INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this introduction is to explain why this research work, 'Scepticism and Belief in T. S. Eliot's Poetry' has been taken up. A new thesis on any aspect of T. S. Eliot's poetry may seem rather unnecessary because innumerable books, articles, research projects and discussions all over the world have gone into detailed discussions of so many areas of the poet's work. A preliminary consideration of the question 'whether yet another research work on Eliot's poetry is really necessary' may easily prompt a negative reply. It may also be pointed out that much of such work consists of old critical debates recounted all over again.

While it has been our consistent effort not to let this work become just one more piling up of old critical opinion, sound critical comments, whether old or new, have been referred to or quoted in support of the arguments put forward here. In a sense, of course, there can never be any escape from quoting old views or opinions: new assertions attain full meaning only in relation to older ones. As to the assertion that enough has already been said by numerous critics, it must be borne in mind that the very nature of Eliot's poetry is such that it refuses to be pinned down to any one kind of interpretation. It is a common experience of readers that Eliot's poetry is able to generate fresh questions and aspects of interest at various
stages of reading. In the preface to Bernard Bergonzi’s *T. S. Eliot*, the author says:

> When I began writing this book I thought I knew his poetry as well as anyone could; I have since discovered how wrong I was. Indeed its capacity constantly to renew itself, to reveal fresh and unsuspected aspects, is, to my mind, one of the marks of Eliot’s greatness as a poet.¹

In fact, Bergonzi’s experience is shared by many readers who find Eliot’s poetry interesting enough to go back to it again and again. Because of this capacity of the poetry to find new vitality and meaning at different stages, discussions of Eliot’s poetry will go on, and it is our contention that the peculiar blending of scepticism and belief in his poetry is a very important factor in making the poetry truly interesting and in making easy interpretation impossible.

Eliot was always against critics paying attention to the biography rather than the work of an artist, but due importance has to be given to the meeting points of life and art that may be legitimately observed. Eminent Eliot scholars have done important work in this area, trying to see the way life and art interact. Ronald Schuchard’s *Eliot’s Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art*, for example, is a successful attempt to ‘explore and map the planes and intersections where life and art meet.’² In fact, many factors from his birth onwards played different roles in moulding a personality and a poetic sensibility that find expression in the peculiar kind of poetry
described as 'Eliotic.' Although no detailed biographical sketch is attempted here, it is necessary to glance briefly at a few important facts of Eliot's life. He was born into a distinguished American family which was proud of its Unitarianism. A strict sense of duty and discipline deeply influenced the precocious young child. Eliot was born a year after his grandfather William Greenleaf Eliot had died, but the strong influence of that zealous Unitarian leader was to remain in the family. W. G. Eliot had laid standards of conduct that no one dared to question. Eliot's father later acted against these norms by not choosing a vocation in the Church or the University, but charting out an independent line of his own by becoming a successful businessman. T. S. Eliot showed a similar defiance of parental authority when he refused to join the Philosophy Department of Harvard University, and decided instead to stay in England and pursue a literary career. And there was defiance also against some elements of his forefathers' faith. Eliot seems to have had a natural thirst for spirituality, so, Unitarianism, with its rejection of the Incarnation, and its tendency to equate religion with only such things as self-restraint and community service, was too insipid for him. He had to ultimately embrace Anglo-Catholicism to satisfy his craving for spiritual succour. The influence of his family actually decided many aspects of his personality. At the same time, his eclectic Harvard education also had its impact on his thinking and his literary activities. It is arguable that without the profound interest in literature, philosophy and religion that Eliot had, and without his truly wide
reading, it would not be possible to write poems like *The Waste Land, Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets* Again, his sudden decision to marry Vivienne Haigh-Wood and settle down in England to pursue a literary career was a pivotal point of his life because if he had not done that, and had simply obeyed his father and joined Harvard University, his life and activities would have changed entirely. The life that he consciously chose for himself, and the accidents of birth and circumstances, all played their part in moulding a highly interesting, multi-faceted personality and an equally complex poetic sensibility. Forces of history played their parts in shaping his life. Events in America, England and the world at large—events like the Second World War—left their marks on his character and his poetic activity. Ultimately, we have poems which, in all their complexity, are open to quite different and divergent assessments. Eliot himself offered little help in the matter of elucidating the ‘meaning’ of his poetry, and very often played ‘possum’ with the reader, as in his answer to the question what the line ‘Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree’ meant:

In 1929 there was a meeting of the Oxford Poetry Club at which he was the guest of honour. Before it some of us arranged a separate meeting with Father M. C. D’Arcy, with whom we studied the text of *Ash Wednesday*, just published. Some points were not cleared up, and at the later meeting an undergraduate asked Eliot: ‘Please, sir, what do you mean by the line: “Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree”?’ Eliot looked at
him and said: 'I mean, “Lady, three white leopards sat under a
juniper tree.”'..."3

When he was asked about the meaning of *The Cocktail Party* at a press
conference in Edinburgh after a performance of the play, this is how he
responded:

‘As far as I am concerned, it means what it says. If I had meant
something else, I would have said so.’

‘But would you have said it so clearly?’

‘No, I would have said it just as obscurely ’4

There are occasions when he is not so cryptic and is not playing possum,
but what he says then also does not usually make things simpler. Nevill
Coghill remembers his conversation with Eliot a few days after watching
Rupert Doone’s production of _Sweeney Agonistes_. A part of the
conversation went like this:

Coghill: I had no idea the play meant what he made of it...that
everyone is a Crippen. I was astonished.
Eliot: So was I.
Coghill: Then you had meant something very different when you
wrote it?
Eliot: Very different indeed.
Coghill: Yet you accept Mr. Doone’s production?
Eliot: Certainly
Coghill: But...but...can the play mean something you didn’t intend it to mean, you didn’t know it meant?

Eliot: Obviously it does.

Coghill: But can it then also mean what you did intend?

Eliot: I hope so...yes, I think so.

Coghill: But if the two meanings are contradictory, is not one right and the other wrong? Must not the author be right?

Eliot: Not necessarily, do you think? Why is either wrong?

What Eliot suggests here needs to be remembered while asserting any point of view or interpretation. Without being curt or cryptic, he suggests that the author does not have access to any ultimate meaning of the text, and that perhaps any number of intelligent interpretations is possible. If we read the poems with this in mind, they become all the more complex in terms of meaning.

It is possible that Eliot regarded the very effort of getting at some definite meaning as rather silly. It has been rightly pointed out that some of the notes Eliot attaches to The Waste Land do not really contribute towards a better understanding of the poem. In these notes, he is sometimes pompous, and at other times inaccurate. The extremely complex nature of his poetry has led to a plethora of critical opinion in terms of both praise and condemnation. Critics seem to have had no problem in passing openly disparaging or highly euphoric comments. And by no means is this debate over. In the introduction to the 1978 Casebook Series volume T. S. Eliot:
'Prufrock', 'Gerontion', 'Ash Wednesday' and Other Shorter Poems, B. C. 
Southam has noted that 'validation and revaluation go on and the 
discussion of Eliot's poetry is alive and continuing'. What A. D. Moody 
says sixteen years later suggests that the valuation and revaluation still 
continue. In the preface to The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot, 
Moody observes that under critical examination of the poet's 'many sides 
from our diverse points of view, Eliot appears more various, less readily 
formulated and pinned down, than some critics have thought.'

Again, critical opinion has often been contradictory to an 
extraordinary degree in regard to Eliot's poetic achievement. For instance, 
Helen Gardner extolled Four Quartets in her book The Art of T. S. Eliot, 
while Karl Shapiro found Four Quartets 'a deliberately bad book'. Such 
sharp differences of opinion are by no means restricted to evaluations of 
Four Quartets, but of his earlier poems as well. Which of his poems are the 
best—the early ones or the later ones—is an issue over which readers and 
critics still do not seem to agree. Is there a traceable continuity in terms of 
poetic thought, belief, and style from Prufrock to Four Quartets, or are 
there sharp differences in these areas? Debates on such issues are far from 
over. Although numerous critics have added to the ever-growing bulk of 
Eliot—criticism, a full consideration of his poetry in terms of scepticism and 
belief will still prove useful because comments on the subject are scattered, 
contradictory, and have not covered all aspects of the complex nature of 
belief and scepticism in his poetry in a comprehensive whole and in detail.
This is not to suggest, however, that the present study will attempt to complete and exhaust the discussion on the issue, but only to assert that it will be a fruitful addition to a meaningful academic exercise that has been going on since the poet first published his work. It is with the knowledge of the difficulty in reducing Eliot’s multifaceted work to any one kind of interpretation, that this study is undertaken. The ultimate end of this study is to positively contribute to the critical discussion on his poetry. This work is also undertaken with the conviction that Eliot’s poetry has vitality and relevance today as it did during the years of its composition or publication.

