In this chapter, our task will be to state as clearly as possible, in what sense the terms ‘scepticism’ and ‘belief’ are being used in discussing T. S. Eliot’s poetry in this work. In so doing, we shall be revealing our main areas of interest, and suggesting the course our discussion is likely to take.

The word ‘scepticism’ originates from the Greek term ‘scepticos’ which means ‘inquirers’. As an attitude adopted by philosophers, the primary function of scepticism is to question all knowledge claims. Philosophic scepticism dates back to pre-Socratic days, and has played a crucial role in shaping human thought throughout history. Our concerns here, however, do not require an inquiry into the history of scepticism in philosophy. We need to note, nevertheless, that scepticism has always served as an important challenge to dogmatic beliefs and assumptions. This, in itself, has been a very important contribution to the evolution of human thought.

A die-hard sceptic’s stance itself can be shown as self-contradictory or a form of dogmatism, for a stubborn sceptic never has any doubts about
his claim regarding the uncertainty of human knowledge. Besides, sceptics have always been criticized for never being able to present anything in terms of positive statement. They are only able to expose the weakness involved in someone else’s assertion, to show an affirmation as doubtful, but are not able to affirm anything themselves. However that may be, it cannot be denied that scepticism has actually tamed dogmatism by making dogmatic claims look ridiculous. A dogmatic philosopher holds a certain fixed position, and scepticism is ‘like an anonymous letter received by a dogmatic philosopher...The letter raises fundamental problems for the recipient by questioning whether he had adequate grounds for his assertions and assumptions, and whether his system is free from contradictions or absurdities.’ Thus, scepticism serves the crucial function of making dogmatic philosophers search hard for sure grounds for their assertions.

T S Eliot’s thought, as expressed in his poetry is consciously qualified by this sceptic challenge. There is a constant, deliberate, subtle tone of doubt that keeps questioning or qualifying his beliefs. So, in discussing ‘scepticism’ in T. S. Eliot’s poetry here, we are dealing with the sceptic stance that the poet assumes quite often, the state of mind in which he disciplines his own beliefs and questions other peoples’ beliefs. Again, when we talk of ‘belief’ or ‘beliefs’ in someone’s poetry, we generally mean the poet’s beliefs in regard to religion, human relationships, the task of the poet, and such other things as expressed in his poems. In this work, however, our concern is specifically with the religious beliefs that Eliot’s
poetry seems to embody. This is not to suggest that this is a consideration of Eliot's poetic work merely as a collection of the poet's doubts and religious beliefs. The purpose of this work is to look into the various ways in which the poet's scepticism and belief interplay and co-exist to create subtleties and complexities of meanings.

In his *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), T. S. Eliot says:

One of the features of development, whether we are taking the religious or cultural point of view, is the appearance of scepticism—by which, of course, I do not mean infidelity or destructiveness (still less the unbelief which is due to mental sloth) but the habit of examining evidence and the capacity for delayed decision.

He goes on, clarifying what he means by scepticism:

Scepticism is a highly civilized trait, though, when it declines into pyrrhonism, it is one of which civilization can die. Where scepticism is strength, pyrrhonism is weakness: for we need not only the strength to defer a decision, but the strength to make one.

In this comment on scepticism, Eliot is at pains to explain not only what he means by scepticism, but also what he does not. He seems to be taking extra care not to be misunderstood. Eliot makes it amply clear that his notion of a healthy scepticism is far from a perpetual incapacity to make
a decision, that it includes the strength to make a decision. Again, he does not mean mental lethargy by scepticism. Eliot’s deliberate cautiousness here shows the complex notion of scepticism he had in his mind and also the value that he accorded to it. Attempts to explain some of his poems simply as sceptic or cynic utterances are often inaccurate because the poetic thought involved is often informed with such subtle notions of scepticism or belief. During the discussion of the poems in the later chapters, these issues will come up for consideration. Here, we only note that our concern throughout this work will be with the pervading sceptic tone constantly modifying the meanings of the poetic utterances. It is also important to recognize the fact that scepticism and belief, as defined by Eliot in the quoted passage, are actually not entirely separable.

