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Chapter 12: The Still Centre — Eliot's Meaning

Man's curiosity searches past and future
And clings to that dimension
Quite different from this is the attempt
. . . . . . . . . . . . to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time.
— The Dry Salvages.

Redeem the time, redeem the dream
The token of the word unheard, unspoken.
— Ash Wednesday.

The two great English poets of the present century — Yeats and Eliot — have both been Symbolists. In spite of their differing ways, both have been successful in rendering Meaning through symbols. The two poets have often been compared: such comparisons only serve to bring out the complementary nature of their achievements. Both worked their way to Reality and rendered it through symbols, but whereas Yeats depended entirely upon experience and intellectual speculation, Eliot brings in a strong element of religious belief. Yeats's symbols seem to give us a sense of spontaneity: even when he makes use of traditionally accepted symbols he is able to give us the feeling that he has done something new. Yeats does not accept or expect any philosophical or religious beliefs. It is true that many of his symbols derive from the 'system' that he elaborately expounded in 'A Vision', but that 'system' is as much a product of his imagination as is his poetry. Again, though acquaintance with 'A Vision' may help us to gain a clearer understanding of Yeats's symbols, it is not a pre-requisite for such understanding. The poetic symbols of Yeats are autonomous and complete in themselves: they do not require the aid of any body of specialized knowledge before they can be fully understood. Even when Yeats uses time-encrusted symbols like the Wheel or the Tree, he does not (though he could have) exploit the archetypal or the traditional literary associations of
these symbols. In 'Among Schoolchildren', for instance, the Tree has not merely the traditional suggestions of 'rootedness' or of the sense of integrity (— root, shoot and blossom) that we associate with an organism: it symbolizes the vitality, the effortless blossoming into beauty and a sense of perfect 'being', and thus attains an independent value within the poem. Eliot, on the other hand, usually falls back on something traditional—archetypal or religious. Even a symbol like the Wheel, which is presented in a somewhat striking manner as 'bedded axle-tree' clotted with garlic and sapphires, calls up associations of 'manger' and 'cross', in turn suggesting the cyclic process of time, the past and the future containing each other. It also echoes Mallarmé's 'bavant boue et rubis' and the 'tonnerre et rubis aux moyeux' of Apphelo's chariot wheel of the sonnet 'M'introduire dans ton histoire'. This is in itself indicative of Eliot's 'bent towards tradition: he constantly alludes to the past in literature or in myth.

In Eliot, the approach to life and its problems is essentially that of a scholar, with a vein of cynicism (borrowed from Laforgue). Half of the suffering of the poet is due to a theoretical ideal of perfection that the scholar has in mind and does not find in real life. Eliot has created in his poetry, an autonomous world 'remote and orthodox', orthodox in the sense that it is 'a product of discipline, discipline of the emotions, of the intellect, of the will: finally, the discipline of the creative powers into an absolute command of technique'. Eliot has thus created 'a world of formal perfection', but it 'lacks the dimension of human error'. On the other hand, Yeats's strength lies in the 'magnificent way in which he

1 The 'tree' represents 'rootedness, repose and growth'. (C.G.Jung: 'Integration of the Personality', p.30).
3 Ibid., p.30.
This is one way of pointing out the basic difference in the method of the two poets. The sense of discipline and of an ordered life leads Eliot naturally towards religion. Right from the beginning of his poetic career, there is a straining after belief: he holds out his hands to belief as to the warmth of a fire. Even in his most sceptical moods, in the moments of darkest despair, he is consciously or unconsciously groping towards belief. One feels he has to obtain religious sanction for all he says, though it would be a mistake to say that he makes his poetry depend upon religion. In contrast, Yeats's is a more direct and confident approach to life, a sort of personal and frontal attack upon life: in Yeats there does not seem to be any metaphysical straining, any anxiety to come within the protecting fold of a system. There is in fact a full and sensuous acceptance of all that life gives. As a result his poetry has a fleshly reality, a palpability, a richness, recalling Keats, the Keats of the 'Ode to Autumn', while at the same time there is maintained a charming simplicity, a directness throughout. The simple, spontaneous appeal that we find in a poem like 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' does not get lost in his later poetry, even in poems like 'Sailing to Byzantium' and 'Among Schoolchildren' in spite of the increasing complexity of thought and structure. Every poem of Yeats is autonomous in a truer sense than Eliot's, his is truly ...

a poetry ... in which everything is implicit; standards emerge and are judged only in terms of human action, as things happen.\(^5\)

Yet, a scholar like Hazard Adams has charged Yeats of having sacrificed something of reality, by not providing a systematic basis or philosophy for the understanding of his thoughts. He does not define what concepts he fully

\(^4\) Ibid., p.32.
\(^5\) Ibid., p.40.
supports, and against what. Adams does not find such a failure on the part of Blake, with whom Yeats is contrasted. But Yeats's aims in writing poetry were something quite different from those of Blake. (Yeats was inspired by something quite different from that which inspired Blake). Blake was first a mystic, then a poet. He used poetry to record and transmit his visions because in this imaginative medium he found the only possible way of symbolizing his vision. His was essentially a mystic's approach to reality, which sometimes became poetic. That is why his later works are prophetic rather than poetic: 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' and 'The Book of Thel' do not interest us as great poetry. Yeats always approached reality as a poet: occultism, mysticism, magic, myth, were all only aids, and occupied a secondary position in his work. Eliot's approach to reality is also poetic, but there is an ascetic strain in his approach. He is aloof in temperament (while Yeats is social, he opens out towards mankind) like Dante, perhaps more like Milton. Eliot's symbols, like the Tiger in 'Gerontion', or the Rose, the Chinese Jar in 'Four Quartets' are fine things, but they are not directly comprehensible like the Tree or the Dancer; they are difficult, metaphysical, contemplative. But for all his scholarship and detachment, Eliot is not a recluse; he does not content himself by living in an ivory tower, though in moods of meditation he may feel:

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

He is neither like Blake lost in his visions, nor like Mallarmé seeking oneness with the abstract:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
though

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each...
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.