What H. S. Davies said about Eliot’s religious position, quoting the poet himself, is something we will remember while dealing with the problem of belief and scepticism in his poetry. Davies said that he came to understand Eliot’s religious position better from a comment Eliot had made about the difference between the Marxists and himself:

“They seem so certain of what they believe. My own beliefs are held with a scepticism which I never even hope to be quite rid of.”

Davies goes on to explain Eliot’s affinity with the Anglican establishment of the seventeenth century, noting that the poetry of Donne and Herbert permeates with both faith and doubt. Eliot’s assertion that he does not even hope to be rid of his scepticism is important for us, for it shows how he values scepticism; and it is also important to recognize that scepticism and belief are actually inseparable. Also, what he seems to mean by scepticism
here—an attitude of mind constantly questioning his beliefs—is the sense in which we are generally using the word in this study.

In some of his prose pronouncements, Eliot takes a rather fixed stance. In ‘Catholicism and Christian Order’ (Essays Ancient and Modern, 1938), for example, he talks of ‘the Christian world order’ as the only one which will work. But the poetic expression of his belief cannot be equated with such statements which seem harsh to people outside Catholic Christendom. We must, of course, exclude the choruses from The Rock here, noting that Eliot was commissioned to write these choruses when he had evidently exhausted his poetic gifts and had nothing more to say. In this work, we shall deal with those of his published poems from the Prufrock-1917 volume up to his major poetic achievement, Four Quartets, which enact a struggle between scepticism and belief. It is our contention that most of these poems are concerned with the tussle between scepticism and belief. While we shall be referring to Eliot’s prose works during our discussion, our immediate concern is not with his prose, but his poetry—with the poetic expression of his search for and attainment of belief. In this context, it is interesting to note what Eliot himself had to say about Dr. Paul Elmer More’s criticism of the ‘apparent incoherence’ between Eliot’s verse and critical prose. Taking up the issue in After Strange Gods (1934), Eliot says that he feels ‘no shame in this matter’ and that ‘in one’s prose reflections one may be legitimately occupied with ideals, whereas in the writing of verse one deals with actuality.’ What he means by ‘actuality’
here gets clarified when, immediately after making that comment, he starts saying that many religious poems are of poor quality because the poets' attempt to write as they ought to have felt instead of trying to write as they actually felt. The suggestion is that in writing his poetry, he tried not to make this mistake, and was concerned about actualities rather than with ideals. What Cleanth Brooks has to say on this seems to suggest the correct meaning of Eliot's words:

Eliot once remarked that prose has to do with ideals; poetry, with reality. The statement has proved puzzling to many a reader who has been brought up on just the opposite set of notions, but Eliot's observation seems to be profoundly true. Discursive prose is the medium for carrying on arguments, drawing conclusions, offering solutions. Poetry is the medium *par excellence* for rendering a total situation—for letting us know what it feels like to take a particular action or hold a particular belief or simply to look at something with imaginative sympathy.

Eliot also saw that much of what he had said in prose needed to be reconsidered later. His criticism of his own views throws light on his honesty and humility. In the preface to the 1928 edition of *The Sacred Wood*, just eight years after its first appearance, he detected 'a stiffness and an assumption of pontifical solemnity' in the essays, and said that the 'chief value' remaining to the book was as a 'document of its time'. Again in the
preface to the 1951 edition of his Selected Essays, he says something very similar:

On reviewing the contents of this book, I find myself at times inclined to quarrel with my own judgements, and more often to criticise the way in which they are expressed. For myself, this book is a kind of historical record of my interests and opinion. As one grows older one may become less dogmatic and pragmatical...13

Going by Eliot’s distinction of prose statements and poems, the poems should not suffer this fate for they are expressions of actualities. A poetic expression of belief is not equivalent to an assertion in prose. Poetry cannot be subjected to the kind of criticism that is applied to propositional prose.

