INTRODUCTION

Ve. de S. Pinto in the introduction to *Crisis in English Poetry 1800-1940* says:

The crisis in English poetry which began about thirty years before the outbreak of the First World War is a part of the moral, intellectual, social and economic crisis of England and Western Europe...

By the end of the nineteenth century rapid social changes were noticed in every sphere of life. There was a break down of the agricultural way of life and economy. It meant the end of rural England and the increasing urbanisation of the country. Industrialisation and urbanization led to various problems like the pollution of atmosphere with the increasing smoke and noise, over population in the industrialised areas, unemployment and raising of city slums which increased ugliness everywhere. There grew great wealth side by side with great poverty. The greater mobility resulting from the automobility, the railway train has increased the rootlessness of man. There was a collapse of old values and ideals. Humanism, individualism and liberalism which were some of the chief aspects of Renaissance came to an

People became materialistic in their approach to life and the world came to be dominated by the inhuman and non-human laws of trade, industry and commercialisation. People's decision became increasingly committed to social organisations.

The twentieth-century technical developments have produced a variety of mass media of communication -- the cinema, the television, the wireless ... a selection of programmes of inane triviality sterilize the emotions and standardize the outlook and attitudes of millions of people.

With the evolution of Darwin's theory of the 'Origin of Species,' there has been a gradual weakening of religious faith. Naturally, religion, which held sway during the Reformation period in the Western Europe, no longer exercised any significant influence on public issues. Scientific spirit and rationalism gave rise to scepticism and agnosticism in the matters of religion. This kind of atmosphere was further accelerated by Freud's discovery of 'unconscious.' Freud's theory added new dimensions in the assessment of human behaviour. To Freud, man was a biological phenomenon, a creature of instincts and impulses. To the marxist, man is an outcome of economic and social forces. The Victorian optimism

\[\text{---}\]

which regarded man as essentially rational and his reason which was supposed to teach him what is identical with social good was disturbed. Man was no longer considered self-responsible or rational in his behaviour. As a result, there was significant increase in vice and crime. Sexual renunciation ceased to be the theme of literature. The interest in sex-perversion grew. F.R. Leavis in his *New Bearings in English Poetry* says:

> Sex here is sterile, breeding not life and fulfilment but disgust, accidia and unanswerable questions. It is not easy to-day to accept the perpetuation and multiplication of life as ultimate ends.\(^3\)

There was break up of the old authoritarian pattern in family relationships. The assessment of the relative roles of the sexes changed, woman came to her own, and the notion of male superiority suffered a serious blow. The war of the generations, of the old and the young resulted in a re-orientation of parent-child relationship. This rootlessness brought in its wake its own problems and frustrations. In the place of Victorian optimism that 'God is in the heaven' and that 'all is well with the world,' gradually pessimism and despair began to take place and the presence of 'the President of the mortals' was questioned. The sphere of social morality in terms of public good, expanded at the expense of private morality. The

---

society was, in a very high degree, hostile to the spiritual life. But the poets hitherto were writing as though no such hostility existed. The Victorian poets were characteristically occupied with the creation of an 'ideal dream-world.' The Georgian or Edwardian poets looked poetry as a means of escape to 'the freshness of the early world.' Even the poets who were satiric and realistic in their works were of the assumption that there were certain section of the people with a genuine culture and a real concern for spiritual values to whom they can communicate.

The same perplexity and confusion were noticed in the field of political theory. Socialism and internationalism were replaced by the Victorian notion of supremacy of England. Imperialism and nationalism had come in for great deal of criticism. The conflict of nationalism with internationalism began.

The First World War (1914-18) further increased tensions and frustrations. The post-war world was called an era of revolt against authority. The dictum "Power Corrupts" is a symbol of revolt of the post-war generation. Unmasked by the impact of the world wars, the poets who were also soldiers -- Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sasson, Rupert Brooke, Edward Thomas, Edmund Bluden, Charles Sorley, Julian Grenfell, Robert Graves, Isaac Rosenberg -- suddenly saw the world in all its naked horror.
The unprecedented destruction of men and matter by the First World War caused a sense of alienation in the modern man. It revealed the capacity of man's mind for evil of which the world was previously unaware. The World War shuttered human values and injustices were inflicted upon individual freedom and this resulted in the crisis in human values and identity.

