-called "New England group" were written
in Europe some three years later. But despite the time and distance,
their common denominator continued to be Eliot's consciousness of his
American past. In the first year of his expatriation (1915) he was
still looking back across the Atlantic, his focus still fixed—at least
in part—on the oppressive conventions of Back Bay gentility. Thus in
the first of these he censures a life circumscribed by the Boston Even-
ing Transcript (the title); in "Aunt Helen," a sense of reality as
delicate and ornamental as an aunt's Dresden clock; in "Cousin Nancy,
" a modernity which is, although acted out in defiance of the "unalterable
laws" of this society, mannered and contrived and hence equally objec-
tionable.

One other poem to be included in this group, "Mr. Apollinax," is,
according to Grover Smith, aimed at Bertrand Russell, under whom Eliot
studied at Harvard in the spring of 1914. In an early essay entitled
"A Free Man's Worship" (1903), Russell expressed a belief that any
spiritual agency was incapable of attaining the redemption of man. I
wish to quote a passage from this essay despite the fact that it is
rather long. It is a characterization and a verdict of, at one and the
same time, the recent history, the moral development, and the literary
expression to which Eliot's attack is to be continually directed:

That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the
end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes

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and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the débris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.

And several pages further:

... in all things it is well to exalt the dignity of Man by freeing him as far as possible from the tyranny of non-human Power.  

The denial of classic religious principles coupled with the celebration of human dignity and strength is, of course, shot sprayed from an ultimately liberal position—a part of a massive attempt to reformulate an absolutistic tradition on an empirical and radically private basis. Moreover, to one steadily moving away from the shallower waters of unlimited skepticism and negation, Russell's prescription would be necessarily immature, grounded, as it is, in "unyielding despair." Perhaps for such reasons (though biography is certainly not important here) Mr. Apollinax is pictured as one who "laughed like an irresponsible foetus," whose speech recalled "the beat of centaur's hoofs," and whose head the narrator half expects to see guillotined, perchance for an act of heresy. On the other hand, in the contrast

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8 Selected Papers (New York, 1927), pp. 3-5.

9 According to Russell, an equation might be written thus: at the bottom of human life (the "débris") is meaninglessness; at the bottom of meaninglessness is despair. Eliot progressively carries the same equation a step further by finding at the bottom of despair: faith.
between the satyr-like Grecian and the other guests, it is the latter who come off second-best—the passionate, "profound" nature of the European being preferred to the genteel proprieties of the hosts, of whom the narrator recalls only the frivolity of "a slice of lemon, and a bitten macaroon."

But in pursuing this lead it is clear that the narrator had not yet achieved a definite formulation in his thinking: "There was something he said that I might have challenged," he says of Apollinax. His allegiance is confused and split—not between the worlds of the Channing-Cheetah's and Apollinax, but apparently between Apollinax and himself. There is private feeling, but no feeling in common.
CHAPTER II

POEMS, 1920

On looking into Eliot's succeeding collection, Poems, 1920, one is not sure whether despair is a stage going back, or going forward—it seems to crescendo and diminish almost at once. On the one hand his pessimism curves directly towards total alienation—the condition of an old man decaying alone in a rented house; on the other this process is reversed in that Eliot attacks "the True Church," not out of agnosticism or positive disbelief, but because he cares enough to wish its abuses corrected. As Professor Williamson points out (p. 88), this ambiguity indicates "a psychological direction" which Eliot eventually arrives at, but which for the moment continues to be shadowed and uncertain. There is still the frightening sense that modern life doesn't hold together, and that any attempt to recast the pieces necessarily involves contradictions and sufferings, checks and failures, all resulting in a muddled confusion in which even the devices of a ghostseer (Madame de Tornquist in "Gerontion") are sometimes indistinguishable from disciplined thought. The business then of finding solutions can come only after one is aware of the whole depth and meaning, and therefore the difficulty of modern life. For in the end, the way of negation leads to its own dismissal—not to "terror in inquisition" (Eliot's phrase), but to the positive denial of such a condition.

Attention, too, should be given to the fact that because these poems were written in Europe there are necessarily sequential differences.
Broadly speaking, Eliot moves from a preoccupation with individuals in New England society to a concern with Americans in one which is foreign (Burbank, Bleistein, the tourists in "Lune de Miel"); to Europeans in their own (the remainder of the so-called "French" poems; background characters in others); and finally, in "Gerontion," widens out to the kind of universal indictment which is to be later found in The Waste Land and "The Hollow Men."

The Hippopotamus

As the earliest poem in this volume (1917), "The Hippopotamus" presages Eliot's direct and constant concern for the theological by placing in a somewhat comic perspective an English religious institution which has begun to decay. Its sham is seized upon by way of a curious, though not a very complicated, kind of nonsense:

The hippo's feeble steps may err
In compassing material ends,
While the True Church need never stir
To gather in its dividends.

The hippopotamus, fleshy and indolent, whose bulk can barely support its weight, is clearly analogous to those for whom the capacity to act is often denied or enfeebled by the demands of the flesh. It is, in fact, a kind of zoological Sweeney inelegantly shifting its hams not in bath-water, but in a pool of mud. But unlike Eliot's sensualist, embraced by an epileptic in a bawdy house, this beast will somehow be--absurd as it may seem--"by all the martyr'd virgins kist."

However, the basic correspondence is not between degrees of sensuality, but between degrees of materialism. Unlike the hippo which sleeps by day and hunts by night, the Church--triumphant yet indifferent
as the epigraphs suggest—can accommodate both with equal ease:

The hippopotamus's day
Is passed in sleep; at night he hunts;
God works in a mysterious way--
The Church can sleep and feed at once.

The moral results are conspicuous and deplorable. Since the "interior life" is minimized by such an externalizing attitude, Eliot's method here suggests that religious aspirations are similarly reduced to their minimum, i.e., to the nonsensical and the ridiculous—a point enforced with a sort of mad looking-glass inversion as the guiltless, though unimmaculate, hippo ascends to Heaven:

Blood of the Lamb shall wash him clean
And him shall heavenly arms enfold,
Among the saints he shall be seen
Performing on a harp of gold.

While the True Church remains below
Wrapt in the old miasmal mist.

The basic motif then is religious: the understanding of the actual both as it is, as well as what it can become. Furthermore, it suggests that "becoming" cannot mean complete deliverance unless the regulative agency of the Church resumes its primary function: cultivation of a high standard of religious consciousness. Considered as such, "The Hippopotamus" is both an accusation and an apology.

Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service

This poem follows close upon "The Hippopotamus" in both date (1918) and subject matter (censure of the pharisaic), but the basic contrasts are slightly altered. The impious materialism of the Church--here represented by the "ritual" of the collection--is now compared, not
to a purer and less degenerate materialism, but to the purity of Christian baptism.

The epigraph from Marlowe, "Look, look, master, here comes two religious caterpillars," symbolizes the modern religious service: it is both protean and parasitic, the shapes of its servitors transformed into insects feeding on the credulous laity—the offspring of the "polyphiloprogenitive." As the presbyters "drift" past the windows, engaged in the solemn mummary of the collection, they are thrown into contrast with the past of which they are the ghosts, the "larvae." The Eliotesque confrontation between past and present which is at the heart of his vision throughout, now unfolds as the explanation for this metamorphosis begins:

In the beginning was the Word,
Superfetation oμν',
And at the mensual turn of time
Produced enervate Origen.

In the parent stage was the divine creative word, the doctrine of the Logos. But a second impregnation took place, superimposing the devitalized philosophy of Origen which separated the One from union in the Trinity and creating, as a result, the polymath. Yet despite continued "superfetation," the three-fold conception still exists within the Church, for on its wall is seen the Baptized God in company with the Father and the Holy Spirit. At this point the present intrudes as the

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1Not only in the entomological sense, but also in the sense of "an evil spirit."

2I am in debt to Williamson (pp. 93-94) for making the essential identifications in this passage.
"sutlers" reappear, collecting alms of expiation from the young, their faces reflecting their maculate souls which "burn invisible and dim."

In the somewhat obscure stanza which follows the presbyters as shape-changers are again reduced to the entomological level:

Along the garden-wall the bees
With hairy bellies pass between
The staminate and pistilate,
Blest office of the epicene.