He is a poet making a sincere effort to understand reality, a poet who has set out on the long and arduous quest for meaning in a world which seems to have lost all meaning for man.

Edith Sitwell once remarked that Eliot began 'a new reign in poetry'; even the opening of the 'Waste Land' makes us aware of this. The line 'April is the cruellest month' recalls by contrast the world evoked by the opening of Chaucer's 'Prologue to the Canterbury Tales':

Whan that April with his shoures sote
The droghte of Marche hath perced to the roote
And bathed every vein in swich licour.

Chaucer's world is the world of nature: it has a richness and a reality, a simple strength and joy which make it charming. In Eliot's poem we are altogether in a new world. The implicit trust in nature (seen in such a line as 'So pricketh hem nature in hir corages'), the sincere delight ('And smale fowles maken melodye'), and the confident hope in the future which we find in Chaucer are replaced by metaphysical probing and a sense of despair.

To Chaucer, Nature is not merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly. 'Nature is the art of God' to be respected and enjoyed.

Chaucer can become one with the joyous spirit of nature. Modern man, after three centuries of systematic investigation into the secrets of nature, no longer feels this kinship. He has put distance between nature and himself, separated from it; in order to have a more objective view and a better

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7 A.N. Whitehead: 'Science and the Modern World', Chapter III.
8 Sir Thomas Browne: 'Religio medici', I.
understanding. Modern man, while he has gained 'knowledge' of Nature, suffers the ill-effects of separation from nature. Mankind today has become 'like a great up-rooted tree, with its roots in the air. We must plant ourselves again in the universe'\(^9\) : the wasteland needs to be rehabilitated. A fundamental need of human beings is a way of expressing our sense of the quality of all things, or what Arnold called 'an explanation in black and white of the mystery of existence'. Poetry does not aim at giving an 'explanation', but it can arouse in us a sense of the mystery. Science has explained to us many things, and inventions like the aeroplane and discoveries like the power of the atom, are no doubt of great importance; yet little in this changing world of ours seems to matter so much as the quality of our living. We have to try to live somehow amidst the machines made by man and to face the divisions and the disorders which have come in their wake; we have to see if any significance can be found in this sort of world. And as soon as we try to live more fully and deeply, we become aware of all that experiment and observation have left untouched. The account of reality that Chaucer gave seems to be far more complete and in a way more satisfying than that we get from modern science. We have no doubt gained much from science, but the mechanistic determinism it encouraged had the effect of shaking age-old faiths and traditions without providing anything new in their place to satisfy all the needs of man's mind. The modern poet makes his own attempt to provide this: he pieces together the fragments of reality scattered about him, and sees whether they can yield any meaning. Eliot begins from the position of extreme scepticism with which modern man in the age of science looks at the world: he cannot accept life joyfully and take it for granted as Chaucer accepted the company of the Canterbury pilgrims; he has to meet the challenge of doubt and despair.

\(^9\) D.H.Lawrence: "À Propos of 'Lady Chatterley's Lover'", p.52.
He cannot participate freely in life; he has still to fight for it.

The search for meaning is partly served by the ironic attitude that Eliot assumes, and maintains throughout the early poetry. This irony is something deliberately cultivated as a reaction to the contemporary romanticism of English poetry. The young Eliot did not for instance, feel any attraction for Yeats. Yeats of the 'dreamy, Celtic' period, with his strong Pre-Raphaelite dispositions, seemed to be only a minor survivor of a past age, from whom Eliot was held back by two characteristically modern prejudices, which Eliot himself has described in the following words:

There were... two prejudices, one against Pre-Raphaelite imagery, which was natural to one of my generation, and perhaps affects generations younger than mine. The other prejudice... is the prejudice that poetry not only must be found through suffering, but can find its material only in suffering. Everything else was cheerfulness, optimism and hopefulness. And these words stood for a great deal of what one hated in the nineteenth century.

Eliot, eager to escape from nineteenth century optimism, had to seek further afield for what he wanted; he turned to the French Symbolists. In 1908 Eliot had learned something about these French poets through Arthur Symons' book on 'The Symbolist Movement in Literature', which came to him 'as an introduction to wholly new feelings, as a revelation'. There seemed to be doings in France which were fascinating; his interest in French poetry deepened under the influence of the excitement he found in these. And when he went to Paris in 1910, it must have been the fulfilment of a cherished dream. Later on he recalled the feeling of rich discovery that the French capital gave him:

Je crois que c'était une bonne fortune exceptionnelle, pour un adolescent, de découvrir Paris en l'an 1910... On avait toujours une chance d'apercevoir Anatole France le long de quais: et on achetait le dernier livre de Gide ou

10 'Dante' in 'Selected Essays', p.262.

11 By 'The Sacred Wood', p.5.
Pre-war Paris gave Eliot an opportunity to perfect his French, his philosophy (under Bergsonian influence) and his poetic talents; he also wrote some French poems. But perhaps his most important acquisition was the ironic attitude to life which he took from the writings of Verlaine, Laforgue and Corbière, minor poets who were more interested in applying symbolist principles to modern life than in undertaking the arduous journey to the Absolute. In their poetry there was an attempt to reveal the peculiar 'quality' of modern urban civilization through ironic flashes of imagery. The revelation came in glimpses; and this exactly suited Eliot. Life as a whole did not seem to have any meaning to Eliot; perhaps more significance could be found in the particular and the heterogeneous, in fragments of life closely examined. Hence in his early poetry we find a number of carefully tended fragments, unrelated with one another or with any general philosophy of life. Nothing has coherence, everything is fragmentary, even the soul, for Eliot speaks of

The thousand sordid images
Of which your soul was constituted.

