CHAPTER IV

T.S. ELIOT'S MYTHICAL CONCERN

While it is true that the casual and the occasional statements of an author of importance need not formulate themselves into a systematic doctrine, the fact too cannot be ignored that there are important views, attitudes, and value-judgements which occurring frequently in his total body of work suggest the presence of a systematically reasoned structure of thought. For the major part of his earlier criticism, T.S. Eliot is searching and inconclusive despite the authoritative tone he employs in his essay and as Northrop Frye observes, Eliot mastered the art of passing off critical polemic in the disguise of objective, disinterested criticism (T.S. Eliot 22). In his celebrated essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", which Balachandra Rajan now considers has fallen into "distinguished obsolescence" (The Overwhelming Question 3), Eliot appears convinced that it is "part of the business of the critic to preserve tradition - where good tradition exists." He uses the concept of tradition as a mask to hide his essentially
individualistic qualities. In his later writings Eliot expands upon his concept of tradition against a backdrop of Christian orthodoxy where his primary concern is with the Church, theology, culture, and society. He is in search here for a universal critical standard which may be applicable in every sphere of intellectual activity, and, hence, "characterized by a persistent tension between vestiges of his earlier critical theories and the overriding demands of his social and religious beliefs" (Lipking and Litz 66).

As a poet and critic, Eliot brought into consciousness, and into confrontation with one another the two opposing factors of the spiritually negative character of the contemporary world and the spiritually positive character of the past tradition, where he viewed the past not as a nostalgic means of escape from the present, but as a living force surviving within the present. And, in order to achieve a composite world view, "he required not only to be a poet but also to be a penetrating analytic critic both of the past and of the present . . . guarding the integrity of the past tradition [and seeing] modern literature as making those past values new within contemporary life"
(Spender 10). On this account Eliot has been accused of identifying tradition with heresy. In Eliot's own words, heresy may be "partly right," and perhaps we can substantiate this by arguing that the basic tenets of his achievement as a major critic lies in his combination of myth and dogma as a world view and which in turn, show the relatedness of his religious and literary ideals. One of the major considerations which runs through Eliot's criticism and poetry, Stephen Spender observes,

is that of escaping from the subjective self into a world of objective values. In all his work there is the search for the merging of individual consciousness within some wider objective truth - at first the tradition, next the idea of the supernatural, and finally the dogmas of the Catholic Church. . . . His search for the authority first found within the tradition and, later, in the dogmas of the church provides the connection between the different stages of his development. (Eliot 13)

It is our purpose here to show that that connection,
which is both objective and subjective exists, and is provided by Eliot's keen awareness of the concept of myth.
Eliot's attitude to life in general may, perhaps, be best described by the word "ritualistic." He has a vision of the continuity of the present with the past and sees the contemporaneous as an extension of the historical through a matrix of rituals which were to be seen as extensions into the modern world of dogmas that remain unaltered from the past. The background to his early poetry "is a secular temporal world in which religious belief has become impossible. All that remains is the tradition: the life and values of a society in which there was true ritual crystallised in certain monuments of art; and to which it was possible for the modern artist or reader, by incessant study of these works, to relate his work, in his new art" (14-15). The rituals of living which Eliot yearned for come within the medieval Catholic tradition, though they have roots in ancient Rome and classical Greece. To him these ancient civilizations provided the chief sources of mythology, and as the roots of English and other European literature. He had based his idea of Europe on a past and antiquity emerges in his poems from the obscurities of myth into the tangible.
As in Matthew Arnold's polemics on culture, Eliot, who is seen to labour under an anxiety of influence, sees religion as a cultural product, but with a distinction:

In Eliot religion forms a third level above human society. Its presence there guarantees Burke's distinction between a higher order of human and a lower order of physical nature. "If this 'supernatural' is suppressed . . . the dualism of man and nature collapses at once. Man is man because he can recognise supernatural realities, not because he can invent them." Hence human culture is aligned with a spiritual reality which is superior to it and yet within it, the kind of relationship represented in Christianity by the Incarnation. Eliot stresses the importance of this conception when he speaks of culture metaphorically as the "incarnation" of the religion, the human manifestation of a superhuman reality. . . . In After Strange Gods Eliot uses "orthodoxy" to mean a conscious and voluntary commitment to the
Metaphorical thinking about culture, religion, traditionalism and the classics may help provide models for a secular temporal world of art, but in the world of actuality, mere symbols, like those arranged in a poem and projected as a creative-critical theory could prove to be disastrous. Eliot realized that politics was not simply a battleground of symbols and abstract principles, but that real people were involved, and therefore, his symbols are imprecise in order to avoid any definite dogmatic categories not present in experience or in religious feeling itself.