Like the fertilizing bees to which they are compared, they act as midwives between God the Son (the staminate) and the laity (the pistilate), thereby usurping the function of the epicene Paraclete. Moreover, it is a material, not a spiritual nexus which is formed, buttressed and sustained by the collection of "piaculative pence." Like Origen before them, the clergy stand accused of devitalizing the doctrine of the Trinity by splitting off one of its members: for Origen, the Logos; for the clergy, the Holy Spirit.

In contrast to these caponizing rites is set the sensuous ceremony of Sweeney's Sunday bath (ll. 29-32) which, even though removed from the sphere of the Baptized God, is preferred because it is not "controversial, polymath." It is, instead, instinctive rather than reasoned, naive rather than disingenuous; and for Sweeney—as for the hippo—the state of grace is thus more accessible than for the recreant episcopacy and their spiritually diseased offspring.

In summary, then, the poem is not so much an indictment of the Church as it is an evidence of how this institution is corrupting itself, although it is not a radical collapse which is revealed, but merely a

3 I take my clue from Smith, p. 44.
phase in a mutation. To be sure, there are signs and vestigial remnants of an older, superior condition, but these have become increasingly difficult to envisage (the mural of Christ is "cracked and brown") because of the immoderate emphasis of the Church on secular values as the standard—at least one standard—for its moral and ceremonial arrangements. Set over against this view is the belief that the Church must be supported and defended by an accession of personal responsibility which shall reform the Church by exposing its vices, at the same time calling for the recovery of its pristine innocence and truth.

**Whispers of Immortality**

Confrontations between the religious and the secular, the permanent and the impermanent, the absolute and the relative—these can be now seen as the intrinsic polarities of Eliot, his way of initially approaching a particular experience and of acting on it, even though the precise nature of the experience is by no means fixed and labeled. And while such confrontations are persistent throughout his poetry, the peculiar enthusiasms subsumed under this term are frequently varied. In "Whispers of Immortality" (1918), the spiritual values of a former literary, as well as a former religious, state of mind are compared to the fleshly interests of the present—Webster and Donne countered by the voluptuous Griskin.

But by no means is this a series of merely pejorative juxtapositions, but rather an evidence of Eliot's attempt to "manipulate a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" (underline
I will come back to this. Here I only want to point out the view that the "antiquity" involved in "Whispers of Immortality" embodies one side of Eliot's sense of tradition: his affiliation in the arts with a body of poetry which was metaphysical insofar as it was incidental to a belief in the divine order of the physical and spiritual world; and with a period which, despite the impact of "modern" anti-authoritarian modes of thought and action, yet managed to produce perhaps the most fruitful tradition in English letters. Earlier clues, of course, can be found, but they exist in fragment only; "Whispers of Immortality" provides his first sustained effort to define through poetry their common ground. With this in mind, the "whispers" refer not only to the paroxysmal grating of bone against bone in the work itself, but also to a desire for something serious which Eliot finds alive in the English literature of the seventeenth century, for something traditional, strong, and severe, which must return. This poem tells us why.

Webster was much possessed by death
And saw the skull beneath the skin;
And breastless creatures under ground
 Leaned backward with a lipless grin.

... He knew that thought clings round dead limbs
 Tightening its lusts and luxuries.

Which is to say, Webster felt that one must willingly accept the terms of death—not the embrace of thought and sensuality which is

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1 "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," The Dial, LXXV (November, 1923), 483.

5 See his essay "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), throughout the whole of which he hammers down his definition of metaphysical poetry.
both the expression of mortality and, negatively, the fear of death. Even more than Webster, however, John Donne recognized the tensions and disparities between the physical experience and its real meaning, believing that "No contact possible to flesh/Allayed the fever of the bone." And yet for Donne, both intellect and passion intensified each other because the play of intellect he found to be a passionate experience. To quote Kenner on this point:

Donne’s understanding came through his sense, though it ached to transcend the senses; he was not "controversial, polymath," a "religious caterpillar" beclouding himself with a cocoon of deductions or (though a preacher) an "enervate Origen" doing the "blest office of the epicene" (p. 90).

Where Donne and Webster emphasize the dualism between body and soul, flesh and spirit, Griskin, the eternal feminine, emphasizes only one half of this equation—the sensual, what Stendhal once defined as "l’amour physique." In her the spiritual circuits of the past have given way to the experiential circuits of the present, for the potentialities of "pneumatic bliss" are great enough to attract even the "Abstract Entities." And what appears to be the liberation of the flesh is, in reality, a compression which denies transcendence. However, the common condition is yet to be stated:

But our lot crawls between dry ribs
To keep our metaphysics warm.

Like Griskin, our lot is flesh-centered; unlike her it hasn’t entirely driven incorporeal possibilities out of existence. But these possibilities are feeble and abortive, and the duality is not that of Webster and Donne presumably because it makes death an abstraction, not a reality. The poem thus represents the belief that what is needed is
a new synthesis, something between the spontaneity of Griskin and the intellectual sensitivity of the metaphysicals. But because this is insisted upon amid conditions which deny fulfillment, the prevailing emotion of the poem itself continues to be one of despair.

Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar

Now it is significant and essential to this study to note that at no point does this emotion emerge as an absolute (though it will approach this position in "Gerontion"). Nor is it a pose: it never loses its reality, but it never becomes reality in toto—it is dissected in order to substantiate its relevance, not to establish its priority.

The priority which is being established, however, is the priority of positive belief. The point is that Eliot does not take possession of it only as he becomes aware of finitude as a factor of disunity, but rather what has always existed simply becomes more clearly defined and intensified (though the process itself appears to be slow and painful) in proportion to this awareness. The final answer, then, is not to be had by fiat, but only by much more devious and difficult, but predictable, ways—predictable because invariably signaled, as I have said, by a polarity of balancing certain fixed factors against one another. To an increasing degree these factors have existed in each poem considered thus far; and in "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar" (1919), Eliot makes (and partially purloins) what is at this time a most explicit statement.

With the air of a bourgeois de province, Bleistein is as totally unaware of the esthetic and spiritual values of a Canaletto, as the
tourists in "Lune de Miel" of a Leonardo,\(^6\) as the prysbyters of a mural of the Baptized God. Such values are lost to those shaped by devotion to material wealth simply because, in terms of the epigraph, "nothing is permanent unless divine; the rest is smoke," the counterpoint yoked in the end by the "clipped lions of St. Mark's." And Burbank, the aspiring parvenu, finds in the highborn and significantly depraved European, Princess Volupine, "no contact possible to flesh" satisfactory; and he sees in the lions' amputated paws a Prufrockian-like image of his own premature senescence.

Taken together, both men represent the European myth of the American in Europe: moneyed (it is the acquisition of it which is particularly damming), weak, vulgar, and slightly pathetic, who starts and ends at zero, culturally speaking. On the other hand, the Princess Volupine as well as her sometime paramour, Sir Ferdinand Klein, represent the disintegration of the old civilities and pieties of the European past. And all four figures are thrown into relief by statuary styled in a peculiar and oppulent background which had developed, says Eliot, neither a philosophy of enterprise, nor the modern alchemy of physical desire.

The Sweeney Duet

Moving now from Prufrockian sensibility, Eliot fastens his attention on the sensual image of Sweeney, not with a Dionysian joy and

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\(^6\)In this poem, American tourists profane "The Last Supper" by coupling it with "unrestaurant pas cher," within which their one concern is the tip—the alms fee reduced to its absurdity. Similarly, they depart wholly ignorant of the values of a Byzantine church less than a league away. Outside of budgeting their time and their money, nothing counts for such people for nothing else matters.
ecstasy—though of course this was never to be expected—but with a mordant detestation that is not to be found in the earlier poems. To censure Sweeney (Neville Coghill calls him "the average, decent, lout") in terms of sexual function alone in order to demonstrate his vulgarity is very likely the calculated revulsion of one for whom the intellectualized distrust of emotions is common (puritan) stock-in-trade. Certainly something like this lies behind the pervasion of disgust and horror in these poems. For in both "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" (1918) and "Sweeney Erect" (1919), Sweeney and his kind appear as barely distinguishable from animals from whom morality is denied and replaced by an immorality at once somber, brutal, and ugly.