The impression of incoherence and general lack of purpose is further strengthened when he describes worlds as revolving

like ancient women
Gathering

To a great extent Eliot's perception of reality was confined to the observation of the individual, the unrelated and fragmentary facts of existence. This and the attention to precision and detail bring him close to Imagism; he seems to be following Hulme's precept 'to prove that beauty may be found in small, dry things'. The extreme concentration on the particular and the physical

in the early poems of Eliot and his habit of juxtaposing contradictory images make us feel that the poet had no other aim than to present the world in fragments. This feeling is strengthened by some of Eliot's own critical remarks. He finds a similar fragmentariness in Donne's poetry:

... perhaps one reason why Donne has appealed so powerfully to the recent time is that there is in his poetry hardly any attempt at organization; rather a puzzled and humorous shuffling of the pieces; and we are inclined to read our own conscious awareness of the apparent irrelevance and unrelatedness of things into the mind of Donne. 14

Eliot's attempt to diagnose the fragmentariness is characteristic, and is in part a reflection and an explanation of his own: it seems Eliot, at this stage, did not believe in the necessity for any systematic and integrated philosophy of life. He finds a parallel to his own situation in Donne:

The end of the sixteenth century is an epoch when it is particularly difficult to associate poetry with systems of thought or reasoned views of life. In making some very commonplace investigations of the 'thought' of Donne, I found it quite impossible to come to the conclusion that Donne believed in anything. It seemed as if, at that time, the world was filled with broken fragments of systems, and that a man like Donne merely picked up, like a magpie, various shining fragments of systems, ideas as they struck his eye, and stuck them about here and there in his verse. 15

Apart from the justice of Eliot's remarks on Donne's lack of 'organization' and belief, it would be difficult to believe that Donne manipulated 'fragments of systems' for casually improvised poems. Eliot himself certainly does not piece together fragments in the manner of a magpie; the absence of organization is more apparent than real. One fragment is often made to reflect the meaning of another, and sometimes the fragments put together may yield meaning, as, for instance, when he speaks of

... all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate.

In fact, the succession of images is so carefully controlled and arranged, that

15 'Selected Essays', pp.138-139.
they become, to a limited extent, symbolic. The aim is, clearly, not realism or accurate description of actual pieces of life. The images are intended to evoke feelings in the reader, rather than to reflect actual scenes. This effect is sometimes brought about by deliberate efforts to fuse disparate elements and impressions to represent a new whole of feeling. In an image like,

The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passageways ...

there is no essential unity of thought between the 'smell of steaks' and a typical suburban evening; the unity is one of feeling or 'mood'. Perhaps Eliot's great achievement in these early poems is his ability to catch something of the contemporary mood of boredom. His characters too help him in capturing this mood; the world of Prufrock and Sweeney is, on the whole, the familiar, material world of day-to-day life. Yet this world is bewildering and boring because there seems to be no necessary relation between its phenomena, no ultimate meaning. A good example of Eliot's success in evoking this mood can be found in the piece entitled 'Preludes'. Here we have the end of a day in a working man's life suggested through images like that of the 'burnt-out ends' of cigars and 'Of faint stale smells of beer'; the loneliness that follows exhaustion; the first stirrings of early morning, when London, as Baudelaire's Paris, wakes 'like an ancient drudge to another day's work'; the feverish preparations of the 'hands' for the day's work beginning with the 'raising of dingy shades' and the 'tramping on muddy feet' to early coffee-stands. All these sordid details create an effect of boredom upon us, but they also bring to the poet

The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.

It is that notion, perhaps, which makes Eliot think of life in the modern
industrial city as something unreal. "Unreal"; that is a word to pounce on', says G.S. Fraser. Eliot's scepticism about reality is the modern man's scepticism: but in his concern with the feeling of unreality, Eliot was working towards something subtler, a sense of blank, hollowness, nausea in everyday life, the sense that the so-called existent reality is sometimes a hollow, incoherent improvisation. Here we have something comparable to Sartre's Nausea or Kirkegaard's dread. Actual life is something pretentious, absurd, while 'reality' would perhaps be something like a Stevenson adventure story, exciting, dynamic, where man battles 'in the warm rain/...knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass'; or, something animal, submerged, fierce, primal:

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

In this mood Eliot found many of the French Symbolists strangely bracing: Baudelaire's prostitutes and corpses, Verlaine's spleen and Laforgue's irony all appealed to him. Though there were excellent reasons for any man of sensibility to be gloomy and bored under contemporary conditions of life, Eliot does not directly refer to these. He explores the mood of boredom, and tries to symbolize it. He uses irony to put distance between his personal feeling and his utterances, and to objectify his mood. One effective way of depersonalizing his emotions was to use an antithetical 'persona' as a symbol. A character like J.Alfred Prufrock, with such ludicrous attributes as the name, the age and the baldness which make him outwardly so unlike the poet, was an effective mask. This device, though borrowed from Laforgue, is a lineal descendent of Browning's dramatic monologue. Pound too had used 'Personae' (which literally means 'masks'), and Yeats 'masks' as well as symbolic characters. Baudelaire had found
a symbol for an intensely felt experience in the character of la Géante.
In a similar endeavour, 'the poet Mallarmé becomes the faun of his dream and lives the myth of a metamorphosis, even as Rimbaud became the drunken boat'. And Laforgue in his Pierrot (though a character taken from legend) had found a symbol for his own experiences. Pierrot actually represents a doubling of his personality — the poet and his fictitious character or 'opposite' in one person — hence, evasive as he might be, 'there is not a shadow of a lie in him'. Eliot had noted Laforgue's use of irony 'to express a dédoublement of the personality against which the subject struggles'. That is what Eliot has done in Prufrock.

Prufrock is a perfect symbol for the feeling of boredom and frustration and loneliness which make modern life so unreal. His situation is not exceptional: there are other men who have a sense of loneliness. This is brought out in the image of the lonely men in shirt-sleeves leaning out of the windows of their isolation: this also implies a sense of longing, a desire to mix among other human beings. But this is not possible because the binding force of humanity, a meaningful life, has been lost. Everyone is left only with a sense of the brokenness of the world:

    I can connect
    Nothing with nothing.

This sense of isolation leads not only to disbelief in love and in friendship, but to a feeling of determinism, and even fatalism:

    Every street lamp that I pass
    Beats like a fatalistic drum.

Even human beings become almost like machines:

    So the hand of the child, automatic,
    Slipped out and pocketed a toy that was running along the quay.