Helen Gardner was actually talking about the struggle between Eliot’s scepticism and belief as evident in his poems, when she said in ‘Religious Poetry’ that the religious poet today confronted a certain problem of communication that did not exist in the past, and that in Hopkins and Eliot, there was ‘a certain straining of feeling and language’ which took the form of ‘an eccentric violence’ in Hopkins and ‘a cryptic obscurity’ in Eliot.16 Of course, Eliot’s keen awareness and dexterous treatment of the experiences of the material world made him more than a religious poet. Besides, even in Four Quartets, where the poet’s faith is quite explicit, he does not impose his religious views on us, but, as Elizabeth Drew notes, urges his readers ‘to sight through vision’17
In the course of this work, we shall be considering how Eliot came to accept Anglo-Catholicism partly as a reaction against the insipid Unitarianism he had experienced at home and partly as a logical step in his inner search for faith and peace. In discussing this, however, we shall keep in mind what R. P. Blackmur pointed out in *Language as Gesture*, that ‘No fact requires so much emphasis as the fact that, just as Mr. Yeats’s poetry is not magic, Mr. Eliot’s poetry is not religion.’\(^{18}\) It is important to understand his religion or his attitude towards Christianity to fully grasp his poetry, but the poetry can never be equated with his religion.

Helen Gardner has noted that the debate about the value of T. S. Eliot’s poetry is likely to continue because readers are unlikely to come to an easy consensus about it:

‘Eliot is a poet of a particular kind, a kind that divides opinion, rousing a strong response in some who treasure his poetry for its deliberation and as strong a distaste in others who, while owning his skill and his seriousness, feel his poetry to be fatally narrow in range….’\(^{19}\)

Something must be said in answer to one particular kind of objection that may be raised against the need of a work that discusses the beliefs of a poet. It may be said that the beliefs evident from the poetry need not be the poet’s own, that T. S. Eliot’s own beliefs and the supposed beliefs or doubts of the several persona of *The Waste Land* are not the same, that the piety of the *Ariel Poems* or the sombre religious tone of some of his later
poetry need not be his own. This is actually a problem of literary theory, and the issue here is whether a poet's work truly reflects his beliefs or not. It is not our intention here to go into a debate on literary theory, but this is the place to acknowledge that this work is undertaken with the belief that literature does make assertions of various kinds and that an author's views do find a place in his creative writing. The manner in which the poet's views shape his or her poetry may vary, and the amount of his or her views in the poetry may also vary. In certain cases it may be pure propaganda, while in other cases it may be such a judicious blend that it may provoke serious thought and consideration. Much of T. S. Eliot's poetry tells us about the different phases of his growth as an artist and a human being. While occasionally his poetry does take on a propagandic tone, most of it is marked by respect for other people's views, honesty, and humility, besides being food for serious, fruitful thought. In this connection, it is well to remember what George Watson has said in the introduction to his Politics and Literature in Modern Britain:

Literature makes assertions....And it matters what it asserts and whether it is true or false. That is not to imply that works of literature are good to the extent that they are true, or bad to the extent that they are false ....But it is one of the least impressive pea-and-thimble tricks of formalist critics to pretend that literature is always a way of seeing, never a thing seen; or that a poet or novelist always speaks in the voice of a dramatic narrator,
never his own; or for that matter, that the voice of a dramatic character in a play or novel cannot also be the author’s own. Literature often has persuasive intent and persuasive force. It can even be propaganda.\textsuperscript{20}