According to F. O. Matthiessen, Eliot once said that "all he consciously set out to create in 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales' was a sense of foreboding." So Sweeney is menaced by a band of likely cut-throats in a public house, a situation diminished and pilloried through its comparison to the betrayal of Agamemnon—a classic formulation of tragedy, enacted in times when the thirst for blood was as urgent an impulse as love but when glory was still possible. But this is not, of course, a nostalgic yearning for a more unique and ecstatic paganism or


9 Rachel, the lady in the cape, the "someone indistinct," and perhaps the host.

10 Grover Smith believes Sweeney's "tragedy" to be that "he can share with greatness only its pollution," rather than merely his failure to match up to a heroic prototype (p. 47).
merely for a more vital past; for beyond both past and present can be heard the unperjured song of the birds near the convent of the Sacred Heart. The meaning, then, cuts in opposite directions inasmuch as Sweeney and Agamemnon become both the betrayed and the betrayors—the victims of sexual duplicity as well as the agents of an esthetic or spiritual breach, the offenders of the nightingales and of the convent.

In the companion piece, "Sweeney Erect," the leveling-down of public morality to fit the erotic pattern of ape-like natural man is continued—and centered. For the scene now shifts from a dive to what may be taken as the inevitable, and symbolic, locus of such creatures: a brothel. Here sex is grotesque and almost fiercely obscene as Sweeney's indifference (he is unaroused by "the female temperament") is placed in contrast with the hysteria of the epileptic, while his foulness is identified with that of Polyphemus. Moreover, he is weighed against the "shadow of a man" which Emerson says is history, doubling it back to the primordial "gesture of orang-outang" rising "from the sheets in steam"—the metamorphosis of l'homme spiritual to l'homme sensual, not so much because Eliot finds the modern sensibility divided, but because he finds it truncated. He will not formulate a vision of sexuality without turning it into an image of ugliness and pain, to the exclusion of anything else.¹¹ Love, then, is necessarily applied only in the most vulgar pejorative sense of the word: lust, a degeneration in meaning that turns the exercise of normal desire into a somewhat inhuman pursuit.

¹¹F.R. Leavis' remark that Eliot "carries in him so disturbing a pressure of disordered inner life, of emotion that he fears and distrusts and cannot understand," is not unappropriate here; see his "T.S. Eliot's Stature as a Critic," Commentary, XXVI (November 1958), 403.
In such poems this impression is not created by tone only, but also by the choice of subject matter, and particularly by the choice of characters: harlots, toughs, libertines. Here sensuality is direct, never really over-intellectualized; and yet, at the same time, it is accompanied by a feeling of reserve, of distance which may amount to the patent wearing of the Puritan figleaf, but which also becomes a private way of disassociating oneself from the assorted vulgarities of modern life. Professor Matthiessen, in illustrating the disparate roles of Prufrock and Sweeney, suggests that both men "are Eliot's chief response to the decadent Boston he knew as a young man" (p. 90). If so, Eliot's truculent handling of Sweeney may then be said to arise from a puritan sense of sin and sordidness, a preoccupation with evil which is at once a moral commitment and a moral blind. I admit that to gain full credence this statement no doubt requires psychological support; but this is not the place, nor am I the person, to supply it. Suffice it to say that his reserve has behind it the personal caution of a real man anxious to state the truth but, at the same time, standing at too great a distance from that which he so vigorously rejects. It is Kathleen Nott who makes the point:

I suggest that Mr. Eliot comes so slowly and obscurely to his main point because he is hard put to it to define, not only a sensibility which while admirable is uniquely Christian, but also a sense for cruelty which shall adequately cover all the wide varieties of this most recognisable vice.12

It is an easy step to affix this judgement, as Mrs. Nott does in effect, to all those early poems in which the characters are made out to be "neurotic, ugly, or savage."

12The Emperor's Clothes (Bloomington, Indiana, 1958), p. 115.
I quote Mrs. Nott's criticism of Eliot's "cruelties" not, however, to accuse him of a limited and aggressive morality but only to further suggest the presence of his patrician and puritan heritage in its formulation and to indicate thereby Eliot's dependence on Christian thought, no matter how it is labeled, no matter how enigmatic or poker-faced such thought may be. That is to say, even in the most dissident and hostile of Eliot's verse can be found something that begins to correspond with his attempt to define new (or old) levels of meaning to believe in, even though such an attempt may be sheltered behind what Robert Adams calls "the armour of the dandy," or Kathleen Nott "the New Philistinism."

But to insist upon a particular moral attitude as the inevitable expression of a religious orientation is not to construct for Eliot a dogmatic theology. Nor is it to forget that in the Sweeney poems the prevailing emotion continues to be that of despair. The fact is that in Eliot neither attitude exists in an absolutely pure state, therefore any discussion of their characteristics will necessitate a certain amount of schematic oversimplification. With this in mind it can be said, I think, that a religious structure—such as it may be—is used as a constant

13 Mrs. Nott's thesis is that this thought in Eliot is no more than partially Christian, partially humane, even though the religious impulse itself may well be sincere. This is, I suppose, what she means by the term "uniquely Christian."

11 Strains of Discord (Ithaca, N.Y., 1958), p. 115; Nott, pp.312ff. Mr. Adams' term is somewhat puerile but not entirely unjust: Conrad Aiken recalls Eliot having carried a mallaca cane whose "nice conduct," he reports Eliot as saying, "was no such easy matter"; and his early fondness for penning his name "T. Stearns-Eliot" is cited by Grover Smith.
background of reference, but a condition of despair makes up the pattern of themes or situations.

Such a reading raises an important question, one with which this chapter begun: is this despair based on some profound vision beyond the range of normal experience, or is it, in fact, an absolute one which is uncompromisingly negative? The choice lies, of course, between a religious construction of experience and one which is thoroughly secular; between an extenuating metaphysical growth and one which has atrophied; between (after Ludwig Lewisohn) "a despairing study of hope and a despairing study of despair." To recognize Eliot's pessimism as being that of deep vision is by now, I suppose, a commonplace, ratified by the patently metaphysical or religious dimension of the later poetry, as well as by the doctrinal pronouncements of the essay. But prior to their publication there seemed to be only one interpretative possibility: to concentrate on those aspects of Eliot's vision which could be subsumed under, but by no means confirmed by, the term "nihilism."

**Gerontion**

Certainly something like this is suggested by the almost obsessive pessimism of "Gerontion" (1919)—seemingly the Poem as an Act of No Return. Hugh Kenner, in writing on Eliot some years ago, remarked that he "explores the mode of negative being," of "annihilation."\(^{15}\)

For Gerontion exists in a state of absolute deterioration, dramatically reduced to immobility by the multiple infirmities of old age, and so much the image of total collapse that in the end there is no more than

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an effigy who complains. Not even that: a voice. It is one which is
de-individualized and without identity, presenting, therefore, a shift
from the subjective (the preceding poetry) to the objective plane: the
protagonist is not made flesh but is instead a formless, impalpable,
non-existent being—but one that suffers. It would seem impossible to
push characterization back any further.

But "Gerontion" has another dimension of meaning: the anomalous
misery is moral. It is not nihilistic because bad as things may be,
there is present—as Stuart Holroyd points out—"religious categories
of thought." In this respect "Gerontion" is essentially no different
than the preceding poetry; at the same time it foreshadows similar but
far more explicit, because more fully developed, characteristics in the
later: the themes of spiritual triumph only through suffering; the de-
generation of modern society in terms of religious decay; the regenera-
tion out of destruction; and the question of positive belief.

Thou hast no youth nor age
But as it were an after dinner sleep
Dreaming of both.