18 'Criterion', April, 1933.
She smooths her hair with automatic hand,
And puts a record on the gramaphone.

This sameness and sordidness about life is evoked in all his early poetry:

Or, as Stephen Spender remarks:

''Modern life is a kind of Hell, but even that view has to be modified; it is, as it were, a fragmentary Hell, a Hell devoid of consistency, too stupid to punish anyone, and without moral severity. It is impossible, according to the values of the modern world, to be damned as to be saved.''

This view of life leads Eliot to the realization that there are two 'worlds, two planes of existence. They are both at first unreal, both 'death's kingdoms', fit habitations for the Hollow Men. But this life, the life of the crowds flowing into the City, 'death's dream kingdom' is more unreal than 'death's other kingdom' which we do not know and which flashes on our consciousness like 'sunlight on a broken column'. This view of material life as unreal, and of a transcendental existence as real owes a great deal to Baudelaire and the French Symbolists that Eliot was becoming familiar with. Symbolism, as Arthur Symons had pointed out, was essentially a search for the mystic reality that lay behind physical manifestations.

Eliot's quest for knowledge is reflected in his poetry throughout: and in this quest the nature of reality was a main objective. In his early poems Eliot, as we have seen, was able to evoke the boredom and the horror — more particularly of the former — in life; but these poems do not have an integrated vision of life behind them. The poet is unable to bring out a sense of the significance or meaning behind the boredom, the horror and the suffering. In 'The Waste Land', Eliot's quest for meaning becomes successful:

it is Eliot's first masterpiece in the symbolic mode. The spirit of the age speaks through this poem of Eliot's: it has caught the pulse of the modern consciousness. 'The Waste Land' is as much the product of our age as Milton's 'Paradise Lost' is of his age. All the erudition of Eliot, his rich background of tradition, his intellectual power, are made use of in his understanding of contemporary life. This accounts for the depth of thought and the intensity of the vision of modern life that we have in the poem. It is the poet's great concern for modern man that makes him pessimistic. But he does not despair: the accumulated wisdom of man is of use even amidst such chaos. Suffering and sacrifice have meaning, and through these can be attained Shantih, 'the peace that passeth all understanding'.

The problem of the unreality of actual life is worked out fully in the poem. Modern man, having lost the knowledge of good and evil, has also lost his understanding of truth. That is why the world has become a wasteland, a realm in which existence itself has become unreal. It is a world in which man has lost his capacity for independent action: he has become an automaton, doing things without understanding them. As Eliot says in his essay on Baudelaire:

... so far as we do evil or good, we are human, and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: at least we exist.

The bottled Sibyl, hanging at the entrance to the poem is an indicator of the weariness in the Wasteland: by saying, 'I wish to die', she indicates the feeling that even death is better than this sort of life. The same sort of joyless existence we find in the representative figure of the wasteland, Stetson. He is 'hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère'. Nothing can stir the denizen of the Wasteland, not even the rebirth of life
heralded by the Spring. Spring reminds him of the past, 'that corpse you planted last year in your garden', which he prefers should remain where it is. For, the corpse or 'reality' is exacting: to face the truth, one has to be prepared for hard and painful labour. Spring brings to man desire for truth and life: modern man is not prepared for this. He would rather do without truth or the work he has to put in after it. He leaves truth buried as an inconvenient corpse, and goes about the dull routine established for him by a mechanical civilization.

The attitude is shown as something universal: hence the multitude of personae introduced into the poem which in sheer number recall Hardy's 'Dynasts'. The personae are often historical or classical characters which come with their entire context, but are used to illuminate some modern meaning. The characters attain symbolic value through Eliot's technique of movement from one context to another, which brings out points of resemblance between diverse persons, episodes and objects. There are ranges of 'correspondence' in 'The Waste Land'. The wealthy neurotic at her dressing table is reflected both in Philomela and the woman being discussed by her vulgar friend in a pub; Cleopatra, Elizabeth, a stenographer of easy morals and the Rhine maidens are ranged in a single perspective; Biblical scenes parallel pagan myths; arias from Wagner blend with echoes from the 'Divine Comedy'. Each introduces its entire context and yet is modified by the situation on which they are made to bear by the poet; and at the same time, each reflects within its context some element of the myth, which as a key analogy joins all the contexts together.

This unifying myth is that of man in his role of seeker after meaning:

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20 The analogy between the typist girl and Elizabeth, for instance, appears absurd on the literal level, yet it holds in the particular context created by the poet. The attitude of both towards love shows that the mechanical attitude towards a human relationship, and the sense of boredom which follows as a consequence, are not something new in the history of the world.
all the actions in the poem, all the images ( = situations ), all the
personae, take their meaning from their relationship to this search.
Eliot sees man as primarily engaged in this quest, seeking through the
various modes of conventional activity, satisfactory terms on which to live
with the world. But as the characters in the poem 'melt' into one
another so situations melt into the world that they define.

The world is symbolized by the Waste Land. The immediate inspiration
for the symbol of the Waste Land might have been Miss Jessie L. Weston's
book, 'From Ritual to Romance', but it serves the purpose of answering Eliot's
need for perspective. It places the contemporary situation in the context
of time or history, examines the present which is not known to us fully,
in the light of the past which is known to us. This way of using the
symbol at once establishes Eliot's difference from the French Symbolists.
They had an aversion to the chronological continuity of past and present
on which history is based. They also did not believe in the linear progre-
ssion of time or in the value of tradition. To them, the present moment,
the moment of illumination, was all-important. With the necessary
visionary powers and discipline, the poet could see the timeless truth
through the present moment and embody it in a symbol. In this respect
Yeats, in a poem like 'Among Schoolchildren', with symbols like 'tree' and
'dancer' comes nearer the French Symbolists than Eliot.

