Chapter-3

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*Sweeney Agonistes* and *The Rock* are Eliot’s first experiments in the field of drama. The former is a natural outcome of Eliot’s desire to turn his energies to the theatre while the latter is a commissioned work. Fragmentary as they both are, they contain ideas and themes which were to find fuller treatment in Eliot’s subsequent poems and plays. They embody the playwright’s vision of the real social world viewed in the light of the higher religious values. Eliot’s anguished concern for the redemption of humanity by making it aware of spiritual reality is too evident in these works to be missed. *Sweeney Agonistes*, written before Eliot’s conversion, achieves this effect implicitly, whereas *The Rock* makes overt and emphatic assertions of Christian belief, as it was the work of a thorough Christian, and was written to promote the cause of the Church. A thematic examination of these works is significant for our study, for it helps us understand Eliot’s purpose and future direction as a playwright.

I

*Sweeney Agonistes*, subtitled Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama, consists of two fragments, namely, “Fragment of a Prologue” and “Fragment of an Agon”. The title, the subtitle and the epigraphs of the play carry implications which should be taken seriously, as they considerably reveal the theme of the play. The title “Sweeney Agonistes” means Sweeney in conflict. The epigraphs, as we shall explain, hint at the nature of the conflict as well as the possible resolution. The title of the play reminds us, on the one hand, of Sweeney, type of the modern secular man, appearing in Eliot’s earlier poems, notably “Sweeney Erect” and “Sweeney Among the Nightingales”, and on the other hand, it also suggests analogies with Milton’s Samson Agonistes. As such, the Sweeney of the play seems to be a combination of the sensual
man and the man capable of deeper awareness. Carol H. Smith has pointed out interesting similarities between the predicaments of Sweeney and Samson:

Samson’s dilemma is that of the exile in on alien world who feels compelled by divine will to pull that world down around his own head in order to destroy its iniquities. Sweeney is another spiritual exile in an alien world, and he too must destroy part of himself in his attack on that world.¹

The subtitle “Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama” is suggestive of the method employed by Eliot to convey his meaning to the audience. The play is Aristophanic in the sense that “it combines a comic surface of social satire with the ritualistic celebration of death and rebirth which Cornford found to underlie comedy”.² It is melodramatic in that it is interspersed with songs and music, and the situations in it are overdramatized. In fact, the basic concern of Eliot was to achieve a mass appeal. He aimed at the participation of the audience in the action as well as their entertainment. Hence his preference for, and adoption of, the music-hall devices which were being exploited so artistically in his time by Marie Lloyd. Eliot appreciated the unique genius of Marie Lloyd because she, more than any other music-hall artist, “succeeded so well in giving expression to the life of that audience, in raising it to a kind of art”.³ He found in the art of this music-hall comedian a meaningful relationship between the performer and the audience:

The working man who went to the music-hall and saw Marie Lloyd and joined in the chorus was himself performing part of the act; he was engaged in that collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art and most obviously in dramatic art.⁴

It is to be remembered that Eliot wrote these lines in 1923, at precisely the same time when he was writing the first drafts of Sweeney Agonistes. It goes without saying that it was his profound human and social concern that was impelling him to

communal character of drama which, he felt, was on the verge of extinction. Like Marie Lloyd, Eliot also wanted to not only amuse his audience in his plays but also express and jolt their consciousness. More than that, he sought “to transform the common consciousness, and to bring his audience to a new and radically different perception of their lives”. Sweeney Agonistes is his first attempt in this direction. It is essentially concerned with the revelation of a spiritual vision which exposes mere mundane existence.

The epigraphs of the play point towards the same direction. They provide a clue to a genuine understanding of not only the theme of the play but also the nature of the conflict of Sweeney:

Orestes: You don’t see them, you don’t – but
I see them: they are hunting me down,
I must move on.

Choephoroi

Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings.

St. John of the Cross

The first epigraph, taken from Aeschylus’ Choephoroi, refers to the mental and spiritual state of Orestes “when he first becomes aware of the Furies, who haunt and pursue him after the murder of his mother and her lover until he has achieved purgation”. It suggests that Sweeney, like Orestes, is driven by a kind of knowledge which sets him apart from other men, and enables him to see more than others. The second one from St. John of the Cross points towards a possible resolution, and the means by which resolution can be achieved. It underlines the necessity of divesting the soul of the love of created beings in order to attain divine union. Both

the epigraphs, thus assert the necessity of purgation leading to illumination. The juxtaposition of the two as joint epigraphs suggests a continuity and inter-relationship between the religious element of Greek drama, Christian mystical thought, and the play itself. This is also illustrative of the way in which Eliot’s social and human humanistic imagination assimilates the mythical and literary tradition of Greece along with the Christian mystic tradition into his view of the problems of contemporary life. The following analysis of the thematic pattern of Sweeney Agonistes is intended to reveal how from the first Eliot was trying to relate the social to the religious with a view to imparting significance to life.

