CHAPTER TWO

FROM WHERE THE STRUGGLE BEGINS: DOUBT AND DESPAIR

In this chapter, our main concern is with the poems contained in *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), and the English poems of *Poems* (1920). We may also have to occasionally refer to relevant poems from the groups entitled *Unfinished Poems, Minor Poems*, and *Poems Written in Early Youth*. Later chapters may also contain references to or discussions of certain aspects of these poems. The reason for dealing with certain groups of poems in certain chapters is partially chronological. Throughout this work, chronology is adhered to, although not very strictly, mainly for the sake of convenience. The other, to us the more important reason, for grouping certain poems in certain chapters is a clearly discernible similarity in terms of the tension between doubt and belief enacted poetically. This becomes our pivotal point of discussion in each chapter. At the same time, this study is done with the awareness that many other interpretations are possible. While we have chosen to focus on the working of scepticism and belief in Eliot’s poems, some other crucial point of reference can be equally valid.

Although Eliot’s prose does not fall into the proper scope of our work, references to some of his statements in prose will help us in our argument. To start with, we may note the impersonal theory of art that Eliot
introduced in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919). Among the many oft-quoted statements of this essay is this:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.¹

Anyone alive to the pleasures of poetry would agree that the very first poem of Eliot’s first volume of poetry—The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock in Prufrock and Other Observations (1917)—is not a love song in the ordinary sense of the term. Then, keeping in mind that the poet considers poetry as an escape from emotion, it would be easy to infer that The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock is not, in any sense, an outpouring of the poet’s emotions. But a glance at the very next sentence of the quoted passage can compel us to rethink about not considering the poem as some sort of an expression of the poet’s emotions:

But of course, only those who have personality and emotion know what it means to want to escape from these things.²

And of course, it is not easy to come to a simple, final conclusion, even about this one issue concerning one of his early poems. The poem seems to suggest the poet’s detachment from his subject and his too deep involvement at the same time. We need to remember what Lyndall Gordon has said in this connection, although Gordon’s comment may not reflect the whole truth:
As more is gradually known of Eliot’s life, the clearer it seems that the ‘impersonal’ facade of his poetry—the multiple faces and voices—masks an often quite literal reworking of personal experience.3

In fact, it is impossible not to see the stamp of the poet’s lived experience in all the stages of his poetry. The attitudes of the doubter, the seeker and the believer that permeate Eliot’s poetry can all be considered reflections of his personal experiences. Gordon’s effort, in fact, is ‘to see the poetry and the life as complementary parts of one design, a consuming search for salvation’4, and of course, any attempt to study the poetry without any reference to the life must fail.

The very act of Eliot’s dedicating *Prufrock and Other Observations* to Jean Verdenal is an act of purely personal tribute. Of this friend, the poet’s fellow lodger in Paris, he says:

I am willing to admit that my own retrospect is touched by a sentimental sunset, the memory of a friend across the Luxembourg Gardens in the late afternoon, waving a branch of lilac, a friend who was later (so far as I could find out) to be mixed with the mud of Gallipoli.3

Although Verdenal was a medical student, he and Eliot had many common interests. They discussed books, visited art galleries together and kept up a correspondence even after parting. The two young men were ‘in very close intellectual and imaginative sympathy’.6 The poignancy of the poet’s
relationship with his dead friend is stressed in the dedication, lines taken from *The Divine Comedy* where Statius speaks to Virgil:

> Now can you understand the quantity of love that warms me towards you, so that I forget our vanity, and treat the shadows like the solid thing.⁷

These words, while underlining 'the quantity of love' the poet feels for his dead friend, also mark his concern with the nature of the self. It may be, after all, only 'vanity', a mere shade and not a solid thing. Thus, the concept of the illusory self, introduced in the dedication itself of Eliot's very first volume of poems, actually sparks off a sceptic debate about the nature of the self.