Eliot constantly refers to past achievements in history, literature
and philosophy and connects them up with certain primitive rituals and myths,
which he feels are psychological certainties, being part of our 'race memory'.
Eliot thus tries to get the support of history and science for the things
he says. Or, as Stephen Spender puts it,

... He is appealing to scientific legend, where Yeats appeals to poetic legend. The authority behind 'The Wasjre Land' is not the Catholic Church nor romantic lore, but anthropology from the volumes of Sir James Frazer's 'The Golden Bough'. Eliot has tried to indicate, beneath the very ephemeral and violent movements of our own civilization, the gradual and the magical contours of man's earliest religious beliefs.

This sort of approach was perhaps necessary for a poet who began with absence of belief and scepticism; but as the poem progresses there is a gradual movement towards belief and hope. This movement is worked out in poetic or symbolic terms.

The images in 'The Waste Land' fall into certain patterns. For example, the cycle of seasons at the opening of the poem suggests the wheel of time. It brings to our mind the idea of time as 'perpetual revolution and repetition', seasonal migrations (— the Lithuanian woman who goes south every winter), the cycles of civilization mechanically reproducing the same events and the same problems, Carthage,

Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London

and Phlebas the Phoenician, caught in the backward whirlpool. We are reminded about the present by the crowd flowing over London Bridge to the "sound" of St. Mary Woolnoth keeping the hours, and by the typist waiting for 'the young man carbuncular' : but this present is set against Tiresias, the deathless old prophet of Thebes:

And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
Enacted on this same divan or bed.

But modern man cannot face Time like Tiresias; he is baffled:

What shall we do tomorrow?
What shall we ever do?

Modern life being without direction or order, Time also seems purposeless,

like a wind blowing where it listeth. Realizing this truth, it is natural for the poet to ask, 'After such knowledge, what forgiveness?' Man seems to have no part in influencing the course which his life will follow. There seems to be a pre-destined way in which things will shape themselves which we cannot alter or resist. Nothing can save us, not even history (knowledge of the past).

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

For this sort of life without hope, the symbol that Eliot finds is the wheel. The whirlpool that drowned Phlebas, and the 'water-mill beating the darkness' (in the 'Journey of the Magi') are forms of this symbol. The wheel brings in both Time and Buddhist philosophy. The eight-fold path to salvation, perhaps coming to Eliot through his favourite book, Edwin Arnold's 'The Light of Asia', suggested how much tied down the earthly life is to the Wheel.

In 'The Waste Land', the Buddha's teachings come in more directly as the Fire Sermon. The fire is desire or lust Burning burning burning burning and turning the wasteland to another Carthage. The curse that has wasted the land brings to the poet's mind a similar situation in the Rig Veda: the imprisonment of the Sapta Sindhu. The absence of the life-giving waters tormented gods and men and beasts alike. What was the way out? How could man get free from unreality, from 'death's dream kingdom', and attain reality and life? The answer that the poet arrives at is that man can hope to be saved only by realizing the value of suffering and sacrifice. But this value or meaning resides in working out a relationship between man and the world. Surrender and sacrifice and their value as a solution to man's problems
had already been suggested by Hindu mythology. As Prof. Narsimhaiah has pointed out,

Dadhichi, the sage, offered his very backbone for the gods to make a club out of, and kill the demon (Vritra), and release the relentless clouds which gathered far distant over Himavant.

The rishi, a mendicant having nothing else to give, but full of compassion for all living creatures, offered his life, his backbone for the good of man and beast. Sacrifices like this have been made again and again for the good of man: there is the example of Christ, and before him the pagan god Osiris who gave his body so that the grain may sprout and provide food for mankind.

In these examples of suffering we see a meaning. Thus...

... Vegetation myths of the rebirth of the year, fertility myths of the rebirth of the potency of man, and the Grail legend of purification, no less than the Christian story of the Resurrection, the Fire Sermon of the Buddha and the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad have all fertilized the poet's imagination, along with Freud and Einstein. And all these are needed to answer the challenge of modern life.

With this realization of the meaning of suffering, the poet gets peace.

Yet, there are several critics who feel that 'The Waste Land' does not indicate any solution, any way out of the problem facing modern man; they regard the poem as just an expression of despair. Elizabeth Drew, for example, feels that the medley of quotations from foreign languages at the end of the poem is indicative of confusion, and that the solution suggested has not been integrated into the experience of the poet; that therefore the poem cannot be said to have closed on a note of hope. She remarks:

... it is impossible to feel peace in the concluding passage. It is a formal ending only. The atmosphere is coloured far more strongly by the image of destruction, 'London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down', and by the sense of attempting to shore up the ruins by repeating words of comfort and strengthening of the spirit which may help him. But they are in foreign tongues, not translated into his own inner experience.
and so become a part of himself. Give, Sympathize, Control, Peace, remain abstract ideas; none of them has been transfigured into a redeeming symbol. The surrender has been made, but it still seems a surrender to death, and the possibility of rebirth is still without substance or outline.

A scholar like Eliot may well be at home in many languages, and the quotations could be taken as giving a sense of universality to the message of peace arrived at by the end of the poem. The poem actually ends with the voice of the Thunder asserting values, through its message of salvation. The values it asserts, supported by the allusions to the Buddha's 'Fire Sermon', the Upanishads and St. Augustine, are used as moral gestures of the standards that Christianity accepts. The Christian judgment that permeates the irony in the texture of the poem is ignored by most critics, who look upon the poem as a world-weary cry of despair. I.A. Richards was one of the first critics to see that there was something more than mere elegiac contemplation of human weaknesses in the poem, but he did not say anything positive about the poem. He preferred to make the cryptic statement that the poetry is devoid of belief. Belief in the literal sense may not matter to the reader, but that is the source of conviction to the poet. It is this conviction that gives particularity of significance to diverse myths and diverse images like the Hanged God of Frazer, the quest for the Grail, Tiresias, the carbuncular clerk and Ferdinand. It is true the poet has not stated the solution, but ended the poem on a subdued and ironic note: this is because the poet aims not at a 'statement' but at a dramatic projection of experience. It has been possible for the poet to present this experience in a particular way only because he has been able to evaluate it and put it in a proper perspective. The evaluation has been made by Christian standards, though he does not pre-suppose these right at the beginning of the poem: in view

of this it is surprising that critics like Helen Gardner find no progression in the poem; they feel that the poem ends morally where it began. It has been pointed out there has been a failure on the part of the poet to release the healing waters:

'The Waste land' moves, if it moves at all, towards some moment which is outside the poem and may never come, which we are still waiting for at the close. It does not so much move towards a solution as make clearer and clearer that a solution is not within our power. We can only wait for the rain to fall. 25

But the poem would be meaningless without the hope of solution that we come to at the end: the poet bewails the loss of certain values only because he cherishes these and hopes that they can be re-established. The poem is far from being pessimistic; the poet was ruthlessly depicting a desperate state of affairs only because he believed in the possibility of a restoration to hopefulness, provided mankind developed a sense of values, and of truth.