“Fragment of a Prologue” is primarily concerned with the exposure of the spiritual sterility and boredom the contemporary secular society. Doris and Dusty, the lower-class London prostitutes, typify the degenerate souls of the modern godless society. Their conversation and behaviour show that they are apathetic to any spiritual awakening, perfectly content to live life merely on animal plane. They like Sam, a whore-monger, and consider him “a nice boy”, “a funny fellow”, “a gentleman through and through”.

8. He is acceptable to them because he can make them laugh and thus relieve, even temporarily, the monotony of their drab existence. Pereira, on the contrary, is likely to force them to think, to jolt their consciousness, and so they try to avoid him. He is no “gentleman” in their eyes, nor is he trustworthy. When he telephones to Doris, she does not pick up the receiver herself. She just asks Dusty to tell him that she is “ill” or she broke her leg “on the stairs” or make any other excuse. Dusty accordingly tells Pereira that Doris has got “a terrible chill”. She, however, hastens to add that it won’t need a doctor, that “She’s got her feet in mustard and water”, and hopes to be all right on Monday. Having thus got rid of Pereira, the girls devote themselves to the superstitious and superficial act of “cutting cards” intended for fortune-reading.


10. Ibid.
The attitude of Doris and Dusty is a clear evidence of the perversion of values in modern times. The chill of Doris is more spiritual than physical. She relishes her state of animal-life, and avoids contact with Pereira, the spiritual doctor. The noise of his telephone call is repulsive and “horrible” to her. Carol H. Smith rightly observes that Pereira “represents a positive spiritual force who keeps insistently calling and who must someday be reckoned with even if not now”. Eliot seeks to suggest that life can be made worth-living only if men come to terms with spiritual values rather than try to avoid and evade them. The interrelationship of religion and society, and the significance and relevance of the former for revitalizing and enriching the latter, is thus brought forth with shrewd dramatic skill and an unfailing sense of social responsibility.

Dusty and Doris, however, view Pereira negatively. The obvious reason is that he demands the agony of purgation which is too much for these visionless creatures. They, therefore, turn to fortune-telling, positing their faith in debased prophecy. The first card they cut is “The king of clubs” which they associate with Sweeney and Pereira alternately. This indicates that Sweeney is as unpopular with the girls as Pereira. It also foreshadows the role of these two as “agents of spiritual and purgatorial violence”.

The fortune-reading turns out most horrible for the girls when Doris cuts “the two of spades” which means “The Coffin”. Though both are terribly frightened by the prospects, Doris is sure that the card foreshadows her luck, as she “dreamt of weddings all last night”. Carol H. Smith observes that the “coffin and the dream of weddings are symbols drawn from Cornford’s discussion of the ritual scenes of death and resurrection”. As such, the coffin card predicts the arrival of Sweeney at the party, and the possibility of the death of Doris’s animal instincts and the birth of a new spiritual self.


48
Meanwhile, Sam Wauchoppe and Captain Horsfall, the regular visitors of the flat of the prostitutes, come along with their two American friends, Mr. Klipstein and Mr. Krumpacker. Their trivial chat with the girls reveals that they are visionless pleasure-seekers. Together with the girls, they represent the sensual denizens of the modern jazz age in which the business of men is just to have a spree with women who are willing to give it to them in return for material rewards and relief from boredom.

"Fragments of an Agon" centres round the character of Sweeney. The role of Pereira merges into that of Sweeney who seems to have attained some awareness through his experiences in the past, and who can, therefore, act now as a spiritual agent. The opening conversation between Doris and Sweeney reveals that the latter wants to act as a "cannibal" to "gobble up" the sensual instincts of the former. When Doris answers that she will be the missionary and will convert him, he retorts: "I'll convert you!/Into a stew." \(^{15}\) He calls Doris's sensual world "a crocodile isle" in which life is merely an "egg":

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{You see this egg} \\
\text{You see this egg} \\
\text{Well that's life on a crocodile isle.} \\
\text{Birth, and copulation, and death.}^{16}
\end{align*}
\]

When Doris says that she is "bored" by such an analysis and concept of life, Sweeney answers in words which suggest that life without spiritual rebirth is bound to be boring:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I've been born and once is enough,} \\
\text{You don't remember, but I remember,} \\
\text{Once is enough.}^{17}
\end{align*}
\]

Sweeney's comment underlines the fact that society without religious and moral values is bound to degenerate into mere animal existence, shorn of all meaning and significance.