In the January 1927 issue of Wyndham Lewis’s *The Enemy*. Eliot said a few things about poetry and belief we need to take note of here:

I cannot see that poetry can ever be separated from something which I should call belief, and to which I cannot see any reason for refusing the name of belief, unless we are to reshuffle names together. It should hardly be needful to say that it will not inevitably be orthodox Christian belief, although that possibility can be entertained, since Christianity will probably continue to modify itself into something that can be believed in (I do not mean conscious modifications like modernism etc., which always have the opposite effect). The majority of people live below the level of belief or doubt. It takes application and a kind of genius
to believe anything, and to believe anything (I do not mean merely to believe in some ‘religion’) will probably become more and more difficult as time goes on.¹

This is Eliot’s answer to the question whether the poet’s beliefs actually play a part in shaping his poetry. Eliot sees the two things—belief and poetry—as inseparable. He is even trying to answer critics who may find other names for belief: ‘refusing the name of belief’ to what is essentially belief is quite meaningless. Reshuffling names together is possible, but that does not really convince him that belief and poetry can actually be separated.⁴ Though the poet admits the possibility of beliefs other than orthodox Christian beliefs to function as the guiding force of poetry, in his case it was Christianity that ultimately gained supremacy. Our chapters on the Ariel Poems, Ash Wednesday and Four Quartets deal with this issue.

When Eliot talks of the majority of the people living below the level of either belief or doubt, he is talking about people who just do not take the issue of belief seriously. Most of us are like that, and it is simply a fact of life. It is important to note this here, because it shows that Eliot was very much aware of the spiritual condition of his fellow men: the issue of belief, particularly religious belief, was not really very important to them. And despite this knowledge, he chose to be different.⁵ He consciously chose to believe, asserting that it took application and genius to believe. The manner in which the poet makes the quoted statement—the number of brackets, the tortuous syntax and careful punctuation—suggests how difficult he finds to
clearly define what he means by ‘belief’ when he talks of belief and poetry as inseparable. Critics have often described some of Eliot’s poems as the outpourings of a true believer. When the poet himself is so cautious even in explaining the meaning of the word belief, critics and readers need to be extremely careful in explaining his poetry in terms of belief or the absence of belief.

The scepticism we are concerned with here is not pyrrhonism—an utter lack of belief in the human ability to acquire knowledge—for Eliot’s scepticism was never that. In his essay on Pascal, Eliot says that

...every man who thinks and lives by thought must have his own scepticism, that which leads to faith and which is somehow integrated into the faith which transcends it. And Pascal, as the type of one kind of religious believer, which is highly passionate and ardent, but passionate only through a powerful and regulated intellect, is in the first sections of his unfinished Apology for Christianity facing unflinchingly the demon of doubt which is inseparable from the spirit of belief.⁵

Without doubt, T. S. Eliot, who was very much a man who thought and lived by thought, had this kind of scepticism, and it ultimately got integrated into his faith. It is interesting to note that just as Eliot saw belief and poetry as inseparable, he also considered the ‘demon of doubt’ inseparable from the ‘spirit of belief’. Again, these issues concern us throughout the later chapters of this work. Here, to look a little closer into
the way the poet’s mind worked, we just need to go to the concluding sentence of his essay on Pascal. Recommending Pascal to a certain type of doubters—his type—Eliot is not only admiring Pascal, but is, in a way, revealing his own position:

But I can think of no Christian writer, not Newman even, more to be commended than Pascal to those who doubt, but who have the mind to conceive, and the sensibility to feel, the disorder, the futility, the meaninglessness, the mystery of life and suffering, and who can only find peace through a satisfaction of the whole being.7

Throughout his poetic career, T. S. Eliot was enacting his efforts to ‘find peace through a satisfaction of the whole being.’ Of course, this was not at all an easy process, and involved a constant wrestle with his doubts and questions about his life in particular and the human situation in general. The poet’s search for meaning in life, his confrontation of the disorder of the human condition, his quest for peace and his poetic activity are inseparable issues.

T. S. Eliot’s ultimate acceptance of Christian orthodox dogma does not involve a meek submission to religion and authority, but a well-considered decision of a very thoughtful soul. Here, because we have been discussing Pascal and Eliot’s admiration of Pascal as a Christian thinker, it would be worthwhile to consider something Pascal himself said in his Pensees:
We must know where to doubt, where to feel certain, where to submit. He, who does not do so, understands not the force of reason. There are some who offend against these three rules, either by affirming everything as demonstrative, from want of knowing what demonstration is; or by doubting everything, from want of knowing where to submit, or by submitting in everything, from want of knowing where they must judge.

Evidently, T. S. Eliot's high praise of Pascal is in no small measure due to his recognition in Pascal a mind very much like his own. The tension of doubt and belief that Pascal describes was a very important part of the mental process that went into the shaping of all Eliot's notable poems. He seems to have been always very careful to avoid the two extremes of believing easily and of not believing anything.