The value and meaning of sacrifice is given a more specifically Christian treatment in 'Ash Wednesday'. Sacrifice for a Christian may be in the form of renunciation, and this renunciation may free him from the Wheel. In 'Ash Wednesday', the wheel is represented through the symbol of the winding stair, which brings to our mind Yeats's symbol of the Gyre. As long as we are climbing the stair, turning and turning on the wheel, we are bound to suffer, seeing below,

The same shape twisted on the banister.

Only renunciation, sacrifice, can save man from the terrible wheel of rebirth and death, the gyre of suffering. But renunciation is very difficult: in 'Ash Wednesday' this is brought out in various ways. The sufferer is fully

conscious of his sin, as is shown by the pleading: 'Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death'. This sense of sin is a shared feeling: it is something universal. That is why we are told of those 'who affirm before the world and deny between the rocks', 'spitting from the mouth the withered apple-seed', which reminds us of the Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden and the perpetuation of that Fall (symbolized by the withered seed). This sense of sin holds man back to the wheel. There are other temptations too which make renunciation difficult. The protagonist is shown labouring up the stair,

Struggling with the devil of the stairs who wears
The deceitful face of hope and of despair ...;

he is tempted by what he sees of the enchanting pastoral scene of life:

... the hawthorn blossom and a pasture scene
The broad-backed figure dressed in blue and green.

He is also tempted by the music of the 'antique flute', by lilacs and brown hair —

Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown.

But he resists this, wishing for 'strength beyond hope and despair', and continues climbing.

The need for ascetic discipline and self-control had been clearly hinted at in 'The Waste Land': there the poet, after leading us through the rigours and nausea of a modern wilderness, shows us that the journey has after all a definite goal in spiritual regeneration. By braving dangers, looking evil in the face and toiling onwards, a regeneration may perhaps be attained, and one may get free from the wheel. In 'Ash Wednesday', the same journey is made and the goal attained. There is much to forego,

... the lost heart stiffens and rejoices
In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices
And the weak spirit quickens to rebel
For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell.
But there is also the human desire for escape and oblivion which finds a perfect image in the vision of the bones scattered in the white sands, Forgetting themselves and each other, united In the quiet of the desert.

After the climbing of the stairs, which correspond to Dante's purgatorial stairs, the protagonist is fit for the transformation that would make spiritual salvation possible for him. The process of transformation itself is symbolized by the devouring of the body by the three white Leopards. These animals are in the tradition of all devouring creatures whose act benefits rather than destroys the victim; we have the myths which show a hero being swallowed, but finally emerging regenerated. The leopards in Eliot's poem devour, but at the same time they have a beneficent aspect. Their whiteness and quiet pose suggest they are harmless; they lose terror in beauty. Moreover, as the bones know very well, the loss of the parts eaten up by the leopards makes it possible for the brightness of the Lady to shine upon them. The 'self' which has been dispersed gladly relinquishes itself:

And I who am here dissembled
Proffer my deeds to oblivion, and my love
In the posterity of the desert and the fruit of the gourd.

In these enchanting and chant-like lines, the body, whose old likeness has been changed and scattered (dissembled), renounces its past and the sensual aspects of its love. And having made the renunciation, it finds that the loss is not complete dismemberment, but a losing and forgetting of the old, followed by a new state of being. In this condition, it is ready to receive the grace of the Lady. The mysterious 'Lady of Silences', by her very silence inspires the regenerated soul on the journey towards the Garden, 'where all loves end'. The final aim of the journey is the Garden.
The symbol of the Garden is an answer to the persistent longing of humanity for perfection. Eliot gave hints of the longing even as early as the Prufrock poem, which contains not only 'spleen' but 'ideal' which takes the form of a submarine vision. The poet gives us frequent glimpses of a garden bathed in sunlight, which contrasts strongly with the drabness of the 'unreal' life; we have a hint of such a garden in 'La Figlia che Piange':

Lean on a garden urn —
Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair —
Clasp your flowers to you with a pained surprise.

In 'The Waste Land', there is the hyacinth garden. And, finally, in the garden of 'Burnt Norton', where in the autumn heat the poet enters, as if invited by the call of a thrush, and experiences a moment of mystic illumination. This vision cannot last, but while it remains it seems an experience out of time, giving to the poet a sense of fullness and reality.

This experience becomes the experience of Reality, and a goal to be sought in all the endeavours of life. In 'Burnt Norton' we have the poet's meditations on this moment of illumination and its relation to life. The first 'movement' of the poem gives the thought that if time is always present, that is, always 'here' and always with us, it is 'unredeemable'. The past and the future are then equally meaningless, and it would be futile to wish things were different. In the 'movements' which follow, the poet suggests two ways in which, time being what it is, we may attain the experience out of time. The two ways had been hinted at in the epigraph of the poem, in the quotation from Heraclitus: 'The way up is the way down'. The 'way up' is the ascent or 'Ehrebung' (= movement) toward the light of the sun, the 'way down' leads to the darkness below the ground. In both cases a point of stillness is reached: the sun as the still centre of the cosmic dance, the centre of the earth or the
point round which the earth rotates. The symbolic meaning of this is that the experience of Reality can be reached either in esstatic happiness or in ascetic discipline. The still point of perfection is the centre of the symbolic wheel, which reconciles the two ways. The still centre of the wheel is presented by Eliot in an interesting image:

Garlic and sapphires in the mud
Clot the bedded axle-tree.