Eliot does not wish to mislead his audience with the imprecision of his symbolism, but on the contrary, hopes to impart a religious experience. He also does not try to question how much one can know from the Incarnation alone. "We can only experience the numinous: we can feel, sense, the religious, but we cannot define it rationally. Thus we cannot know or understand religious feeling, only religious dogma" (Skaff 420-22). Eliot's own writings reveal that the time sequences in "Journey of the Magi" and in The
Waste Land, show that he believed, following Frazer's The Golden Bough and Jessie Weston's From Ritual to Romance, "that the Christian Church grew out of older Oriental religious and fertility cults and that all such cults, including Christianity, are successive mythic reincarnations of the same basic religious truth, one of which is the Incarnation, the perpetual possibility of religious feeling inherent in the material world" (421–22).

A recent critic of Eliot's suggests the possibility that Eliot could have been influenced by the Higher Criticism (Harris 838–56). Besides being anti-myth, there appears to be no evidence in Eliot's essays or poetry that the issues examined by the Higher Criticism were of much concern to him. Moreover, by the time Eliot began to express his own struggles with literal belief, the Higher Criticism had been surpassed by the neo-orthodox theology of Barth. Following F.H. Bradley, Eliot believed that objective historical fact was impossible on philosophical grounds. Bradley's philosophy attracted Eliot because it is concerned with the relationship of the subjective consciousness with the objective world. In his thesis, Knowledge and
Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley, Eliot dealt with Bradley's attempt to answer the questions of consciousness and the external world and their relationship to the private self. Eliot clearly felt, like Bradley, the need to reject a negative or solipsistic answer to them, and it is this that leads him to an ultimate commitment to a religious belief. However, in his acceptance of religion and the idea of a transcendant God, Eliot departed from Bradley's philosophy. For to Bradley the division between God and the world, a Creator and His Creation, represented an abstraction false like, though not so false as, any other abstraction. Nevertheless, even when Eliot added a belief in God, he retained the Bradlean conviction that individual consciousness as it is ordinarily conceived is not an ultimate fact of reality: and for this conviction he retained the Bradlean argument that you cannot arrive at truth or reality by simply adding up individual consciousness - for your starting point is rooted in abstraction, and therefore in error. (Spender
Eliot, hence, would have regarded the Higher Criticism's belief based on empirical values as misguided and irrelevant.

We can safely assume then, that for Eliot, myth and dogma are the important elements of religion:

Myth involves the feelings in the meaning, whereas dogma alone cannot. Eliot wants to integrate both the intellect and the emotions in religious experience in order to maintain a unified spiritual sensibility. . . . Eliot's repeated emphasis on Original Sin and the Incarnation demonstrates that he has no "distrust of dogma": he criticizes the Catholic Church only for what he perceives to be false interpretations of dogma and myth. Dogma encapsulates one's beliefs so the intellect can grasp them. Likewise, Eliot does not . . . oppose "Matthew's mythologizing"; this "historical-mythological pageant" is also crucial to religious experience. (Skaff 421).
It is the world of "Gerontion," where there is not merely a loss of faith in the myths and virtues on which the civilization originally flourished, but where it becomes impossible to believe in them except vicariously through remembering the past. "Gerontion" is an important stage in Eliot's development, more so, since it leads towards The Waste Land —Eliot's controversial, and most successful, poem where there is a true synthesis of all that is Eliot, i.e., myth, dogma, and tradition.

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II.

(For Eliot, as for his generation, the idea of "tradition" had a profound impact. It showed the way to a new understanding of the relationship between the poet and his world and made a distinction between the Classical and the Romantic which was in gravity as much as the distinction of the Copernican from the Ptolemaic system of the study of the Universe. The poet was displaced from the centre of his universe and had to re-vamp his creative consciousness according to those famous words that were the order of the day: "Poetry is not the turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion. . . ." (Sacred Wood 58).

Balachandra Rajan, in his opening remarks in *The Overwhelming Question*, says that to read "Tradition and the Individual Talent" today is to become aware of its distinguished obsolescence. He feels that the essay has taken its place among those monuments, the ideal order of which it once sought to alter by the injection of the radically new. "Literary judgement," he comments, "moves onward though not necessarily
forward," and, "the expanding worlds of the collective and the anonymous, the growth of mass communications authentic, have given to words like 'personality' and 'identity' a rallying power they once did not possess" (3). Perhaps Mr. Rajan is right in considering the controversial essay obsolete, but we must at the same time remind ourselves that for Eliot, continuity and change are both basic to tradition. Once a tradition is formed, it is expected to move, "onward though not necessarily forward," toward an order of more inclusive unity through the assimilation and participation of new parts. Rajan himself admits that Eliot's criticism "has always been enmeshed in a given literary situation and has found its strength because it has usually been charged with the forces needed to make that situation creative. Since part of the milieu which the criticism illuminates and moves forward is formed by Eliot's own poetry, it is reasonable that motifs predominant in the criticism should find their substantiation in the creative work" (5).