Ronald Schuchard has noted the overwhelming importance of the struggle between scepticism and religious impulse enacted in the early poetry:

> ...the paralysis of will resulting from the tension between scepticism and the religious impulse was a motivating factor in his early poetry, as Eliot's unpublished notebooks and the poems from 'Prufrock' to 'The Hollow Men' show.⁸

Prufrock's endless anxiety about his inability to utter the right word or to take any decisive step is a form of the 'paralysis of will' that Schuchard talks about. A similar state of consciousness can be discerned in the male persona of *Portrait of a Lady* whose ambiguities of thought and feeling
make him another Prufrock, although more refined and sophisticated. The hollow men, too, are embodiments of such paralysis:

Shape without form, shade without colour,

Paralysed force, gesture without motion

(The Hollow Men)

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock can be taken as a typical output of the tension between scepticism and belief in the early phase of Eliot’s poetic career. In this phase, sceptic utterances seem to drown out statements tending towards belief or assertion. Perhaps at the risk of simplifying things too much, it can be asserted that the sceptic voice in the poem is not to be identified with one particular individual and interpreted in terms of that individual’s sceptic philosophy. Scepticism as a state of being in uncertainty or doubt is what the poem achieves by constantly emphasizing the instability and intermittence of the self. In this poem, ‘we learn much about what the speaker is not and what he should have been, but nothing about what he is.’ The same is the case with the first poem of the Poems 1920 collection—Gerontion. In this important poem, lines such as--

I was neither at the hot gates

Nor fought in the warm rain

Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,

Bitten by flies, fought.

(Gerontion)
are remarkable for their indeterminacy. They do not convey anything in terms of positive statement. John Paul Riquelme observes about these lines:

We find out where this “I” was not and what it did not do, not where or what it is in any positive sense. The passage gives rise to questions that it does not answer and that are not answered elsewhere in “Gerontion.”

It is important to note in this discussion the poet’s skilful building up and maintaining an atmosphere of indeterminacy. Nothing is fixed, determined, and unquestionable. The reader gropes his way in various directions, and thereby gets a taste of the highly complex movement of the poetic consciousness. Prufrock’s ‘overwhelming question’ remains an unasked question:

Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’

Let us go and make our visit (The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock)

What Prufrock says or tries to express in his highly wordy manner gets reduced to:

It is impossible to say just what I mean! (The Love Song J. Alfred Prufrock)
Prufrock can be understood as a consciousness unable to express itself, to decide, to take action. Prufrock is synonymous with physical and mental stasis.

The overwhelmingly important thing in this poem is not what the persona says, but the persona’s inability to say anything clearly, the persona’s elaborate monologue that conveys nothing affirmatively. Our interest here is in this ‘negative’ characteristic of Eliot’s early persona, because this is what suffuses the poems with doubt and scepticism. Together with this, an attitude of caustic humour and satire develops in many of the poems under discussion in this chapter. Prufrock’s satire and wry humour is self-directed. At this stage, our contention is that a profound sense of dissatisfaction with and hence scepticism about worldly things and life made the poet express himself in such a tortuous and satiric manner in the early part of his poetic career. At one level, Eliot’s early dissatisfaction was with the intellectual culture of England and America in the beginning of the twentieth century. Writing about the intellectual atmosphere of England, America and France during the first decade of the twentieth century, Eliot described the scenario in both England and America as an ‘intellectual desert’. In this bleak state of affairs, France alone offered some hope. Among many comments of praise about the French intellectual scene, he said:
Anatole France and Remy de Gourmont still exhibited their learning, and provided types of scepticism for younger men to be attracted by and to repudiate.\textsuperscript{11}

In the context of our discussion it is important to note his specific comment on the ‘types of scepticism’ that engaged the attention of young writers like him. Septicism seemed the perfect mode of thought for conveying what he wanted to say at that moment of time.

Another interesting point to be noted here is that the young Eliot was in the habit of seriously looking for alternatives. If England and America were intellectual deserts, France promised him the kind of influence that would satisfy his creative urge. Similarly, if his grandfather’s Unitarian faith seemed too insipid and over-intellectualized to him, the Church of England would ultimately provide him spiritual succour.