It is all too easy to assume that the early poetry of Eliot is the creation of the sceptic and that the later poetry is the product of the true believer. The simple formula involved in this assumption suggests that in his early years the poet was a young rebel, churning out unconventional, 'shocking' poems like *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* which is not a love song at all, *The Waste Land* which has generally been considered the most important English poem of the period expressing the despair of contemporary western civilization, and even blasphemous poems like *Mr Eliot's Sunday Morning Service* and *The Hippopotamus*. Then, shortly after his conversion, he wrote poems—the *Ariel Poems* and *Ash Wednesday*. 
which enact the peculiar experience of conversion; and then at last, the true believer in him made his final pronouncement of faith in *Four Quartets*. Our discussion here indeed traces the poet’s career in this order, but that is only because this chronological order happens to be the most convenient one for our purpose. Although there is some truth in the assertion that there is a markedly sceptic tone in the early poetry and that the later poetry is characterized by affirmation of belief, it is not quite correct to suppose that Eliot’s poetry simply involves a linear movement from point A, scepticism, to point B, belief. His poetry manifests far more complex workings of scepticism and belief at different stages of his poetic career. In fact, the assumption of a certain kind of evolution from one state to another may not always hold good in discussing a creative artist’s work. With regard to T. S. Eliot’s poetry also, such an assumption does not work. Each so-called phase of his poetic journey was essentially self-sufficient and owed its identity to some creative necessity. What we are trying to say here can perhaps be better explained by looking at what the artist Pablo Picasso once said in connection with his own art:

> Variation does not mean evolution. If an artist varies his mode of expression this only means that he has changed his manner of thinking, and in changing, it might be for the better or it might be for the worse. The several manners I have used in my art must not be considered as an evolution, or as steps toward an unknown ideal of painting. All I have ever made was made for the present.
Here, Picasso talks of variation in his art, and something similar explains Eliot’s early and later phases of poetic work. He changed a certain style after acquiring mastery over it, and moved onto a different style only to change that in time. This did not at any moment involve a total rejection of scepticism or a full acceptance of belief. The tension of scepticism and belief is present at all stages, although with varying levels of emphasis.

Sir Herbert Read talks of a complete break between the early poems like the *Prufrock* 1917 poems and *Poems* 1920 and the later poems like *Four Quartets*, when he suggests that Eliot’s later poetry means ‘the end of the earthly poet and the beginning of the redeemed sinner.’ Incidentally, Herbert Read’s personal relationship with Eliot developed over a period of nearly fifty years, but Read was to remain an agnostic. Referring to T. S. Eliot’s announcement about his religious and political position in 1928, Read said:

> When he announced in the preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928) that he was a classicist in literature, a royalist in politics and an Anglo-Catholic in religion, I could only retort that I was a romanticist in literature, an anarchist in politics, and an agnostic in religion.11

Of course, he also said that Eliot could very much respect such a statement of differences. But what we suspect is that even very close friends of Eliot who held differing views on religion, who were agnostics or non-believers, were at times rather in a hurry to conclude that the early Eliot and the later
Eliot were two utterly distinct and different beings. His conversion and religious interest made some of his friends feel let down. At this point of time, however, it has become easier to discern a certain religious tone even in the early verse, and a certain indecisiveness, and reluctance to acknowledge fixed notions of belief in the later poetry. Thus we note the overwhelming importance of the religious overtones of *The Waste Land* and the tentative, non-dogmatic utterance of belief in *Four Quartets*.

Herbert Read's comment, however, represents only one type of criticism of Eliot's religious position. There were other people who knew Eliot, and who could clearly detect the fallacy involved in seeing Eliot's work as a simple pattern of evolution. Stephen Spender says:

I think there is a danger of people interpreting the whole of Eliot’s development as the unfolding of a predetermined pattern.\(^{12}\)

Spender argues convincingly, and gives examples to show how people actually misinterpreted his work and his beliefs. Such critics even asserted that Eliot had simply become a 'reactionary in politics, narrow-minded (and anti-Semitic) in his culture, and obscuranist in religion.'\(^{13}\) The proper task of the critic, however, would be to assess the poet’s work in terms of his beliefs as evident in and expressed by the poetry, and grasp the universality the poetic thought achieves because of what Keats would call the 'negative capability', the capacity 'of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'\(^{14}\)
Writing about politics and fascism in an article in *The Criterion*, T S. Eliot says something about belief in general which is worth noting here:

The human craving to believe in *something* is pathetic, when not tragic; and always, at the same time, comic. I still believe, however, that religious beliefs (including, of course, Atheism), are on a different plane.