These words from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* form the
epigraph of "Gerontion," and mark the clue and the lineament of its
theme. In the play they are spoken to a man condemned to death, urging
him to believe that nothing will be lost in dying since he had not
lived; that is to say, life is no more than a dream, a period of bogus
reality and hence valueless. The implication is clear enough: in order


17 See Smith, p. 305.
to bring into relief the fundamental nature of contemporary life, Eliot arbitrarily deprives it of meaning. Take away certain beliefs and sensibilities which had heretofore given to life something of value and there remains a substratum which is at once illusory and irrational and which, in turn, implies the concept of death. Thus we have the motionless, un lifelike tableau of Gerontion's vegetative existence:

Here I am, an old man in a dry month,
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain

followed in the next few lines by a concatenation of memories and impressions recalling a zone of action and experience held in vivid contrast to his own:

I was neither at the hot gates
Nor fought in the warm rain
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,
Bitten by flies, fought.

To identify the historical events to which these images refer is no doubt important, but it suffices to know, I believe, that they simply represent moments of heroic action forever lost to Gerontion, hence stirring him to envy and to poignant recollection. And symptomatic of this declension in vitality is the abrupt reduction to the squalid condition of the present, the "decayed house" which contains the moribund Gerontion—a condition summarized by the bald isolation of the inconsolable,

I an old man,
A dull head among windy spaces.

Contemporary reality is thus rendered colorless by its divorce from certain values and energies and in being so is controlled, denied, and

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\(^{18}\) For this identification see Matthiessen, p. 101.
frozen into what may be named "the attrition of mobility." The result is a systematic deterioration which turns the decayed house into a kind of limbo, and Gerontion himself into an anonymous and disembodied voice that has "no ghosts."

At this point it might be well to return to the pair of lines with which the poem begins:

Here I am, an old man in a dry month,  
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.

My underscore is to emphasize the presence of what many Eliot-critics take to be a symbol of spiritual rebirth in his poetry: water, "a prerequisite of a return to the obsessive experience," a presentiment of something sacred which can, in one way or another, restore those who are cut off from the sanctions of the supernatural. This is, in part, the sign for which Gerontion is waiting—in part because it now translates into something more:

Signs are taken for wonders, "We would see a sign!"  
The word within a word, unable to speak a word,  
Swaddled with darkness.

I wish to quote Eliot's source here, for this stanza is not only crucial to "Gerontion," but to Eliot's quest for tradition as well:

Signs are taken for wonders. 'Master, we would fain see a sign' [Matt. 12:38], that is a miracle. And in this sense it is a sign to wonder at. Indeed, every word here is a wonder. . . . Verbum infans, the Word without a word; the eternal Word not able to speak a word; 1. a wonder sure.  
2. And . . . swaddled; and that a wonder too.  

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19 The quoted phrase is from Ungar, The Man in the Name (Minneapolis, 1956), p. 170; see also Edmund Wilson, Axel's Castle (New York, 1931), p. 106, for an early estimate of this meaning.

20 Lancelot Andrewes, Works, I, 204, in Smith, p. 306.
There are two ideas to be pinned down here. First, it is evident that to survive—or rather to revive—Gerontion must find again a mode of thought and creativity which is revealed as rooted in religious experience. Second, it is clear that this involves a return to the Christian fountainhead for, for the first time in Eliot's poetry, Christ is evoked, presumably as the point of departure towards solution, presumably the imperious superior power which can in some way restore the disinherited vitality of the past. I say "presumably" because at this point nothing is certain: the Word is wrapped in darkness (recalling the mural in "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service"), concealed by an apostate present which makes its disclosure improbable. It would take a miracle. But even this would be no guarantee of a solution, for it would bring the Divinity as something alien:

In the juvenescence of the year

Came Christ the tiger.

Ungar believes that Christ as tiger represents the equivalent to the ecstatic experience which he finds recurring throughout Eliot's poetry (pp. 173-4). In "Gerontion," however, this connection is very nearly broken (as Ungar indeed realizes), because here the significance of the ecstasy is dependent on a contrast rather than a correspondence: Gerontion would see a sign and yet he is apparently incapable of religious belief. He does not say no. He cannot say yes. Hence any suggestion of affirmation is to be followed by an annihilating negation, a condition corresponding to the impotence and futility of Gerontion and of his milieu; and indicating that there cannot be, not even for a moment, an interregnum of hope.
When viewed in this way, it becomes apparent why many have fashioned, negatively, certain synthetic alternatives: money (Mr. Silvero), art (Hakagawa), the occult (Madame de Tornquist), and carnal love (Fraulein von Kulp)—a registry of apostates actively engaged in "the lurid malaise of some cosmopolitan Black Mass," and hence responsible for the depravation (the "drowning," Yeats might say) of the Christian communal rite, the sacrament now

To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk
Among whispers;

As Amos Wilder puts it, such rites had once "asserted and communicated the deeper sanctions for existence, and kept alive in men a sense of its mysterious and transcendent ground." But the present has witnessed a general lack of contact with sanctity, a falling away from the eternal to values prescribed as temporal because committed to the urgencies of a moment or of an age. Moreover, the corrosion of the communal ceremony dovetails, symbolically, with the corrosion of the socio-cultural community: the deracinated Jew is like the deracinated Oriental is like the deracinated Scandinavians and so on to the point of complete cultural atomization—as the conclusion of the poem makes clear.

Holroyd's category of the religious applies properly then in "Gerontion" to the awareness of the incommensurability between secular

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21 The first two are self-evident, I am in debt to Matthiessen for the third (p. 121), and the fourth is conjectural, based on what would seem to be the logical Eliotesque complement.

22 Kenner, p. 130.

demands and divine formulae and the sense of guilt that attends this awareness: "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" And preoccupation with this problem now constitutes the fundamental orientation of Gerontion's self-criticism. Finding it difficult to give articulate form to this intuition because of his all but complete inertia—the hammer-like series of "think nows" are forced and painful—he holds the past accountable for his decline, as well as for the decline of his world:

Think now

History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities.

That is, he conceives history as something which cannot be trusted to provide correct (moral) lines of action, simply because it has failed to provide that sense of permanence and continuity which Eliot finds lacking in contemporary history. Furthermore, history is incapable of sustaining the fundamental religious impulse which, when given too late, is accepted "in memory only" as "reconsidered passion"; or, when given too soon, is rejected for lacking the preparation required to realize its necessity. The first is emotion stifled by intellect; the second, intellect stifled by emotion. Consequently, there is apparently little hope for regeneration:

Think

Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices
Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues
Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.

Here is a hostility between passion and intellect which, in the last analysis, cannot be resolved no matter what form Gerontion's contrition (or attrition) takes, thus making it clear that he is in conflict with an outside force which he can in no way control or even appease.
Ironically, his noblest efforts would involve him in further guilt, and even what good he might achieve would be no more than accidental. Hence: "These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree"—"the crucifixion yew tree," says Grover Smith, "and the death tree of the hanged traitor," betrayer of Christ (p. 61). In the presence of the absolute independence of this force, the predicament to which Gerontion is condemned is felt as implacable. For his guilt is absolute, as absolute as is the fact of his disillusion and despair; thus one feels that to exist is to be guilty, that to be guilty demands and inevitably receives retribution: "The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours."

Christ comes in again as the destroyer, a force which makes all positions untenable, all acts potentially fruitless. All Gerontion can do is counter this force with a show of sincerity (any other approach would eliminate, in terms of the poem, even an "accidental" solution), refusing to perjure himself either by protesting his innocence or by performing an act of penitence:

Think at last

We have not reached conclusion, when I
Stiffen in a rented house. Think at last
I have not made this show purposelessly
And it is not by any concitation
Of the backward devils.
I would meet you upon this honestly.

Confronted with spiritual death and having just enough strength in the interval to proffer a few words in his own behalf, Gerontion would make it clear that he speaks without pretension or fear, as well as without the ministry of false prophets. And more: even though he is

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24 This is what I take the "concitation of backward devils" to mean; see Inferno (xx), a chapter which concerns those who have engaged in forbidden arts.
dying in a house "decayed" because no longer sanctified by the divine presence and thus irreparable, he nevertheless believes (or would like to believe, I am not sure which) that his ending must not be all, that it is not a "conclusion." John Middleton Murray must mean something like this when he says apropos of tragic poetry: "The tragic experience rises out of a sympathy with the effort to realize the ideal, and our recognition that it must be defeated, and yet produces the conviction that it is not in vain." Gerontion would like to "realize the ideal," knows that he cannot, but would like to know in any case that something could be gained in defiance of circumstance and inspite of impending disaster. As Murray goes on to say, "This experience has been central to the Christian religion, however much it has been materialized." In hoping for another conclusion, Gerontion becomes the perfect representative of this experience.