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16. Ibid., pp. 121-122.  
17. Ibid., p. 122.
D.E. Jones rightly points out that “the reiteration of ‘once is enough’ indicates the reluctance of the secular man ‘to be reborn in the spirit’.\textsuperscript{18} This is further confirmed by the tone and content of the chorus of sensual enjoyment sung by Wauchope, Horsfall, Swarts and Snow:

\begin{quote}
Tell me in what part of the wood
Do you want to flirt with me?

Any old wood is just as good
Any old isle is just my style\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

Doris, however, confesses that she does not like life on “the crocodile isle”. The mechanical sensuality of the worldly existence as revealed in the chorus is not acceptable to her. She is gradually rising above the sensual plane of life, and is beginning to feel, like Sweeney, the inadequacy of that form of life. Her anguished cry evidences it:

\begin{quote}
That’s not life, that’s no life
Why I’d just as soon be dead.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

Sweeney now explains to her as to what constitute real life:

\begin{quote}
That’s what life is ……

Life is death

I knew a man once did a girl in.
Any man might do a girl in
Any man has to, needs to, wants to
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{18} Op. cit., p. 33.
\textsuperscript{19} C P P, p. 123.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
Once in a lifetime, do a girl in
Well he kept her there in a bath
With a gallon of lysol in a bath\textsuperscript{21}

The idea implied in these significant lines is that life is through death, that the
solution of death-in-life is a death-wedding, a life-in-death, which resembles the ritual
marriage. The mystical process of killing desire in order to bring about the birth of
the spirit-contains the same notion. Carol H. Smith aptly comments that “the murder
and dissolution in a lysol bath.....of the girl in Sweeney’s tale represents the violent
murder of human desire and dissolution of the old life of “birth and copulation and
death” in the sacramental purgatorial bath which will bring rebirth”\textsuperscript{22}

It is important to note that the need for doing a girl in has been given by
Sweeney a universal dimension. It has been depicted as a necessary stage in the
process of spiritual illumination. It is the man’s state of mind after the murder which
receives special emphasis. This state of mind is incommunicable to those who have
no experience of that sort. Sweeney feels the difficulty when he tries to communicate
the predicament of the murder of his tale:

\begin{quote}
He didn’t know if he was alive
And the girl was dead

He didn’t know if the girl was alive
And he was dead

He didn’t know if they were both alive
Or both were dead.

If he was live then the milkman wasn’t
And the rent-collector wasn’t

And if they were alive then he was dead.
\end{quote}

\footnote{Ibid., pp. 123-124.}

\footnote{Op. cit., p. 71.}

\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{22}
When you are alone like he was alone

Death is life and life is death.  \(^{23}\)

The uniqueness of the consciousness of the murderer is too evident in the quoted lines to require any comment. A.D. Moody points out that the idea of murder and the state of consciousness that it entails is found in a prose sketch by Eliot, namely, ‘Eeldrop and Appleplex’, published in 1917:

In Gopsum Street a man murders his misters. The important fact is that for the man the act is eternal, and for the brief space he has to live, he is already dead. He is already in a different world from ours. He has crossed the frontier. The important fact is that something is done which cannot be undone – a possibility which none of us realize until we face it ourselves.  \(^{24}\)

Perhaps that is why Sweeney says that “Any man has to, needs to, wants to/Once in a lifetime, do a girl in” – in order to cross the frontier to where “Death is life and life is Death”. A careful study of the play reveals that Sweeney might not have quite crossed the frontier himself but, by his exceptional awareness, he has certainly moved the other men to link his story with their own experience:

When you’re alone in the middle of the night and
you wake in a sweat and a hell of a fright

You’ve had a cream of a nightmare dream and
you’ve got the hoo-ha’s coming to you.

And you wait for a knock and the turning of a lock
for you know the hangman’s waiting for you.