Eliot's concept of tradition admits experiment and originality, yet it is a somewhat destined movement. "By tradition," he says, "I do not mean its
vainglories, its conceit of itself in its past; but the fact that it has grown in one way and not in another, and that its future growth is determined in a certain direction, if any, by its having grown in that way through the past" (Eliot "Commentary" 88).

Eliot's interest in the work of the early anthropologists is well known, but what is somewhat less known or rather understood, is the extent of influence the concept of myth had on the formative ideas of Eliot, and Eliot's indebtedness to the work of scholars like J.G. Frazer, Gilbert Murray, Jane Harrison, and F.M. Cornford. Eliot shared their knowledge as did all the major thinkers of the day. Freud, Jung, Frazer, Bergson, Murray, had as their common stock Ovid, Homer, Virgil, Sophocles. Novel though their systems were, it was equally disturbing, as C.B. Cox writes about Frazer in the "Introduction" to The Twentieth Century Mind: "with his touching faith in reason and good sense he proved to the twentieth century how powerful are the irrational and savage elements in human civilizations" (xi). Frazer and others had a profound influence on the thinking of the "positive" age notably on the artistic imagination of
Eliot: "If we are to digest the heavy food of historical and scientific knowledge that we have eaten," he wrote, "we must be prepared for much greater exertions. We need a digestion which can assimilate both Homer and Flaubert" (Selected Essays 63).

Eliot's early impressions of these ideas were from Gilbert Murray. Using the investigations of the anthropologists, like Frazer, as his starting point Murray weaved an inter-relationship between pre-Hellenic Society and Greek myth, religion and philosophy, law and literature, arguing that the Iliad was a traditional book "dependent on a living saga or tradition," (and thereby advanced a new interpretation of the Homeridae - that the relationship of the many anonymous poets contributing to the master epic was such where the individual poet was content to subordinate himself entirely to the tradition.)

But now comes a curious observation. We who are accustomed to modern literature always associate this sort of imaginative intensity with something personal. We connect it with an artist's individuality, or with originality
in the sense of "newness." It seems as though, under modern conditions, an artist usually did not feel or imagine intensely unless he was producing some work which was definitely his own and not another's, work which must bear his personal name and be marked by his personal character. . . . I do very greatly wish to point out that the artistic feeling in this matter has not always been the same. Artists have not always wished to stamp their work with their personal characteristics or even their personal name. Artists have sometimes been, as it were, Protestant or Iconoclast, unable to worship without asserting themselves against the established ritual of their religion; sometimes, in happier circumstances, they have accepted and loved the ritual as part of the religion, and wrought out their own new works of poetry, not as protests, not as personal outbursts, but as glad and nameless offerings, made in prescribed form to enhance the glory of the spirit who they served. . . . (Each successive poet did not assert himself up to
the tradition, and added to its greatness and beauty all that was in him, (The Rise of the Greek Epic 255-56).

It has been necessary to quote Murray at length here for, reading Eliot along with the above, the point being emphasized will be better understood.

One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors . . . whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his works may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. (Sacred Wood 48).
More compelling is the famous metaphor which demonstrates the relation of the new work of art to the past monuments where Eliot says that no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone, but that his significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists (49–50). In the same strain Eliot further elaborates that what is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or acquire the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career. By this process the artist surrenders his individuality to his art thereby leading to an extinction of personality.

The above examples go to show that Eliot was merely repeating Murray. To suggest, however, that Eliot was wholly indebted to Murray would indeed be a fallacy, but nevertheless, much of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" can be seen as a direct influence of ideas impressed upon Eliot's young mind. Writing on Eliot's sense of tradition Frye Comments that "an essential part of creative power is in past literature. Every poet inherits a literary continuum which has come down from Homer to our own day, and feels that this continuum 'has a simultaneous existence and composes a
simultaneous order'" (Eliot 26). And Rajan: "The implicit criterion is one of continuity, sometimes expressed in, but not necessarily identified with, the presence of a literary 'personality'. The important thing is that the continuity should possess the power of development, that it should be capable of creating and sustaining a significant process or a meaningful world" (5). Eliot's concern to fuse "the most ancient and the most civilized" and return to "the most primitive and forgotten" was not isolated, and as if in anticipation of criticism like the above, in "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," Eliot identifies the artistic method with the mythical method, which is supposed to reduce chaos into order, confusion into significance: "In using the myth," he says,

Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of
futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious. It is a method for which the horoscope is auspicious. Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology, and The Golden Bough have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art. (Selected Prose 177-78)

And, "a myth," Eliot defines, "is a point of view raised to importance by imagination" (Notes on Current Letters . . . ." 4).
Eliot did not use myth as a means of seeking insight into his own unconscious mind, nor is myth developed in his poetry into a vehicle for approaching the untraversed paths of inner and external reality. Eliot's mythical method is essentially a mode to provide "an escape from emotion ... an escape from personality." Commenting on Arnold's famous definition: "Poetry is at bottom a criticism of life," Eliot, in his essay on Matthew Arnold, says: "At the bottom of the abyss is what few ever see, and what those cannot bear to look at for long; and it is not a 'criticism of life' ... We bring back very little from our rare descents, and that is not criticism" ("Matthew Arnold," in Use of Poetry 111). Myth did offer a path to the "bottom of the abyss" for Eliot, but it was only to unfold itself as an impersonal means of expression—a means by which individual talent could reshape traditional literature.

A.G. George believes that "Eliot uses the ancient myths as objective correlatives and not to
institute a comparison between the present life and the past as is commonly understood" (TS, Eliot: His Mind and Art 122). Eliot explains the objective correlative as:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. ("Hamlet and His Problems," Selected Prose 48).

And George concludes: "What Eliot finds in the myths is a large number of situations, a chain of incidents which act as objective correlatives, to express his emotions in the form of art, especially his religious emotions. The study of social anthropology by Frazer and Miss Weston has revealed the enormous wealth of mythical customs and rituals which can, for a modern poet, act as adequate symbols for his religious ideas and emotions" (123). George disagrees with critics like
F.O. Matthiessen and Helen Gardner, who, in spite of their detailed study of Eliot's technique, fail to relate "the use of the objective correlative to the mythical element" (122).

The terms may differ, but whether one derives ethical ideas from myths or studies them as evidence of traits in the artist's mind, the process essentially remains that of translating the objective into the subjective, and vice versa, or one might, perhaps, assume at the outset a dualism, without giving much weightage to what relevance such a scheme could possibly have in Eliot's world—the world of the "invisible poet" where the boundary between subject and object is obscure, indefinite, and mainly speculative. It is in just such a world that the myth-maker and myth-critic finds himself comfortable, for his theory serves handily as a peg on which to hang a number of pertinent truths. This theory need not be as confining as Northrop Frye's system as adumbrated in the *Anatomy of Criticism* which is confined within the limits of literature, but rather, a more general, more inclusive theory which Frye has in mind and elaborates after the *Anatomy.*
If at this juncture we are to assume that the concepts of conscious thought are drawn from and gain prominence within the artist's world view, it should follow that in order to understand these concepts we must look beyond them to the images that define this view. The further we advance, in this fashion, into subjectivity, the more objective it turns out to be. Frye refers to this method by the terms "centrifugal" and "centripetal". He says:

Whenever we read anything, we find our attention moving in two directions at once. One direction is outward or centrifugal, in which we keep going outside our reading, from the individual words to the things they mean, or, in practice, to our memory of the conventional association between them. The other direction is inward or centripetal, in which we try to develop from the words a sense of the larger verbal pattern they make. In both cases we deal with symbols, but when we attach an external meaning to a word we have, in addition to the verbal symbol, the thing represented or symbolized by it. Actually we have a series of such
"The thing represented" is an archetype and the archetypes, as a group, constitute the vision through which the individual perceives the world. These archetypes are traditional, may be even universal, and therefore logically prior to anything in a person's thoughts that could be called unique and regarded as his own. It is precisely in such circumstances, in attempting to explain the nature of this vision that one refers to the "historical sense". In Eliot's schema "the 'historical sense' is the instrument of self discovery for it is an instrument for the discovery of the whole. When the whole pattern of artistic activity is perceived, the past and the present fall into proper places, their significances (sic) are revealed" (Fei-Pai Lu 82-830). Eliot it may be recalled, is concerned with history primarily as a manifestation of temporal existence—a challenge in his conquest of time. Time, however, which is a major construct, becomes subjective as it enters into one's historical reconstructions, since here it is not time in isolation, but a temporal system. The opening lines of "Burnt Norton" expresses such a view. It is as if
Eliot were introspecting into the nature and methods of his technique:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.