The rehearsal of his present state continues:

I that was near your heart was removed therefrom
To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.
I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it.
Since what is kept must be adulterated?
I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:
How should I use it for my closer contact?

The conviction that informs this passage is a reassertion that passion was once and ought now to be at work in support of religious belief, but that it has given in to a surcharge of intellect in default of genuine faith and confidence. The question is, how can it be restored and preserved inasmuch as he is deprived of his senses? It is a loss which makes a religious apprehension of life impossible and the discontinuity

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between the temporal and the divine inevitable. The point is that Gerontion's knowledge is an understanding that he is impotent to act and to believe because he is emotionally, hence spiritually, dead. He lacks what John Henry Newman once described as "real assent," that is, "one made by a shift of the total personality."^27 The result is, at best, "chilled delirium," "reconsidered passion" endlessly examined and re-examined, inverted and reversed, "in a wilderness of mirrors."

I don't believe it is necessary to know, as Professor Smith would have it, the second law of thermodynamics to see that "Gerontion" ends with a bang as well as with a whimper.28 For the violent whirling of De Bailhache and company "Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear/In fractured atoms" suggests well enough the material representation of a state when faced with the force of "dissociation" and the radical break-up of all personal relationships. Moreover, it is clear that Gerontion has no choice but to submit to these winds that blow in one direction only: "beyond the circuit"—towards annihilation. But as Hugh Kenner suggests, "annihilation closely resembles self-surrender."^29 Gerontion recognizes his role, such as it is, and accepts death and chaos as his inevitable dispensation; for in the end he is no closer to receiving the communion embodied in the redemptive rain:

"Tenants of the house, Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season."

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27 The underscore is mine, the quotation is from G.H. Bantock's Freedom and Authority in Education (London, 1952), p. 111.

28 See Smith, p. 62.

And so there is no reprieve as there was, finally, for the condemned man with whom the epigraph connects. But it is indeed Gerontion's distinction to acknowledge his extreme dislocation and the solitude of his position, to locate its origin in the pervasive secularism of history, and to know, above all, that the antidote must lie only in the recovery of religious consciousness. At the same time, Unger's remark that this pursuit "is not the explicit but the underlying theme" (p. 173), is not to be disregarded. Gerontion's religious focus is not a moral or ethical experience, not a way of recreating lost values, but simply a way of interpreting life from the center of an inanimating despair. And this interpretation is fundamentally and insistently skeptical insofar as he is unable to surrender himself to faith and, in fact, mistrusts it.
CHAPTER III

THE WASTE LAND

The Waste Land (1922) grew from an effort to understand and make possible the kind of surrender which Gerontion was impotent to achieve by pointing towards a new set of values with a unity made manifest not by an intellectual scheme alone, but through impregnation by a new ordering of the spirit. To observe that this demanded, in terms of the poem, a mythic recreation of a civilization (not just a photograph), in its turn requiring an intricate collage of references and cross-references ranging over many moments of world history, is by now commonly known—the result of what Edward Dahlberg has irreverently, but not extravagantly, labeled "the biggest paper chase in the history of criticism." It is not my intention, however, to audit in detail the profusions of image and citation on which this poem rests—it would be vain to list them all—but rather to comment on those lines and passages most urgently dealing with Eliot's pursuit of tradition. Actually, one need only point to them. But first it may be well to preface this discussion with a quick survey of his design and of its origin.

The impact of the destruction of the traditional community and its values is manipulated through the essential image of an arid land

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1Eliot's original impulse was to publish "Gerontion" and The Waste Land as a single poem with a single theme but was dissuaded from doing so by Ezra Pound; see Kenner, p. 148.

2In "Edward Dahlberg and Herbert Read: A Dialogue," The Twentieth Century, CLXVI (August 1959), 60.
in which all life is dead or dying for lack of water, the pervasive symbol of spiritual regeneration. This image is essentially timeless, for it originates in the primitive fertility rites related to the coming of spring—the idea of a vegetation spirit which perennially dies and is perennially reborn. With its evolution into medieval saga (the Grail legend) the setting becomes a fantastic kingdom and landscape with semi-mythical characters: a king, a hero, prophets, among others. In Jessie Weston's From Ritual to Romance—which, together with Sir James G. Frazer's The Golden Bough, Eliot relied upon for his mythic material—the hero arrives to find this realm enchanted into a waste land, made barren by prolonged drought and ruled by a sexually maimed and impotent lord—the Fisher King. It is the hero's role to break the spell, thereby restoring both the virility of the king and the luxuriance of his land. Eliot, drawing freely from this mythology, adapts it to his own temperament by shifting its meaning from physical to spiritual sterility, refining the task of restoration beyond the limits of merely temporal concerns. This is indeed the proof of a poem of the religious order—a poem working against the present evil of the world, but recreating it into a single perspective of imperishable experience in which past and present together are measured against the preferable verity of religious belief.

But how is this expressed in The Waste Land's four hundred-odd lines? One is tempted to answer: through Despair itself.

"Yes, and I myself saw with my own eyes the Sibyl of Cumae hanging in a cage; and when the children cried at her, 'Sibyl, what do you want?' she used to reply, 'I want to die.'"
In this epigraph, this fragment from Petronius, is compressed the meaning and dispensation of contemporary history. The speech of the Sibyl then is essentially prophetic. And yet it not only dictates future events, it also bespeaks a current truth. It announces what has already commenced. It indicates the future as well as that which has come before. Of such a kind is the Sibyl's wisdom that it makes itself understood through a millennium, though perhaps it is never at the moment understood—a wisdom which lays open with a scalpel, the formless cadaver of the waste land.

The theme that informs Part I, "The Burial of the Dead," is that modern man exists in a state of spiritual torpor, dying yet ready to be reborn:

April is the cruellest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing Memory and desire, stirring Dull roots with spring rain. Winter kept us warm, covering Earth in forgetful snow, feeding A little life with dried tubers.

In the season of rebirth the narrator feels the presence of new life, but would prefer to remain dormant under the self-effacing snow than to confront a potential resurrection. And yet through rebirth will come purification, its likelihood signaled by a quick, short, burst of rain. But the soil is too arid for flowering. And the narrator—the "hero"—, enforcing the contemporary, and perpetual, indifference, turns for cover to a coffee house and to memories of a less difficult but no less tangible past.

Meanwhile, the dying is a slow and ugly process:
What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.

Here one cannot avoid the conclusion that for Christ, as well as for all others, there exists a burial of fertility, a drying up of the spiritual sources; this, in turn, produces a state of death-in-life for which there is no translation except fear, existing in a purgatory of stones.

The infertility of this world is given further definition in terms of the Hyacinth garden, which contrasts directly to the broken images and the caustic dust, emphasizing by its difference the quality of the dead land:

"You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
They called me the hyacinth girl."
--Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak

This experience is, on the highest level, a reduplication of that moment of intensity and illumination found in the earlier poetry; however, the response is far more explicit, more final than before:

my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

As one might expect, it is Leonard Ungar who makes the point here: it is his argument that this passage recalls "not the experience in the garden, but his [the "I" character] removal from it, his failure to see its meaning" (p. 174). And this fact, as I have tried to suggest, is so much the result of a lack of faith and vision that the hero is denied access to the garden with its promise of regeneration and grace.
But in such questions of belief the danger is not the inadequacy but the distortion. For in Madame Sosostris we have (as in "Gerontion") the religious artificer who, lacking the will to achieve a truly Christian synthesis, creates surrogates in its place. It is owing to her imperfect spiritual vision that she cannot, in her "wicked pack of cards," find "The Hanged Man," a symbol generally taken to represent the figure of the crucified Christ. Moreover, she fears death by water, thus failing to see, as Cleanth Brooks observes, "that the way into life may be death itself."^4

The last stanza of Part I is a hermetically concentrated description of the voiceless boredom which pervades the territory. Here is part of it:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

According to Eliot's appended "Notes" to this poem, the fourth line is from the Inferno, specifically from "The Gate of Hell," where souls are "eternally unclassified" (the phrase is John Ciardi's) in a limbo which is neither Heaven nor Hell. This analogy translates the Unreal City into the modern Inferno whose inhabitants suffer the ennui of the damned as a symbolic retribution for their irreligion. That they do not aspire

^3Smith, p. 66; or Williamson, p. 118.
towards a life larger and more permanent than their own is made clear in the narrator's dialogue with his friend in the crowd:

"That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
"Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?  
"Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?