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And perhaps you’re alive
And perhaps you’re dead.\textsuperscript{25}

These lines focus on the most painful phase of spiritual journey, the phase of purgation. It is no wonder then that they strike a grim note. One can easily account for this if one remembers that the play was written at a time when Eliot was experiencing the pain of penitence himself. Lyndall Gordon feels that “the earlier years of Eliot’s marriage were the background to the macabre, unfinished play, \textit{Sweeney Agonists}”.\textsuperscript{26} The failure of the first marriage and the sense of sin associated with Viviane haunted Eliot, and its repercussions can be easily discerned in the play by any perceptive mind.

The critical response accorded to \textit{Sweeney Agonistes} displays astonishing diversity. On the one hand, we have a critic like Martin Scofield who lavishes a lot of praise on the play and goes to the extent of calling it “perhaps Eliot’s best poetic drama”,\textsuperscript{27} and, on the other hand, we have Helen Gardner who considers it “a rather sterile appendix”\textsuperscript{28} to \textit{The Waste Land}. Focusing upon the theatrical potential of the play, Katharine Worth claims that it is “a very long step in a new theatrical direction”,\textsuperscript{29} whereas D.E. Jones thinks that the main concern of Eliot in the play is “to come to terms with the speech of the time”.\textsuperscript{30} It must be mentioned, however, that no valid assessment of the achievement of the play can be made without properly taking into account the fact that Eliot was trying to evolve a new kind of verse drama which could satisfactorily embody spiritual experience at the level of temporal existence. He

\textsuperscript{25} C P P, pp. 125-126.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Eliot’s New life}, p. 52.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{T.S. Eliot : Poems}, p. 7.


\textsuperscript{30} Op. cit, p. 29.
was experimenting with the form of drama with a strong sense of social obligation. The account of the evaluation of *Sweeney Agonistes* given by Eliot clearly suggests the social purposes behind his experiment:

The most useful poetry, socially, would be one which could cut across all the present stratifications of public taste – stratifications which are perhaps a sign of social disintegration. The ideal medium for poetry, to my mind, and the most direct means of social ‘usefulness’ for poetry, is the theatre……….I once designed, and drafted a couple of scenes, of a verse play. My intention was to have one character whose sensibility and intelligence should be on the plane of the most sensitive and intelligent members of the audience; his speeches should be addressed to them as much as to the other personages in the play – or rather, should be addressed to the latter who were to be material, literal-minded and visionless, with the consciousness of being overheard by the former. There was to be an understanding between this protagonist and a small number of the audience, while the rest of the audience would share the responses of the other characters in the play. Perhaps this is all too deliberate, but one must experiment as one can.\(^{31}\)

Eliot’s concern for the redemption of the contemporary secular society by bringing it back to the religious roots is very much evident in the quoted lines. Eliot believed, in the words of Carol H Smith, that a “theatre with “something for everybody”, refined and disciplined by the standards of art might involve, unify, and order a society as no other means in the modern world had succeeded in doing”.\(^{32}\) Viewed from this perspective, *Sweeney Agonistes* may be said to embody Eliot’s endeavour to register in dramatic form the spiritual sickness of the contemporary

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society, and the religious awakening as an antidote. The character and the situations are presented and developed in the play in such a way as to convince the audience of the necessity of religious belief in life. Such problems of the modern man as isolation, boredom, social disintegration, and perversion of values are viewed and analysed, even in embryo, in the light of religious faith. The main emphasis, however, is laid on the horror and pain of the process of spiritual awakening, and one gets the impression that the ideal is extolled at the expense of the actual. Death of the body is shown to be a prerequisite for the birth of the spirit. Although the social humanistic vision of Eliot is considerably overshadowed by the religious one the two are closely interlinked as inseparable aspects of wholesome human existence. The gradual awakening of Doris in the play and the final chorus representing the recognition of religious fear give us ample evidence that Eliot is anxious to assimilate the masses into the scheme of redemption. Hence it is obvious that the theme of “spiritual conflict and growth in an exceptional person and its relation to, and repercussions in, the lives of more ordinary people”\textsuperscript{33} was to be the central theme of his later plays. Thus the interplay of the social and the religious was to find more detailed and dramatically satisfying treatment in the subsequent works of Eliot.