Here 'garlic' has associations of the gross and the earthy, and calls up in our mind such images as 'the rat with slimy belly', the damp souls of housemaids, Apeneck Sweeney erect, Mr. Eugenides, the young man carbuncular, the winter evening round behind the gas-house, the cactus-land and the toothed gullet of an aged shark. Sapphires suggest the deceptively fragile beauty of Princess Volupine, 'la figlia che piange'. Belladonna lady of the Rocks, the jewels of the modern Cleopatra, Elizabeth and Leicester beating oars on the yet unsullied Thames, and the silken girls bringing sherbet. These literary echoes will help us—even if we do not include the reflection of Mallarme's phrase 'tonnerre et rubis aux moyeux'—to regard 'garlic and sapphires' as symbolic of the objective, sensuous world that surrounds us.

We have to start from our awareness of this sensuous world with its patterns and cycles of history and of nature, even if we wish to move upwards 'above the moving tree' to a light in which we may see the eternal pattern of the wheel: 'the boar-hound and the boar' which get 'reconciled among the stars'.

It is also what we have to start with if we are to make the downward journey which is the subject of the third 'movement' of the poem. The way down begins with our awareness of human life and modern civilization, a typical representative of which is the London Tube full of the 'Wind in and out of unwholesome lungs'. The descent from this into the complete
the still centre appears at first as

Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property.
Desiccation of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy,
Inoperancy of the world of spirit.

It is a descent till complete deprivation of the temporal is reached.
The fourth 'movement' is concerned with the moment of illumination which comes at the still point, the glimpse of the Garden. It is in the form of a prayer that the vision may remain, and that the moment of grace be extended.

If the moment passes,

Will the sunflower turn to us, will the clematis
Stray down, bend to us; tendril and spray
Clutch and cling?

The sunflower and the clematis not only suggest the Garden, but also Christ and the Virgin. The question is whether after such moments of illumination the seeker has any hope of salvation or not. And the answer, in the image of the Kingfisher, suggests the possibility of peace. In the final 'movement' of the poem, motion and stillness are contrasted. Motion belongs to time, as poetry and music belong to the world of time. But the complete pattern is timeless, the pattern in which the whole of a poetical or musical composition is contemplated at once in the mind, so that

the end precedes the beginning,
And the end and the beginning were always there.

Similarly, through desire and action, or movement, we reach the stillness of absolute love and pure illumination. Thus, 'Only through time time is conquered'. The 'all is always now' of the final movement is something different from the 'all time is eternally present' of the opening: the vision of a meaningful pattern lies between the two.

While 'Burnt Norton' contrasts the way up with the way down, and sees...
in both the presence of a pattern, 'East Coker' is concerned with the antithesis of pattern and chaos, and with a further exploration of the 'way down' through renunciation, suffering and darkness. The poem tells us about the patterns which may be found in the processes of natural growth and decay, and in the unforced observance of seasons and traditions. Such ordered life in itself partakes of the nature of a 'dignified and commodious sacrament'. There is also, in contrast, the chaos and frustration, the lack of a meaningful pattern, which were vividly demonstrated at the outbreak of the second world war. Science and religion had promised something better, but one cannot base one's beliefs on empirical knowledge or theories since the pattern of the whole keeps changing, and understanding of it is a revelation to be hoped for and accepted with humility. If humility is there, even darkness and deprivation may be turned into a source of enlightenment. The garden can be a garden of agony as well as a garden of ecstasy:

The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy,  
Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony  
Of death and birth.

The poet then suggests the idea that not only must renunciation of self be complete, but Christ's passion, too, must be accepted if we are to be healed. In Christ's love, suffering can attain meaning by being related to pattern instead of to chaos. This leads to the conclusion that it is not the isolated moment that counts, as the poet has now discovered, but the perpetual struggle and exploration; 'We must be still and still moving'. The last words of 'East Coker', 'In my end is my beginning' mean not only that death is followed by rebirth, but also that in my goal, my 'end' ( = absolute love ) lies the impulse of my striving.

'The Dry Salvages' is a poem of humility. The poet is modest in his aspirations and he realizes that most of us are not saints, and that therefore
our moments of illumination are hardly more than distraction fits, 'hints followed by guesses'. Human life is represented by the river, which has pattern. The sea, which is all about us, on the other hand, patternless. Human beings continue their activities in the ocean of limitless time, because they are afraid to think that their toil is really useless or that the future may lead them to an absolute destination, a final judgment. Only despair keeps a flicker of hope and the flicker of a prayer alive in us.

The poet has, however, learned to see the past as more than a sequence of events and activities and more than an evolutionary development. The past has a meaning given to it by timelessness. The poet realizes here, even more fully than in 'East Coker' that agony as well as ecstasy may be permanent and revealing, and that even 'the agony of others' may lead to a fuller understanding. The poet also thinks about the future, and finds that it is not, any more than the past, a sequence or development; in fact, past and future merge in the past expanse of the ocean of time. Whatever aim or meaning there is must be found in our minds,

on whatever sphere of being
The mind of man may be intent... and it is the present moment ('the time of death') that counts most.

A prayer for all voyagers on the directionless sea is followed by a rejection of all attempts to foretell the future, and an affirmation of belief in

The point of intersection of the timeless
With time,
which is interpreted as the Incarnation of God in the temporal world.

'Little Gidding' is concerned with the past or history and with the purifying fire, and their place in man's search for the timeless reality. Little Gidding, a village with hallowed associations, will give meaning to a journey, wherever one arrives, at whatever time and for whatever reason.
There is an exhortation to prayer and discipline. The second movement of the poem describes the destruction by the four elements of everything belonging to this world. This is followed by the scene of London after an air-raid during the second world war:

After the dark dove with the flickering tongue
Had passed below the horizon of his homing
While the dead leaves still rattled on.