Then, after a few lines he says:

There is a form of faith which is solely appropriate to a religion; it should not be appropriated by politics...The popular result of ignoring religion seems to be merely that the populace transfer their religious emotions to political theories. Few people are sufficiently civilized to afford atheism.15

Eliot here first talks of the universal human craving for belief, by which he does not mean that all human beings actually do have settled beliefs, but that they seem to have a natural yearning for belief. Thus, he does not contradict what he says in *The Enemy* (quoted earlier in this chapter) that most people live ‘below the level of belief or doubt’. Then he speaks against relinquishing religion for politics, noting that most people are not ‘sufficiently civilized to afford atheism.’ Two things that are obvious from the quoted passage—Eliot’s strong plea for giving religion its due, and his respect for belief entirely different from his own, even atheism—are invaluable in understanding Eliot’s personality in terms of his beliefs.
Religion, as a way of life, was important to him, and he was against anything else usurping the place of religion in the life of the people. Critics have sometimes ridiculed this twentieth-century poet's leanings toward religion, and in their criticism have tried to reduce Eliot's later poetry in terms of either religious escapism or dogmatism. In so doing they have very often ignored Eliot's ability to sympathize with other people's beliefs and have also become guilty of intolerance and intemperate assertiveness, faults they would like to impute to Eliot.

Scepticism, which 'as a critical philosophical attitude, questions the reliability of the knowledge claims made by philosophers and others' served human thought from the Greek times to the present day by relentlessly questioning the fixed stance of dogmatic thinkers. In T. S. Eliot's poetry, scepticism is an all-pervading attitude of mind, resisting oversimplification of his beliefs and making them flexible. Of course, the diversity, the rich complexity that his poetry achieves because of the tension between his beliefs and his sceptic attitude can hardly be explained in prose, for his poetry, like all good poetry is in a way 'untranslatable.'

Closely connected with this is the issue of the co-existence of the philosopher and the poet in T. S. Eliot. As Anne Paolucci observes, 'In him the universe of the poet merges with the world of the philosopher through a self-conscious critical dialectic.' It is not proper to extract a philosophy out of his verse, but much of his poetry, especially the later work, has a special appeal to many readers because of the engaging thought content.
reader need not accept the Christian religion to be able to appreciate the purgatorial effort of *Ash Wednesday* or the meditations of *Four Quartets*. And of course, being a Christian does not automatically enable one to appreciate the worth of Eliot’s poetry.

In Eliot the poet, we see not only the interesting blending of the poet and the philosopher, but also the conscious movement of a sensitive modern mind towards religion. The notion that spiritual, religious aspirations do not quite fit an intelligent modern man with a good education sometimes remains in the back of a reader’s mind while reading the work of a poet who clearly declares his religious beliefs and shows how important they are to him. Such a notion can easily prejudice readers of T. S. Eliot’s later poetry. One needs to remember, however, that the very complexity of the modern age makes room for religion just as it accommodates many varied and sometimes contradictory elements. Just as systems of thought like humanism and Marxism have flourished in modern times, so also many twentieth-century artists have strained and struggled towards spirituality in an attempt to free themselves from the apparently redemptionless fiasco they find themselves in. In fact, Eliot, in trying to arrive at a supernatural answer to things terrestrial does not make of himself a strange exception or an oddity. Other writers have had similar, if not the same strivings. J. Hillis Miller’s book, *Poets of Reality*, is an interesting, well-argued presentation of six twentieth-century writers: Joseph Conrad, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Wallace Stevens.
and William Carlos Williams. The author shows how these modern writers start from an experience of nihilism or its concomitants and how each in his own way enters the new reality: Yeats by his affirmation of the infinite richness of the finite moment; Eliot by his discovery that the Incarnation is here and now; Thomas by an acceptance of death which makes the poet an ark rescuing all things; Stevens by his identification of imagination and reality in the poetry of being; Williams by his plunge into the ‘filthy Passaic’. Miller asserts that the goals of these writers ‘are different and yet have a family resemblance.’

The Christian belief in Eliot’s poetry does not make him a modern man with a medievalist doctrine, because his turning to God and the Church is, in his case, essentially a modern man’s search for coherence and meaning in an increasingly difficult situation. While these issues will be taken up in detail in later chapters, particularly in those on the Ariel Poems and Four Quartets, here it is sufficient to note what Cleanth Brooks remarks in this connection:

Eliot attempted to reclaim his Christian heritage, though thoroughly aware that the Christian communion, in the English-speaking world and especially among its intellectuals, represents a minority. His community is the remnant of the Christian community in a post-Christian world. His poetry—including his specifically religious poetry—consistently addresses itself to the ‘gentiles’—takes into account the reader’s agnosticism.
Sometimes, the scepticism in a poetic utterance of Eliot is so explicit and of such all-encompassing scope that even on first reading, any reader would immediately get an impression of utter futility and lack of conviction or belief:

Wipe your hands across your mouth and laugh;
The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots

*(Preludes IV)*

or in:

Birth and copulation, and death.
That’s all the facts when you come to brass tracks:
Birth, and copulation, and death.
I’ve been born, and once is enough.