\textsuperscript{33} D.E. Jones, op. cit., pp. 29-30.
Eliot's next dramatic experiment, *The Rock* (1934), tends to achieve through overt and emphatic statement what *Sweeney Agonistes* did by suggestion and evocation. The shift of emphasis that occurs during the period between the two may be attributed to two reasons. In the first place, by the time Eliot was commissioned to provide words for *The Rock*, he had found his belief, with the result that if *Sweeney Agonistes* appears to be a work of the writer of *The Hollow Men*, *The Rock* seems to be that of the author of *Ash Wednesday*. Secondly, *The Rock* was written for a specific church occasion, and its performance was intended to raise a fund for church building. Quite understandably therefore, the work is marked by a distinct and deliberate Christian note. It is also to be noted that the play was written in collaboration with, and under the direction of, E. Martin Browne, and Eliot's contribution was confined to the writing of the choruses and only one scene. Eliot viewed the work as a pageant, a revue, rather than a play, and the only important thing for him was that he got an opportunity to experiment with modern forms of verse suitable for the stage. However, he himself later felt that he was not very successful in this respect. He couldn't evolve the required dramatic voice, rather it was his own voice "addressing—indeed haranguing—the audience that was most distinctly audible".34

We are concerned here with the themes and sentiments expressed in the choruses for which Eliot assumed full responsibility. An examination of the 'Choruses' reveals that what they mainly offer is a clear and full statement of his conscious convictions—his distrust of the secular materialistic attitude to life, and his faith in the saving order of religious belief. A careful exploration of the pattern of these convictions is important for our study, as it provides a useful approach to the understanding of Eliot's religio-social vision which emerges with an increasing force in his subsequent plays.

It is to be noted that the development in Eliot's vision after conversion is

discernible not only in *Ash Wednesday* and the Ariel Poems but also in the important prose writings of 1930. In all of them Eliot is constantly asserting that the only way to restore meaning and significance to life is to apprehend and acknowledge “the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life”. He was completely distrustful of any and all views of life rooted in materialism. He saw no hope in liberalism, socialism, ad fascism, and felt that these views were lame and insufficient. In his essay entitled “Catholicism and International Order”, Eliot points out that society should provide an atmosphere where man can develop his “full humanity.” Eliot further adds:

“But unless this humanity is considered always in relation to God, we may expect to find an excessive love of created beings, in other words humanitarianism, leading to a genuine oppression of human beings in what is conceived by other human beings to be their interest”.

This is probably the core of the sentiments expressed in the choruses of The Rock, and with slight variations in emphasis, this is also the core of the meaning of all Eliot’s plays. Man, according to Eliot, is a combination of body and spirit, and any philosophy that tends to endanger man’s spiritual life by trying to save the physical, is distasteful to him. He always strives to synthesise the human with the divine, the social with religious though the levels of the synthesis vary from time to time. In *The Rock*, Eliot juxtaposes the temporal and the timeless, and insists on the significant fact that the Incarnation, representing the intersection of time and timeless, has given meaning to otherwise meaningless flux of time. Man’s duty, therefore, is to remember and serve God, and live his life in the light of religious values.

The action of *The Rock* consists of the building of a London church by some workmen who meet during the course of their action both difficulties and encouragements. The various scenes and episodes of the play are linked together

by the chorus which illuminates and comments on them. In addition to it, the chorus also serves to reveal and convey, on the poetic level, the implied meaning of the action to the audience. Carol H. Smith rightly says that in *The Rock*, “the task of the chorus was to present the ideological commentary on the action in a poetic form which would make the audience feel, as well as understand, the more profound implications of the events”.\(^{38}\) Eliot considered the choruses to be the only part of the work worth-preserving, and accordingly, in the 1969 edition of his Complete Poems and Plays published by Faber, we have the title as *Choruses from ‘The Rock’*, 1934, and not the original one – *The Rock*. A thematic study of the “Choruses” helps us perceive the growing vision of Eliot very clearly. The very first chorus is a sort of assessment of man’s secular concerns and achievements viewed in the light of religious belief. In his attempt to make life materially successful and happy, man has lost the real meaning of life. He has gained knowledge of the world and of words, but not of the Word. And consequently he is deprived of the wisdom which is necessary for apprehending life and reality spiritually. The ultimate result is that man has moved farther and farther from God, and in the process, robbed his life of all significance:

The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
Knowledge of words, but ignorance of the Word.