That little portion of Eliot’s poetry which does seem to have a propagandic tone—the choruses from \textit{The Rock}, for example—does not form a part of our study here because of its narrow and very specific range of interest. Anything that is in the nature of propaganda does not contain the struggle between scepticism and belief that forms the core of our interest throughout this work. There is hardly any doubt that Eliot’s poetry, or any poetry, should not be studied simply in terms of the message it conveys from the poet. However, to us it seems sensible to agree with George Watson that literature does make certain assertions. In other words, we believe ‘that art has intrinsic meanings and points of reference beyond the boundaries of its own medium’ and that in genuine poetry, ‘every murmur of faith and doubt is an utterance forged in the smithy of the soul’.\textsuperscript{21} This is not to suggest, however, that our aim here is merely to list certain assertions made in Eliot’s poetry; it is essentially an attempt to see how scepticism and belief as attitudes of mind have an interesting role to play in Eliot’s poetry. The ‘persuasive intent and persuasive force’ of the best of T.S. Eliot’s poems are such that they urge the reader to think, to take stalk, but not merely to accept what the poet gives. Besides, his poetry displays the conviction he himself has in his ideas. The conviction is not something hard and rigid, but
is characterised by subtlety and flexibility. All this will fall into the scope of our study of scepticism and belief in T.S.Eliot’s poetry. For us, observing the tension between shades of scepticism and belief present almost throughout Eliot’s poetic career, hold more interest than any attempt to come to certain conclusions about the poet’s beliefs.
NOTES


3. Spender, Stephen. ‘Remembering Eliot’. *T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work*. Ed. Allen Tate. 1966. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971. 46. Spender rightly observes that this was certainly not a fair reply to the undergraduate student struggling with the text of *Ash Wednesday*. As in this instance, Eliot could be ruthlessly pompous or imperial at times, putting off inquiries about his poetry. Some of his detractors argue that such explicit unwillingness to discuss his poetry actually meant that he was deliberately trying to create an impression that his poetry was only for a select, intelligent few, and that in fact the poetry did not really contain anything that could justify his pompous and reserved demeanour.

5. Coghill, Nevill. 'Sweeney Agonistes'. *T. S. Eliot A Symposium* 
comp. Tambimuttu and Richard March. 1948. London: Frank and 
Cass Co. Ltd, 1965. 86. 

‘Ash Wednesday’ and Other Shorter Poems. A Casebook*. 13 

XIV. It is interesting to observe, from our point of view in this 
work, that Moody claims to discern a persistent strain of scepticism 
and pragmatism even in the dogmatic assertions of Eliot. 

1949. This book, by one of the most perceptive readers of Eliot’s 
poetry, is a complete discussion of *Four Quartets*. As Dame 
Gardner acknowledges in the preface to the book, her appreciation 
of Eliot’s poetry was enhanced by the critical work of Professor F. 
O. Matthiessen and Dr F. R. Leavis; but the critic she owed most 
was T. S. Eliot himself. In *The Art of T. S. Eliot*, she has 
successfully employed Eliot’s critical prose to understand his 
poetry. 

1969. Ninth reprint 1994. 247. It is arguable that Karl Shapiro’s 
distaste for *Four Quartets* springs at least partially from his decided
antipathy towards Eliot and Eliot’s friend and mentor Ezra Pound whose anti-Semitism understandably offended this Jewish American. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. has given a fair account of Karl Shapiro’s activities and his likes and dislikes in ‘Karl Shapiro 1913-2000: He Took His Stands’ in the Winter 2001 issue of The Sewanee Review (Vol.CIX No.1.) In this article, he says that Karl Shapiro could very well be charged of intellectual dishonesty, a fault he has tried to impute to Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Besides, Rubin’s account gives the impression of a man overly conscious of his status as a poet and critic, of an ego-centric person who enjoyed flattery and who was not incapable of acting from jealousy.


12. Even the most ardent admirers of Eliot’s poetry would have to agree, however, that sometimes enjoying the poetry cannot go together with agreeing with the prose. Denis Donoghue, a very perspective reader of Eliot’s poetry, for instance, finds it impossible to agree with Eliot when it comes to dealing with the poet’s opinion as expressed in some of his prose writings. In a review of Words Alone: The Poet T.S. Eliot by Denis Donoghue, John Ottenhoff says


20. Watson, George, *Politics and Literature in Modern Britain*. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977. 10. George Watson is, of course, uncompromisingly anti-theory, and can be considered as one of the chief upholders of what may be termed the common sense approach to criticism. Even without sharing his marked animus towards theory, it seems sensible to acknowledge the soundness of his arguments as in the quoted passage.