*(Sweeney Agomstes)*

An attitude of extreme scepticism about earthly life—an attitude of seeing worldly existence as entirely morbid or filthy—causes the disgust for life that is apparent in these lines. Sometimes, the poetic voice can be interfused with bitter irony, as in:

At mating time the hippo’s voice
Betrays inflexions hoarse and odd,
But every week we hear rejoice
The Church, at being one with God.

*(The Hippopotamus)*
Of course, this is only by way of illustration, to suggest that there are many important variations to the sceptic tone in his poetry. These variations, creating a medley of meanings and suggestions in different contexts, are discussed in the chapters that follow.

Again, the affirmation of belief often involves a tortuous, painful struggle with an old self:

.... I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different, this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death

(Journey of the Magi)

There is also a moment—though extremely rare—of total affirmation and complete freedom from doubt:

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

(Little Gidding)

The moments of doubt and the moments of belief get modified by their contexts, and in their relations to each other. Ultimately it is a complex web of poetic utterances with a multiplicity of suggestions, which we have to
tackle. Thus, the two strains of scepticism and belief in Eliot's poetry function together to provide true poetic richness and diversity.
NOTES


3. Quoted in Leavis, F. R. *New Bearings in English Poetry*. 1932. Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1963. 99. In the passage where the quotation occurs, Leavis is discussing *Ash Wednesday*, and he brings in the issue of belief to show how important it was for Eliot. At the same time, he cautions against any tendency to reduce such poetry, charged with ‘a kind of delicate tentativeness’, to easy interpretations. What Leavis says about the poetry of *Ash Wednesday*—that it is ‘a striving after a spiritual state based upon a reality elusive and yet ultimate’—seems to be perfectly applicable to much of Eliot’s later poetry including the *Ariel Poems* and *Four Quartets*. It is our contention in this thesis that the struggle between scepticism and belief enacted in these poems is responsible for creating the ‘delicate tentativeness’ which Leavis talks about, and that this is what imparts a special beauty to the poems.

4. In an essay in the same year (‘Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca’, 1927), however, Eliot said that what the poet believed was
of no importance at all, that the poet merely made use of certain beliefs to make poetry. We shall refer to this again, but here we may note that the apparent contradiction in these two statements is perhaps characteristic of many of Eliot’s prose pronouncements. It is difficult to rely on or base one’s arguments on what Eliot has said at one point of time, for very frequently he revised his opinion, and this did not seem to have bothered him much.

5. In choosing to be a believer and to make his belief an important steering force of his poetry, Eliot apparently went against the expectations of many of his close friends like Herbert Read, Ezra Pound and Virginia Woolf, but we can hardly dismiss his behaviour as the behaviour of an eccentric individual. Our contention is that his urge to attach himself with a Church or a set of religious beliefs can be understood as a basic human craving, and we shall have more to say on this in this chapter and also towards the end of this thesis.


9. Ellmann, Richard and Charles Fieldelson Jr. Ed. *The Modern Tradition*. 1965. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. 26. The important thing to observe is Picasso's assertion that the different manners of his art should not be taken as steps towards some unknown ideal of painting. Similarly, the different manners of Eliot's poetic activity should not be taken as steps towards some kind of poetry of belief or devotion simply because his later poetry consistently addresses the issue of his Christian faith.


11. Tate, Allen. Ed. *T. S. Eliot the Man and His Work*. 31. Herbert Read remained a close friend of Eliot. Many of Eliot's friends and contemporaries reacted to Eliot's conversion with the petulance and impatience evident in Read's words. Their sense of having been betrayed must at least partially have been because of Eliot's keeping his faith a secret until the abrupt announcement in the Preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes*. It should perhaps be noted, however, that agnostics and atheists are very often guilty of the same impatience with other people's beliefs that they would like to charge believers with.


31. Eliot’s observation that humans seem to have an irresistible craving for belief is in line with what experts say about the process of belief-making. In an article entitled ‘The Belief Engine’ in the Skeptical Inquirer (May/June, 1995. Accessed from the Internet on July 12, 2003), James Alcock says that the human brain and nervous system constitute a belief-generating machine, that this engine goes on spewing out and strengthening beliefs which have nothing to do with reason and that humans will possibly never be able to completely eradicate irrational beliefs because of the very nature of the belief engine. Scepticism helps us put some restraint on the activities of the belief engine.