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from GOD and nearer to the Dust.\(^{39}\)


\(^{39}\) C P P, p. 147.
The "Life" reduced to mere temporal existence is further illustrated by a satirical portrayal of the attitude of modern people towards the Church. In the civilized society of today, men are so hectically busy in material pursuits that they have neither time nor inclination to go to the Church. They have no faith in spiritual values, and "the Church does not seem to be wanted/In country or in suburb; and in the town/Only for important weddings." 40 The leader of the Chorus then pronounces the entry of the Rock, "who has seen what has happened/And who sees what is to happen", 41 and who is, therefore, in a position to answer the "doubtings" of the Chorus. Grover Smith Jr. says that in "contrast with the Chorus, which represents the Church in fields of action, the Rock himself is the spokesman for the Church as the eternal witness, the sufferer and martyr". 42 At the very outset, the Rock explains the principle of right action in words which remind one of Krishna's advice to Arjuna regarding the concept of detached action:

All men are ready to invest their money
But most expect dividends.
I say to you: Make perfect your will.
I say: take no thought of the harvest,
But only of proper sowing. 43

The Rock further tells people of "The perpetual struggle of Good and Evil", 44 and exhorts them to serve the cause of "Good" in the right spirit. The chanting of the workmen expresses their contented lot: "There is work together/A Church for all/And a job for each", whereas the voices of the unemployed reflect their wretched predicament:

40. Ibid., p. 147.
41. Ibid.
44. Ibid., p. 175.
No man has hired us
With pocketed hands
And lowered faces
We stand about in open places
And shiver in unlit rooms

In this land
There shall be one cigarette to two men
To two women one half pint of bitter
Ale.\textsuperscript{45}

The sympathy and poignancy with which Eliot portrays the plight of the unemployed express his deep concerns with the state of common man in society. If he stresses the necessity of religious belief in life, he also feels with sympathy the pressures of such existential problems of the modern man as poverty, unemployment, oppression, and isolation. He shows genuine anxiousness to cope with these problems, though his guiding principle is religious belief. E. Martin Browne rightly observes that Eliot’s “concern with the present state of society is passionate and compassionate”.\textsuperscript{46} Thus the first Chorus ends with affirmations of social concerns as well as belief: “A Church for all/And a job for each”.\textsuperscript{47}

The second Chorus manifests most clearly and emphatically Eliot’s efforts to reconcile the claims of the mundane reality with those of the transcendent reality. Man belongs as much to the spiritual world as to the physical, and therefore neither of the two worlds has to be forgotten. The Chorus refers to the “ruined house” in which modern people are helplessly sitting, and suggests that this state of affairs has been brought about by people who ignore the place of God and religious values while

\textsuperscript{45.} Ibid., pp. 149-150.
\textsuperscript{46.} \textit{The Making of T.S. Eliot’s Plays}, Cambridge U.P., 196, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{47.} C P P, p. 150.
structuring the fabric of society. Under the impact of humanistic and socialistic ideas, these people have been “Talking of right relations of men, but not of relations of men to GOD”. The Chorus asserts that true citizenship can flourish on the earth only when men constantly keep in mind their citizenship in Heaven:

‘Our citizenship is in Heaven’; yes, but that is the model and type for your citizenship upon earth.

This explains the real concern and aim of Eliot as a playwright – the betterment of the temporal life by bringing it into close contact with the timeless. An unfortunate lack of this contact has resulted in the disintegration which is everywhere perceptible in the modern society. People are suffering the consequence of not having been able to evolve a sound philosophy of life in consonance with religious belief. Such setbacks, however, have occurred in the past also, and every time faith has prevailed. Therefore men need not lose heart; they should rather go on trying to restore spiritual values to life, for “the Church must be forever building, and always decaying, and always being restored.”

The Chorus also emphasizes the need for community-life which is possible only under the Church, “the Body of Christ incarnate”. Beset with the baffling problem of isolation, modern men are all the more in need of such a life. They can hardly enjoy their life if they do not know how to live and pray together:

What life have you if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of God.

Eliot seeks to suggest that the Church is still the solution of the problem of isolation, intensified to a horrible extent in modern civilization. In the Church, man’s

48. Ibid. p. 151.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid. p. 152.
51. Ibid.
isolation is broken through annihilation of the self, and even God can be communed with. Those who reject God and do not respond to Him, lose contact even with one another, and find themselves isolated and imprisoned in their loneliness. Individual self-seeking inevitably results in disintegration and loss of the sense of belonging:

And no man knows or cares who is his neighbour
Unless his neighbour makes too much disturbance,
But all dash to and fro in motor cars,
Familiar with the roads and settled nowhere.
Nor does the family even move about together,
But every son would have his motor cycle,
And daughters ride away on casual pillions.\(^{52}\)

This sorry state of human relationships can be improved, according to Eliot, only when men recover the lost faith in God as well as in the Church.