Literary meaning, to be sure, is not exclusively in our subjective responses to a particular work or references from it to the outside world of reality, but rather, meaning exists as a circulatory process—both mental, as the path of our thinking takes us (centrifugal), and objective, as the actual system of relations between
the text, regarded as a thing in itself (centripetal) and the whole of reality.

Perhaps, the best practical example of such an interpretation we can take is of Eliot's use of myth in The Waste Land. F.R. Leavis observes:

It was The Waste Land that compelled recognition for the achievement...

The title, we know, comes from Miss J.L. Weston's book, From Ritual to Romance, the theme of which is anthropological: the Waste Land there has a significance in terms of Fertility Ritual. The seeming disjointedness (of the poem) is intimately related to the erudition that has annoyed so many readers and to the wealth of literary borrowings and allusions. These characteristics reflect the present state of civilization. The traditions and cultures have mingled, and the historical imagination makes the past contemporary; no one tradition can digest so great a variety of materials, and the result is a breakdown of forms and the irrevocable loss of that
sense of absoluteness which seems necessary to a robust culture. ("The Waste Land" 89)

Leavis further comments that "the anthropological background has positive functions. It plays an obvious part in evoking that particular sense of the unity of life which is essential to the poem" (91).

Eliot, in *The Waste Land*, develops an integrated theme of regaining the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual vitality by drawing upon related modes in myth, anthropology, theology, and ancient literature. The reading of the poem makes one aware of a sequence of metaphorical identifications which leads to an awareness of an organizing structural pattern or conceptualized myth. And as Northrop Frye points out: "When a work of fiction is written or interpreted thematically, it becomes a parable or illustrative fable" (*Anatomy* 53).

The parable here, obviously, is Eliot's "preoccupation with 'birth, copulation and death'" (Leavis 90). In the Christian myth man's original sin is an offence against God the father, and Christ, in order to allay this sense of guilt, sacrificed his own life and thereby redeemed mankind from primal sin. The
reconciliation with the father is complete because along with this sacrifice there follows the complete renunciation of woman, for whose sake mankind rebelled against the father. In the crucifixion of Christ we see an extension of the hanged fertility god, and can trace an identity with the "theanthropic" human sacrifice and the Christian eucharist; in these rites we recognise "the after effects of that crime which so oppressed men, but of which they must have been so proud" (Freud, Totem and Taboo 202-205). Eliot projects this irony, and if we accept Fry's contention that "each mode of literature develops its own existential projection" (Anatomy 64), embodying a myth and an archetype, then,

the archetype of the inevitably ironic is Adam, human nature under sentence of death. At the other pole is the incongruous irony of human life, in which all attempts to transfer guilt to a victim give that victim something of the dignity of innocence. The archetype of the incongruously ironic is Christ, the perfectly innocent victim excluded from human society. (42).

Mythology projects itself as theology here; that is,
the poet accepts certain myths and shapes his poetic structure accordingly. Tiresias, the bi-sexual protagonist of the poem embodies all experience and hence is projected as the archetypal man. An extension of the theme of bi-sexuality is seen in the Grail Legend where the lance is interpreted as a phallic symbol and the cup as the female sexual symbol. Christ too can be interpreted as the archetypal man. And, on a more personal level, Eliot, perhaps, also sees himself as an archetypal man setting up his own tradition.

Eliot, therefore, not only combines traditional and religious myths, but in doing so creates his own personal myth corroborating his theory that the whole of European literature from Homer has a simultaneous existence. Eliot's later poems too, take on a mythico-religious strain. We can speak, therefore, of Eliot's mythical method as the product of an existentialist-Christian orientation towards life, an also draw an identity between his use of myth and his philosophy of life.

The dualism of the subjective and the objective, which we assumed in the beginning, thus converge on the
concept of the archetype, whose reversibility, as both prior to and following from personal experience, reveals a circularity essential alike to Eliot's spiritualized effects and to the phenomenological attitude underlying myth criticism. To argue against such circularity is to mistake for solipsism what is really a kind of relativism. The theory does not destroy the objective world in favour of an all-inclusive subjectivity, but defines subject and object as immanent ideals, somewhat like Frye's cycle of the seasons—though in time, it is not a moment of time. And so, with respect to the subjectivity and objectivity, we cannot rest content in either of them, but should seek to trace the dialectic of their relationship where the centrifugal-centripetal, subject-object dichotomy is in a state of flux. As the archetypes help to constitute a person's thought, but, are archetypal by virtue of their being mental constructs, we may generally accept that the subjective and objective are interdependent and, often, the same thing.

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