The economic crisis that followed the First World War had far reaching political implications not only in England but in the whole world. It gave a shock to the belief of Capitalism and in its place socialistic ideas gained currency in the eastern Europe. The ever deteriorating economic conditions in Britain created the danger of communism in her mind. This caused social unrest and created various domestic problems. Political and religious scepticism, general disillusionment, cynicism, irony, anxiety, despair etc., became the order of the day. The temper of the age was 'anti-heroic.' The value of 'success' was questioned.

It was necessary to find expression for a new sort of sensibility that aroused out of conditions totally different from the agriculture class dominated society from which the old traditions of English poetry had sprung. The values of the old cultivated middle class were dead. If poetry has to express freely the modern sensibility, the ways of feeling, the modes of experience of one fully alive in his age, the poet had to find
expression to the horror of contemporary society which was in a state of progressive degradation. Though a series of novelists from George Grissing to Joseph Conrad had immersed in 'the destructive element,' the poets, for the most part at the very early part of the century averted their eyes. Christopher Gille in his *Movements in English Literature 1900-1940* points out:

> For over a century the majority of people—certainly of educated people—had lived in cities .... But the poet had continued to write as though life is passed in the country.  

Through prose medium, novelists like Conrad had performed part of the poets function of finding words to express his vision of the hideousness of the scenes around or between which he lived. But to express, the impact of the strange and grotesque beauty of scenes in the contemporary society on a person with a poetic sensibility it becomes necessary to find suitable verse rhythms.

In an age in which there are no serious standards current and no live tradition of poetry, a poet who expresses his experiences and their effect on his inner life would almost be considered 'difficult' and 'unpleasant.' T.S. Eliot in his essay on *The Metaphysical Poets* asserts that poets living in our

civilization which comprehends great variety and complexity must be 'difficult.' F.R. Leavis observes that Eliot has made a new start, and established new bearings. Ve. de S. Pinto points out:

Much of the importance of the early works of Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) lies in the fact that he was the first English-speaking poet of genius who was fully aware of the implications of the New situation. Eliot had the advantage of being brought up in the tradition of English literary culture, and yet, at the same time, of being able to see it, as a foreigner sees it, from the outside. It was an advantage which could, perhaps, be only fully enjoyed by an American with a cosmopolitan education.

One of the important qualities that characterise Eliot's works is his own 'sense of his age.' This gave him unprecedented sensibility for the urban environment and for distinctively modern status of mind.

In his poems Eliot expresses "the boredom, the horror and the glory" of modern society. He rouses some consciousness in the minds of people with a view to attaining a higher

life. By employing the technique of imagery, he awakens men and women and restores their confidence in their own identities.

The critics of T.S. Eliot have dwelt upon the themes and the imagery in the major poems of T.S. Eliot. But much work has not been done on the theme of loss of identity in some of his minor poems. Eliot in these poems seems to be concerned with the modern civilisation or the modern man from this point of view.

The rich heritate of the past, a belief in religious and moral values, beliefs in supernatural life etc., which had given, both men and civilization itself, a unique identity had been lost. Eliot presents the state of civilization which has lost its old values. This view of modern civilization in decay is achieved by contrasting it with a vision of the rich past. With this aim in mind, Eliot has employed various themes and imagery. Eliot was of the opinion that poetry is a medium which takes its start from the poet's emotion but is impersonalised by the tradition in which the poet has to work. He insisted on "hard thought and clear, precise imagery which would become an 'Objective Correlative' for the mood the poet wishes to evoke."³

The following chapters which concern themselves with selected poems of T.S. Eliot -- Preludes, The Love Song of

J. Alfred Prufrock, Portrait of a Lady, The Waste Land and The Hollow Men -- seek to show how the poet has dwelt upon the theme of identity crisis through powerful imagery of which he is a master.