The third Chorus contains a direct and bitter attack on the “wretched generation of enlightened men”, who, in their pride of being ingenuous and inventive, misuse the gifts of God. Ignoring the “Law” of God, they “set up commissions” to make their own laws. They betray their indifference to religious values both in their physical and intellectual activities: “Much is your reading, but not the word of GOD/Much is your building, but not the House of GOD”.\(^{53}\) The attitude inherent in such concepts indicates the way Eliot traces the ultimate roots of culture and tradition to the “House of GOD”. History or tradition is unredeemed if not related to the still point which is God’s House and which stands against time, without which the “nettle shall flourish on the gravel court”,

And the wind shall say: Here were decent godless people:
Their only monument the asphalt road

\(^{52}\) Ibid., pp. 152-153.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., p. 154.
And a thousand lost golf balls".  

The Chorus puts the rhetorical question: "Can you keep the city that the LORD keeps not with you?" The implication is that we cannot make our social life happy without faith in spiritual values. "Where there is no temple, there shall be no homes", and mere physical proximity can never give us assurance of community-life. Unless we are guided by religious belief, we would be prone to exploit our neighbours rather than love them. "Engaged in devising the perfect refrigerator" and "a rational morality", man has become completely oblivious of the ways of God. But the Chorus warns that "Life you may evade, but Death you shall not". The question of the ultimate meaning of life will have to be faced.

The fourth Corus enumerates the difficulties faced by the builders of the Church through the ages: "There are those who build the Temple, And those who prefer that the Temple should not be built". Therefore men of faith must face the opposition bravely and build with "the sword in one hand and the trowel in the other". The idea is continued in the fifth Chorus which underlines the essential sinfulness of human heart, and the need, therefore, for its purification. The heart is said to be "deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked". Until and unless this impurity of the heart is purged, men can hardly lead a meaningful life, which is always a life of spiritual as well as temporal significance.

The next Chorus recounts the "tales of Christian persecution", and exposes the

54. Ibid. p. 155.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., p. 156.
58. Ibid. p. 157.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid. p. 158.
hollowness of man’s secular achievements. It asserts that faith has to be revived again
and again because it is constantly threatened by votaries of the material pleasure, who
dream of “systems so perfect that no one will need to be good”. Following the
example of Christ, men should therefore try to fight the evil. Because,
- - - the Son of Man was not crucified once for all,
- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
But the Son of Man is crucified always
And there shall be Martyrs and Saints. 62

The seventh Chorus presents a rapid but graphic survey of the history of the
world to the time of Christ, the coming of the light of revelation and the foundation of
the Church. Ever since God created man, he strove towards Him in various ways,
realizing that “man is a vain thing, and man without GOD is a seed upon the wind:
driven this way and that, and finding no place of lodgement and germination”. During the period immediately preceding the birth of Christ, men were hanging
between belief and disbelief, finding no meaning in the flux of time. Then Christ was
born; the eternal intersected the temporal, and meaning was given to time:

Then came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in time and of time,
A moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call history : transecting,
  bisecting he world of time, a moment in time but not like a moment of time,
A moment in time but time was made through that moment : for without the
  meaning there is no time, and that moment of time gave the meaning. 64

The light of religious belief radiated from Christ, and “it seemed as if men must
proceed from light to light, in the light of the Word”. Unfortunately, however,
something has happened that has never happened before – “Men have left GOD not

61. Ibid., p. 159. 62. Ibid.
63. Ibid. p. 160. 64. Ibid.
for other gods, they say, but for no god”,⁶⁵ that is, men have forsaken religious values not because they have developed disbelief but because they hold no belief. They have turned their devotion to material pursuits which in turn have rendered them spiritually hollow. Having disowned the Church, they have now nothing to do except “stand with empty hands and palms turned upwards/In an age which advances progressively backwards”,⁶⁶ The question that poses itself is: “Has the Church failed mankind, or has mankind failed the Church?” And the answer is implicit in the question itself.

The next Chorus, therefore, voices the need for deriving lessons from the history of Christianity in order to determine the future course of life. Though our age is an age of “moderate virtue” and “moderate vice”, yet “nothing is impossible, nothing./To men of faith and conviction”.⁶⁷

The ninth Chorus once again presents the secular concerns as something against the Church. Men of disbelief keep themselves busy in matters of material life. They are proud of their faculties, and never feel the need of repentance and penance. Men of belief, on the other hand, realize that “the House of GOD is a House of Sorrow”,⁶⁸ and, therefore, wish to practise the Holy Communion: “Let us mourn in a private chamber, learning the way of penitence./And then let us learn the joyful communion of saints”.⁶⁹ Eliot then resorts most conspicuously to the “first” voice of his poetry, and asserts that the creative talent of man should be directed to the service of God, for the “Lord who created must wish us to create/And employ our creation again in His service”.⁷⁰ This is only another way to assert that unless one reads the Word of God, all his reading is futile. A poet creates “the life of music” out of “the sea of sound”.