The corpse is the slain god, the Hanged Man who must not be resurrected if the present compulsions of denial are to be sustained.

Part II, "The Chess Game," gives further emphasis to the lack of community which occurred in the preceding passage. Even that which passes for love is a mockery of real affection: the wellborn intrigante lacquered with "synthetic perfumes"; the middle-class couple whose depressive attempts at speech betray the impenetrable coldness beneath it all—the absence, in fact, of anything approaching the normal familiarity of marriage:

"My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.  
"Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.  
"What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?  
"I never know what you are thinking. Think."

Followed by:

"Do  
"You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember  
"Nothing?"

And finally, on the lower strata of society, the woman in a London pub for whom love is no more than an importune and troublesome accident to be remedied by a pill. For these as well as for others who have yet to appear, love has come down to this: to a going through of the motions which, because it obstructs essential relationships, finally exhausts

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6 Eliot refers the reader to Thomas Middleton's Women Beware Women where, in Act II, scene ii, a game of chess is used to hold the attention of a mother-in-law while her daughter-in-law is being seduced.
and destroys itself in the symbolic act of abortion. This is underscored by the anticipatory "knock upon the door," which is time, perhaps, or death; and by the insistence of the barkeep's predictive command as he closes up shop: "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME."

But the most decisive statement of this theme occurs in "The Fire Sermon," in the brutalizing scene between the typist and the carbuncular young man. Such loveless situations are not prepared for by "The Chess Game" alone, but also by the quester's acute revulsion of the carnal, indeed obscene, intemperance of his world refracted through the kaleidoscope effect habitual to Eliot: the section's first focus falls on the garbage and offal of the modern Thames, now a river of lust from where the nympha of love have departed; sweeps backward to the sensuous but no less solemnizing epiphany evoked by Spencer's "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song"; and forward again to the dissonance of "horn's and motors" as the perversion of Philomela's cry which shall accompany Sweeney to Mrs. Porter. And the entire passage is thrown into direct contrast with: "Et 0 ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!"

But the dominant symbol in this section—in fact in the entire poem, as Eliot's "Notes" affirm—is contained in the figure of the prophet Tiresias. Here we hold the key—at least one key—to Eliot's all-pervasive intention when we find him ascribing to a seer the prierity of thoughts which, through Eliot, have become common property: Tiresias is able to see the past in the present as a cohesive and continuous whole. For he perceives the total reality of the waste land (but "un-real" to the provisional sight of the quester), sees through illusion
and dream:

I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest—[1]

thus seeing in the sordid affair of the typist and the clerk the mechanical heirs of an age as well as the attenuators of tradition, although in this case surely one of questionable value:

(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
Enacted on this same divan or bed;
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall
And walked among the lowest of the dead.)

Such reflections occur throughout The Waste Land, but it is the distinction of this passage that it provides, in the embracing and penetrating seizures of prophetic vision, an alternative of insight to the despair and disenchantment of Eliot's earlier work. Counter to the crowd swarming over London Bridge with "sighs, short and infrequent," Tiresias does not strike the attitudes of the sufferer with dismissals of ignorance; nor is he blind to the facts of contemporary history, especially when these facts are attested to by the best witness possible: the past. He is as profoundly aware of the malediction which governs the waste land as was Gerontion; and he is equally interested in the spiritual consequences but with this difference: where knowledge of this condition made despair nearly unbearable for Gerontion, Tiresias is capable of turning this knowledge into action. But the nature and quality of such action is not to be revealed until the final section, and so "The Fire Sermon" serves only to prepare for the potential purification.

Intimations of such an act are contained in the fragments of music which the protagonist now and again hears near the church of
Magnus Martyr. But as the experience in the Hyacinth garden was terminated by "Oed' und leer das Meer," so this moment is subsumed under the fleshly preoccupations of Elizabeth and Leicester on the river of lust. This is what Mr. Williamson means when he identifies their voyage with the hero's "moral journey," for they are alike in that both end in a state that "can connect/Nothing with nothing" (p. 144). Their passion to a large degree depends on its asceticism and unfillment, and they can only accept the present degradation—rather the waste land.

Be that as it may, as the sermon concludes it is the hero's dispensation to be plucked "burning" from the river, to be dropped into the sea where he passes "the stages of his age and youth/Entering the whirlpool" of religious anxiety as a prefigurement of a potential regeneration. At the same time, it is apparent that a patent examination of conscience, the audit of his past life alone, is not enough to assure "the presence of a will to believe." He seems to be confronted by rejection, scarified by the abusive hallucinations of:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{If there were water} \\
\text{And no rock} \\
\text{If there were rock} \\
\text{And also water} \\
\text{And water} \\
\text{A spring} \\
\text{A pool among the rock . . .} \\
\text{But there is no water}
\end{align*}
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The pulsation does not distract, but is aimed at intensifying into essential statement the belief that in an illusory and even distorted world, there can be little hope for the recovery of grace. Yet the fact is that to be fully aware of the "unreal" nature of this world

\[\text{7Holroyd, p. 198.}\]
is to give rise to the longing for something larger and more permanent in life. Therefore the shadow he sees but fails to recognize ("Who is the third who walks always beside you?") is Jesus as he appeared to his disciples, in other words, the resurrected god. And followed, significantly, by "a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust/Bringing rain."

The way is now cleared for the message of spiritual rebirth, for the suggested action of the incantational "Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata," brought by the thunder. However, I don't think this should be construed as a statement of belief. It is a prayer from the abyss, and therefore a beginning, not an end. And the attendant conditions--give, sympathise, control--can be achieved only in "The awful daring of a moment's surrender/Which an age of prudence can never retract." That is to say, a man cannot be absolutely self-regarding, nor can he actually live content in a waste land simple because that is the "true" condition of things. Locked in his solitary identity, he can transcend his essential isolation only by self-surrender and sympathy with others:

I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison

And if secularization has destroyed the age, and the suggestion is that it has, the protagonist still has private obligations to fulfill. Even if civilization is breaking up—or down like London Bridge—there remains the individual duty: "Shall I at least set my lands in order?"

But it is not clear how this is to be achieved, nor even if it can be achieved. All the hero can do is shore the fragments of his insight and belief against the imminence of further dissolution. For despite the
final invocation and as F.R. Leavis has said, "The poem begins where it ends": in a state of aridity. It is the story of a pilgrimage which apparently fails.

The presiding mood, then, continues to be one of pessimism, or at least of incertitude—a mood impoverished by doubt and yet motivated by feelings of religious empathy. As Stuart Holroyd, in writing on The Waste Land, observed: "The virtues of self-surrender, sympathy and self-control are certainly not inconsistent with the Christian ethic, but the Christian virtue which is conspicuously absent here is: faith."^{9}

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^{9}Holroyd, p. 200.
Ludwig Lewisohn once observed that "broadly speaking it remains true that the modern attitude to the written word could not and did not arise until scripture had become literature and literature scripture."\(^1\) Eliot's ethical immanence of values dramatizes this statement by making clear his yearning to regulate the actual in terms of the absolute categories of Christian belief. It is to be expected, then, that the last poem of this period, "The Hollow Men" (1925), would necessarily contain his most explicit attempt in verse to integrate scripture and literature; and that it would necessarily be phrased, at least in part, in a language worthy to celebrate that integration, should it be made. True, it is not made; it does not turn into a clear-cut, self-contained, explainable commitment. But, after the profound skepticism and despair of the preceding poetry, it does "pronounce its hope that this world of death may disclose a means of life,"\(^2\) even though such a disclosure is no more than partial and incomplete.