The poet, walking among the ruins meets with a 'familiar compound ghost' who tells him of the futility of all mortal life, and of the necessity of accepting the loss of everything as the source of a new, purified being. The poem moves on to a contemplation of the purification and expansion of love beyond desire. This would be a love which includes love of one's country. This love has its roots in the past, because we inherit both the victories and the defeats of the past: 'History may be servitude,' History may be freedom'. We think of the past as dead, but death itself may be a new beginning and a reconciliation of all things. The dead of the nation provide new beginnings or starting points for the living. Since death is a timeless moment, history, the story of the dead, is made up of a pattern of timeless moments. It is in this way that history becomes meaningful, and that time, with past and future, is fully redeemed.

The last of the 'Four Quartets' connects the timeless reality with the objective world represented by 'garlic and sapphires'. It also connects that reality with a tradition, a nation, a period of time, and makes it independent of chance moments of illumination or the solitary efforts of an individual. At the end of the poem comes the resolution of the dualisms and struggles which have been the burden of the Quartets, and the poet says,

All shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are infolded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

This brings us back to the Garden. In the opening quartet, we had the feeling that the moment of vision or the glimpse of the garden was disappointing in its partial and insufficient revelation, but even that revelation was likely to be a strain on the limited capacity of a human being. That is why we are told that 'human kind/ cannot bear very much reality'. But the discipline and the efforts of a quester after truth could enable him to ally the garden with the 'still point', the 'point of intersection of the timeless with time'. And thus the quester is able to arrive at Reality.

This Reality is satisfying to the poet in many ways. On the deepest spiritual level, Eliot finally finds meaning in Christianity, on the artistic level he finds it in the poetic intuition of the meaning of Christianity for men, and on the intellectual level he finds it in the belief in a living tradition. As he says in 'Little Gidding', 'History is now and England'. The quest for meaning ends in a position which is indistinguishable from belief. What is remarkable is that

Eliot has managed to integrate belief with art to a surprising extent, persuading each to fulfil the conditions of the other. Thus Christianity becomes a vision, a certain way of seeing and feeling things rather than a system of theology.26

This is particularly true of the 'Four Quartets' which are neither religious in the sense of devotional verse nor just lyrical effusion into which religion enters as more or less fortuitous material.

Dr. Helen Gardner objects to the introduction of Krishna in 'The Dry Salvages' on the ground that it is an error which 'destroys the imaginative harmony of the poem, since it is precisely in their view of history and the time process that Christianity and Hinduism are most opposed'.27 But Eliot envisages

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redemption from history and redemption of history. By leaning towards the doctrine of the Incarnation (the intersection of the timeless with time) rather than that of the Atonement, he finds it possible to believe in redemption through the realization of a timeless fulfilment of the temporal, and thus manages to reconcile Christianity and Hinduism without offending either. By reaching the 'still point' man attains release from the pressures of time, and though such moments of attainment are rare, they alone redeem the sad wastage of otherwise unillumined existence. In bringing out this difficult and intricate truth, the symbol of the Wheel has been very helpful. The symbol takes into account and reconciles contradictions: the view of time as a mere continuum and the difficult paradoxical Christian view of how man lives both in and out of time, how he is immersed in the flux and yet can penetrate to the eternal by apprehending timeless existence within time and above it.

'The Four Quartets' represents fulfilment, the end of the quest for Reality. The implications of that Reality have been fully worked out in the Quartets, but he had glimpses of it even earlier. In 'Ash Wednesday' he had said:

Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled
About the centre of the silent Word.

And, in the 'Coriolan' poems we have the lines:

O hidden under the dove's wing, hidden in the turtle's breast,
Under the palmtree at noon, under the running water
At the still point of the turning world, O hidden.

But while in the earlier poems Eliot expresses a mood or experience of Reality only occasionally glimpsed, in the 'Four Quartets' he embraces a more positive faith. We have here a serene acceptance of Reality, something which comes close to the 'Catholic philosophy of disillusion' he had found exemplified in Dante's 'Vita Nuova', and which could be summed up in the
precepts: 'not to expect more from life than it can give or more from human beings than they can give; to look to death for what life cannot give'.

In the early poems there is little of this sense of resignation; even in 'Ash Wednesday' he finds resignation difficult. But in time the Catholic philosophy of disillusion engulfs the more rebellious and bitter disillusion of his earlier poems.

Eliot, like Yeats, arrived through symbols at a visionary experience of Reality, thus conquering the problem of the 'unreal' world which he had presented in the early poems. Eliot and Yeats alike carried on the quest for Reality and Meaning: where they differed is in the type of discipline they felt the quest demanded of them. Eliot accepted the Christian procedure of purification through renunciation, and sensing human inadequacy and impurity tried to perfect his life by self-denial,

Emptying the sensual with deprivation,
Cleansing affection from the temporal.

Yeats preferred the road which leads through the sense of self-sufficiency and joy. F.A.C.Wilson has pointed out the difference by saying that Eliot's way is Christian and 'objective', while Yeats's way is Hindu and 'subjective': 'he (Yeats) was a subjective by nature, in harmony with eastern thought'.

The difference is characteristic and it can be seen in the poetry most clearly if we compare a typical Yeatsian symbol like the Dancer with Eliot's Garden. The Dancer is the symbol of the artist struggling through time towards timelessness, and achieving perfection in and through art. She rivals nature in her perfection: hence the analogy of Dancer and Tree. The Garden, on the other hand, breathes the rarefied atmosphere of paradise, and is something beyond life and death, beyond the normal temporal dimensions. It is something

28 Kristian Smide: 'Poetry and Belief in the Work of T.S.Eliot'.
beyond life and death, beyond the normal temporal dimensions. It is so completely out of the familiar world of the senses, that to apprehend it fully requires either the mystic powers of a saint or the help of the larger context of the Christian view of Reality. The reality symbolized by the Garden is thus given meaning and supported by a tradition; whereas in the Dancer we have a directly comprehensible symbol, getting validity from human experience. Yeats's attitude is closer to that of the French Symbolists who did not seek validity for their symbols in an accepted tradition. We could put the difference between the symbolism of Yeats and Eliot in another way: we can say the former represents a purely aesthetic approach to Reality, while the latter is more religious and traditional in inclination. Eliot's greatness lies in the way he has synthesized symbolism with the Christian approach to Reality.