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⁶⁵. Ibid. p. 161.
⁶⁶. Ibid.
⁶⁷. Ibid. p. 163.
⁶⁸. Ibid. p. 164.
⁶⁹. Ibid.
⁷⁰. Ibid., p. 165.
The chaotic experience is given form and pattern in a poem, which is a way of attempting to recover the “unspoken Word” in words. Such concepts and convictions of Eliot clearly reflect his Christian leanings. All creative output of an artist, he pleads, must be informed with divine purpose. Since man is a combination of spirit and flesh, he should devote himself to the service of God and the Church, both spiritually and physically:

For Man is joined spirit and body,
And therefore must serve as spirit and body.
Visible and Invisible, two worlds meet in Man;
Visible and invisible must meet in His Temple;
You must not deny the body.\textsuperscript{71}

The implication is that religious belief is not to be contemplated as a thing apart; rather it is to be lived and acted in actual experience: Implied in the lines is also the idea that the temporal is not to be rejected in pursuit of the timeless; rather it is to be used: “Only through time time is conquered”.\textsuperscript{72} Eliot thus strives to reconcile the dichotomy of nature and God, time and eternity, flesh and spirit. Grover Smith Jr. rightly observes that The Rock does not suggest to the audience a negative way of sanctity through contemplation or martyrdom, but a positive way of using life and time in consonance with God. The Rock contains, in his words, “a philosophy of using time rather than of escaping from it, of focusing upon the life of the wheel as the means to attain the point rather than of neglecting the wheel – nature and time and man’s active life – for the sake of a more immediate communion.”\textsuperscript{73}

The last Chorus, built around the symbolism of light, expresses the hope that the newly built Church will serve as a spiritual light – house, and guide the confused generation of today. It thanks and praises the “Light Invisible” which is the source of

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid. \textsuperscript{72} “Burnt Norton”, CPP, p. 173.
\textsuperscript{73} T.S. Eliot’s Poetry and Plays, p. 178.
all earthly lights.

The foregoing analysis of the *Choruses from 'The Rock'* shows that on the one hand, they contain an overt attack on the materialistic values, and, on the other, they stress the need for religious significance in life with a view to restoring faith in spiritual values. The affirmation of the Christian belief becomes so important in these choruses that all else is subordinated to it. As it is, all secular concerns of man are seen to be against the Church, and are therefore denounced. Man's life on earth is required to be that of prayer, or else it is worthless. But, at the same time, the choruses contain ideas which suggest that Eliot is not interested in theology or religion in the abstract. He is concerned rather with the betterment and redemption of the earthly life of man. This is evident from Eliot's heart-felt concerns for the plight of the poor and unemployed, and also from his stress on the need for community life, as revealed in the present analysis. It is to be noted that it is this social vision of Eliot that was to take on a greater significance in his later plays. It must be admitted, however, that in the *Choruses from 'The Rock'* , "'the world' is not brought into a significant relation with the Word". 74 As Martin Scofield points out, the choruses just "gather together the elements of modern society which Eliot hates, and the elements of faith which he wishes to counteract them, and simply set them down, both rather wearily". 75 What is of interest and importance for us, however, is the fact that the choruses help us anticipate the direction which Eliot's synthesis of belief and social vision was to take in the plays to follow. They do contain the seedlings of Eliot's efforts to reconcile realism with religious significance, the world with the Word, man's relations to man with his relations to God. If they embody Eliot's assertions of Christian belief, they are also concerned, in the wards of E. Martin Browne, with "the bettering of this life, especially in terms of personal relationships and the building of a common way of living". 76

Taken together *Sweeney Agonistes* and the *Choruses from 'The Rock'* represent, in the words of Sean Lucy, “two opposite extremes of Eliot’s talent and of his subject matter, extremes which were to meet and blend in his later plays. In the first we have the acute consciousness of the sickness of man deprived of spiritual significance, in the second the awareness that this sickness can only be cured by the hard discipline of the spirit involved in the real and lasting choice to serve a higher will than its own.”77