The poem begins with a pair of epigraphs. The first, "Mistah Kurtz--he dead," deliberately suggests "the horror" of which Conrad wrote in *The Heart of Darkness*: that human existence is an escape from something evil rather than a journey towards something good; and that

\(^1\)Expression in America (New York, 1932), p. x.
\(^2\)Smith, p. 99.
the individual himself is doomed because he is "hollow at the core."
His private beliefs have been shattered only to be replaced, not by new
beliefs but by none at all (as they were for Kurtz)—a state of which
one seems to be virtually unaware until, perhaps, the moment of death.
The second epigraph, "A Penny for the Old Guy" evokes, as Hugh Kenner
explains, "a man whose zeal for the old religion led him unintention­
ally to provide the populace with an inferior religion wherein are
preserved and perverted festivals of fire older than the church of
Rome" (p. 187)—which is simply to say that because Guy Fawkes' plot
against parliament was enacted on behalf of Catholicism, the Roman
Church was subsequently denounced and oppressed. Together these epi­
graphs offer an expression of fear for the nature and fate of both the
social and religious terrain, in addition to underscoring the quality of
its inhabitants. They are, collectively:

the hollow men . . .
the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw.

Which is clearly the stance for the inner world which is commensurate
with the outer world of insubstantiality:

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;
both worlds melting into a kingdom of life-in-death where the figures,
in the agony of their inaction, are little more than effigies of "These
who have crossed/With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom."

If this interpretation is followed through the implication would
then be that the hollow men are in need of enlightenment, of a regenera­
tion into faith to avoid becoming victims of their own suffering. But
the speaker makes evident the loss of moral courage necessary to face this need:

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams
In death's dream kingdom

In its place he turns possible turning points into a trumpery of vague and illusive images which avoid in their sentimentality "the challenge of positive faith." He will even create new roles for himself, new surrogates for his lack of reality, new denials of personality:

Let me be no nearer
In death's dream kingdom
Let me also wear
Such deliberate disguises
Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves
In a field
Behaving as the wind behaves
No nearer--3

The difficulty with denial is that it prevents taking constructive action: if a perception doesn't seem to exist there's no incentive to do anything about it.

Part III universalizes this concept by ascribing it to the deification of "stone images" which have risen in place of Christianity (symbolized, I believe, in "the twinkle of a fading star"), hence supplanting the beauty and peace of the earth with the aridity of "the dead land . . . the cactus land," and with the lassitude of men who have turned from God. The question, "Is it like this/In death's other kingdom," contains the narrator's need to apprehend and lay hold of something beyond his own isolation and that of his apostate society. His lips

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3One recalls at this point not only the many other scenes of quick-change disguise in Eliot (his most sustained description occurs in "Mélange Adultère de Tout"), but also Conrad's Russian sailor in The Heart of Darkness, symbolically appareled in harlequin dress.
"would kiss"—the supreme gesture—were they not denied by the spiritual emptiness of the cultural climate, by the forged supplications "to broken stone."

To further support the idea of general dislocation, Part IV signals the total collapse of the Church: the eyes of spiritual light have vanished, the "fading star" becomes one of "the dying stars," and the hollow men are now deprived of their speech and sight. They are deprived because there is no community, and there is no community because there is no church. Yet this section ends with a vision of hope, desperate as it may be, rather than one of confirmed futility and despair: their sight will return if,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The eyes reappear} \\
\text{As the perpetual star} \\
\text{Multifoliate rose} \\
\text{Of death's twilight kingdom} \\
\text{The hope only} \\
\text{Of empty men.}
\end{align*}
\]

As Professor Williamson puts it: "as star becomes rose, so rose becomes ... an image of the church," a "rose window" (p. 159) through which will shine the perpetual light of faith, thus redeeming the hollow men from their moral inquietude and dereliction.

But the act of revelation seems unlikely insofar as the prevailing mood of the concluding section remains one of profound discouragement. For here in the cactus land Christian formulae withers and decays into the adolescent mimicry of a nursery rhyme ("Here we go round the prickly pear")—the hypnotic liturgy of the living dead. Moreover, the founding of rigorous spiritual principles cannot be achieved owing to the intercession of the shadow of fear between the consecutive statements of
affirmation: idea and reality, motion and act, conception and creation, emotion and response, and so on; at last culminating in the division and unfulfillment of the plea of conciliation:

For Thine is
Life is
For Thine is the

Followed, significantly, with a panic of insight:

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.

On the one hand this reveals the purposelessness of all material consolations, and on the other suggests "that death is no final destruction, but is a birth, the first sound of a newborn creature." Death then is not well contemplated except when it projects the spirit, not towards a dream, but towards a preferable verity, one which can, Eliot supposes, suppress time and dissolve all bitterness.

It may thus be said that however slight may have been the hope of discovering an answer, it was part of Eliot's philosophy to continue consideration of such questions, to examine the approaches to them, and thereby to keep alive the search for an existence which had been impaired and even swept away by the mediocrity of his cultural-religious environment.

Giorgio Melchiori, The Tightrope Walkers (London, 1956), p. 120.
CHAPTER V
NOTES TOWARDS A DEFINITION

It is not my intention to rehearse all that the early poetry reveals in the way of Eliot's response to traditional thought, but rather to make clear his starting point and the direction of his pursuit. In a sense the closing paragraphs of the last chapter marked the end of this effort and of the study which I want to offer for consideration. Yet this is, I suspect, to indicate a greater simplicity than the nature of the question allows, as well as to depreciate many of the ideas which nourished it. The form that Eliot's tradition progressively assumes needs to be more closely defined and the quality of its role appraised. To this end this chapter comes both as a necessary postscript and a conclusion.

It seems to me that in attempting to understand Eliot's notion of tradition nothing is more capricious than accuracy, nor more elusive, nor more difficult to hold when caught, for the concept is blurred to begin with by being molded twice over—first by its formal definition and then by what it uniquely signifies for Eliot. What is more, because the motives behind this concept are varied, complex, and at this time, incomplete, to lay firm hold on their meaning no doubt demands evidence more subjective than that furnished by the poetry alone. But in one sense the answer is comparatively simple: the lines along which a formal definition might run are more or less agreed to. Such lines are to
be found both in the sense of "holding on" or consolidating, as well as in the literal sense of "handing on" or transmitting. The first is that found in the established values of the past, the essentially permanent in life; the second exists in "the always manifest sense of change,"¹ that which tends to extend and preserve itself by a constant effort of renewal. The maintenance of tradition is to be found in the balance and imbalance between the two, and in the guarantee of their common inheritance.

But Eliot's tradition, although in essential agreement with this reading, is not precisely an inheritance; it is a system of will in action. He is not an impartial observer, nor simply the guardian of transmittal, he is a participant. Together the poles of the formal concept dovetail past and present by constantly affirming and reaffirming their common connection and their relevance. Eliot's tradition not only affirms, it also selects and adjudges.

In defining it for himself, Eliot once quoted this phrase from Remy de Gourmont: "Eriger en lois ses impressions personelles, c'est le grand effort d'un homme s'il est sincere."² To be exact, this is the task of the critic but as Matthew Arnold suggested as long ago as 1864:

Every one can see that a poet . . . ought to know life and the world before dealing with them in poetry; and life and the world being in modern times, very complex things, the creation of a modern poet, to be worth much, implies a great critical effort behind it.³

¹Briffault, p. 41.
Thus if the assumptions behind these statements were true of Arnold's time—and I believe they were—they are still more relevant to Eliot's and to the man himself. For this can now be said: the constant stress that grows out of his essays and that figures very largely in the poetry reviewed is that which recognizes the poet's task as being, before all else, a search or quest for the proper discipline, for a personal identity within a given framework of values, for a sense of placement and continuity.

But there is for Eliot a prerequisite: this sense must be one that will give him freedom. For it may also be said that his problem was not so much to control as to do justice to his own individuality, to define the rights of a traditional society with his personal and private ideals. It is against such a background that the early poems pass in continual review. For as we have seen, they dramatize not only the cause—the dissociation of appearance and meaning in western culture—but also the effect—the need for the individual, unsupported by values outside of himself, to acquire identity as an isolated person. And while this position ultimately derives its sanction from divine authority, it first grew out of a search for a creative principle to steady the practice of his art.

The passage which most clearly reveals his awareness of the issues and his choice, which is necessitous, occurs in his review of Ulysses. He puts the matter with some care:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him... It is simply
a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and a
significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy
which is contemporary history.4

This is important. It is the preliminary statement, summing up in this
period a pattern of unity which, because of its pervasiveness, can be
recognized as his means of arriving at tradition. Even the most cursory
glance over the corpus of Eliot's early work will reveal how deeply this
was felt, and how often it was dealt with: his preference of Hawthorne
to James because Hawthorne "had a very acute historical sense" and James
did not (1918); his approval of Ezra Pound's poetic method involving as
it did, a "final concentration of the entire past upon the present"
(1919); his essay on J. Middleton Murry with its attendant plea for "the
creative eye" which can survey past and present simultaneously (1920);
his favorable review of Frazer's The Golden Bough (1921); finally
(though not for lack of example), his mythic structuring of the present
in The Waste Land (1922).5

What is to be maintained, through this maze of references, is
that myth is an organic principle—and Eliot's conception of tradition
is avowedly the conception of an "organic whole." Which, in its turn,
simmers down to this: myth provides not only a structural pattern, but
also a status and function. It renders homage to man's ancestral and

4"Ulysses, Order and Myth," The Dial, LXXV (November 1923), 4.
5The first quotation is drawn from one of Eliot's uncollected essays in The Little Review (1918), and it is here taken from F.O.
traditional roots; it involves loyalty to essential forms in a time of general change and unrest; and, significantly, it denounces the polemics of individualism because it demands an absolute beyond experience in order to intellectually judge experience. One needn't explore this principle much further to observe the extent to which the intellect is required to preside over the emotions. Myth in truth becomes for Eliot—and this I take to be particularly telling—simply a poetic abstraction, an elaborately objective form to which all thematic content is subordinated, an elaborate apparatus of allusions.

What I am preparing to say is not that "Gerontion", for example, or The Waste Land has the form and substance of an ethnographic report; but rather that the kind of anthropology they suggest is the arm-chair variety—the arbitrary ordering of recorded legend to substantiate personal preference and belief. Thus in the formulation of Eliot's tradition, the main issue at stake particularly bears upon the acquisition of a synthetic pattern. Thus the necessity for a form, a structure, if needs be a fiction, based on the principles of unity. Thus, too, the profound need in the space of a poem to organize his knowledge, to erect a concept that will escape the diffraction of formlessness by referring not to the intuitional, but to the intellectual. In this way, for the poet, the re-creation of meaning will finally be able to start.

But there is more to it than this. Where Eliot's early poetry is concerned, there seems always an awareness of the need, and hence the practice "to manipulate a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" (emphasis added). Society and civilization collapse
together when one sees the duplicity of Clytemnestra and her paramour synthesized with that of the ominous trollops in a London pub; and when Princess Volupine submits to Burbank, the Venetian past is purposefully present not in its beauty, but in its evil—the two components of Europe that formed an inseparable unity in the past. If further proof is needed, consider *The Waste Land*, where the desert of medieval legend, the Carthage of St. Augustine, Elizabethan England, and Baudelaire's Paris are pasted together into a collage of modern London.

Here again the exploitation of knowledge is obvious: poetry put to such a use doesn't contain real experience, but simply "symbols" of that experience. Yet one finds it difficult to do less than praise Eliot for this "manipulation," and after to talk about its significance. For what is clearly in view here—and what, indeed, Eliot is constantly invoking—is his effort to conserve not whatever happens to be the past, but rather the consensus of an entire civilization. Although his tradition emphasizes the importance of the past and reorders it accordingly, it doesn't consist merely in following its ways. Thus one can see how completely wrong was Malcolm Cowley, when he said that all Eliot meant by *The Waste Land* was that "the present is inferior to the past." Or, similarly, the opinion of Van Wyck Brooks' mouthpiece, Oliver Allston, who thought it "immature to 'break away' from the mould of life and seek for death... immature to whine, with Eliot and Pound, about the 'pure' past and the 'vulgar' present." Surely such criticism is too simple.

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6. *Exile's Return* (New York, 1934), p. 96; it is necessary to say, however, that Cowley "corrects" this opinion in the revised (1951) edition of his book (pp. 112-13).

Eliot conceives tradition as being something more than mere antiquarian re-creation; it is not a thing to be kept in museums, a refuge from reality. And if his work appears to serve that nostalgic yearning for "the golden day when mystery survived," for the old civilities and sanctified glories of the past, it does so as a means, not an end.

On the other hand, it must be said that while this defense dismisses Cowley, it doesn't entirely dismiss Brooks—whose argument not only questions Eliot's procedure, but also indicates discontent with the moral position which supported it. Here are firmer grounds for dissent. Much of Eliot's work does undoubtedly pose for debate a question of "puritanism" in its most pejorative sense—puritanism as a general expression of disgust and revulsion operating almost to the exclusion of anything else. Sexual asceticism denouncing sexual athleticism—we have seen this occurring over and over again, from the sheer animalism of Sweeney to the mechanical but no less successful debauchery of the young man carbuncular. As Edmund Wilson pointed out many years ago, these are elements of a long-standing native dialectic; such a chilling of the blood is a necessary part of Eliot's over-intellectuality, and of his role as "the Puritan-turned-artist" still bound to New England despite his hankering after the amenities of Old England.

This, I think, goes a long way toward explaining Eliot's somewhat enigmatic remark that he wrote The Waste Land "to relieve [his]

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9Axel's Castle, pp. 102-03.
emotions.\footnote{Richard Chase, "T.S. Eliot in Concord," \textit{American Scholar}, XVI (Autumn 1947), 442.} For "relieve" read "control," i.e., "suppress." As I argued earlier, many of the poems considered deal with intellectualized emotion, when there is any to intellectualize—most often there is only a pretense of emotion intellectualized and poetized within the significantly abstract "mythic" framework, thereby removing the artist not only from the emotional focuses of his work, but also from the experience contained in the very life around him. In other words, this intellectuality, and what one does with it, constitutes "experience" for Eliot, and "experience" in this sense to him is, as it seems, the essential reality of human life, and the only reality that greatly matters.

Of course to describe reality in this way is inaccurate; it describes an attitude toward reality. And even though some of his poems effectively capture the often brutal and rapacious nature of modern life, the style is never sustained, presumably because the poet can never become (or refuses to become) "wholly enough engaged" with the shabby world he is busy describing.\footnote{The expression belongs to F.R. Leavis who considers this question with regard to Eliot's criticism in "T.S. Eliot's Stature as a Critic," \textit{Commentary}, XXVI (November 1958), 408.} He may, as he says, have "a vision of the street that the street hardly understands," but this vision fails because detached from what it sees. What is dangerous in this failure is the complacency of it, the easy acceptance of an apparently insuperable breach between poet and street without ever attempting to cross it.

"Our doubt is our passion," said James's Dencombe; no doubt, no passion.
It is therefore possible to understand why the body of poems here considered suggests, from the very beginning, a devotion to the principle of unity; and why this in turn is testimony to the presence of a predominantly impersonal, predominantly orthodox, predominantly traditional frame of reference. Furthermore, if one strays into the realms of the spiritual—and I have, more or less, from the start—it is unavoidable. As the poet discovers he cannot operate without the sanctions of the spiritual man, the image of the expatriate as fugitive perforce melts into the image of the expatriate as accepter of moral conventionality. At this point the poet qua poet disappears—if indeed he ever existed—becoming instead the imitator and upholder of the "Establishment," committed not to poetry (now mutated into "a superior amusement") but to culture; and lifting the safety catch off his gun when he finds their functions confused.

But I should like to end by again saying something favorable. For even though one might quarrel with Eliot's particular discipline and his strategies, his pursuit doesn't necessarily (and paradoxically) involve a cowardly escapism, but rather a pursuit of facts abidingly true. Eliot's early poetry may represent an earnest, uncompromising recoil from immediate reality; but it also begins to define, and is the inevitable prelude to, the primacy of positive belief. It seems to me that poetry cannot be asked to do more.
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