What we have just said here seems to have close connections with what A. David Moody observes in the preface to his \textit{Tracing T. S. Eliot’s Spirit: Essays on His Poetry and Thought}. Saying that he is concerned about Eliot’s peregrinations, he goes into a somewhat lengthy discussion of the meaning of peregrinations, and comes out with observations that we cannot ignore in discussing Eliot’s poetry as a search for belief:

The meanings of peregrination start from the ordinary ‘transplanting into another country’, as Eliot transplanted himself from his native America to England; but when we come to ‘travelling into foreign lands’ the sense becomes metaphysical,
Eliot's travels having been mainly into foreign regions of the mind and spirit; that connects with the further sense of 'travelling as a religious pilgrim' in quest of places especially devoted to the life of the spirit; and finally we are brought to the general idea of 'man's life on earth viewed as a sojourn in the flesh', with the implication that the spirit belongs elsewhere.12

The final meaning Moody presents here is of especial interest to us. The early poems, the poems of the middle phase and the later poems—all of them have, with greater or lesser emphasis and with different angles of emphasis, the theme of peregrination running through them. While the early poems have more to do with the earthly experiences of the flesh and the later poetry with spiritual experience, they can all be understood in terms of a quest, a journey undertaken by the spirit, a movement of the consciousness from a state of doubts and perplexities to a state of faith and conviction. In the early poems, this journey does not result in the realization of the goal. In the later poems, a certain assurance of faith is reached.

One of the most striking features of Eliot's poetry is its allusiveness. This is clearly discernible right from the *Prufrock* volume. It is not that Eliot merely refers to other, earlier works of art in the context of his poems; he very often speaks through those other voices. His highly allusive technique subdues his own voice so that very often it becomes extremely difficult to track down one predominant poetic voice or the poet's own
voice. The result is the creation of a pervasive sense of uncertainty, tenuity, and lack of rigidity: in other words, an essentially sceptic atmosphere. The poet's utterance becomes marked by a sceptic tone. Our discussion of scepticism in Eliot's poetry, therefore, does not involve showing the poet's adherence to a particular system of sceptic philosophy, but the creation of a sceptic tone that becomes all-pervading in the early poetry. Paraphrasing Eliot's poetry is an impossible task because of this. No ultimate meaning can be arrived at, but there is a constant suggestion of several possibilities.

In some of the early poems, the poetic voice very often completely overturns what it has said before. Thus, in *Preludes*, after a four-part description of the sordidness and emotional emptiness of modern city life, the poetic voice seems to become charged with pity:

> I am moved by fancies that are curled Around these images, and cling: 
The notion of some infinitely gentle 
Infinitely suffering thing.

(*Preludes*, IV)

Immediately, however, an utterance of seemingly careless contempt undercuts the statement of pity:

> Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh; 
The worlds revolve like ancient women 
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

(*Preludes*, IV)
Sometimes, again, an ironic title is the first thing to suggest an inversion of meaning. Thus, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is far from being a love song, while *Rhapsody on a Windy Night* is the very opposite of the rhapsodic.

It is an established fact that in his early career, Eliot was very much influenced by Laforgue and Baudelaire. He has himself admitted to being influenced by them and others, besides being deeply indebted to Dante. When, in an essay, he talks about one's being 'carried away' by the work of a poet, he is essentially talking about his own experience:

Everyone, I believe, who is at all sensible to the seductions of poetry, can remember some moment in youth when he or she was completely carried away by the work of one poet. Very likely he was carried away by several poets, one after the other.\(^{13}\)

Most biographical accounts show the youthful Eliot as a serious, voracious reader, and there can hardly be any doubt that his comment about the seductions of poetry carries autobiographical elements. He says that as the young reader weighs one author against another, his critical faculty matures:

...we begin to be, in fact, critical; and it is our growing critical power which protects us from excessive possession by any one literary personality. The good critic...is the man who, to a keen and abiding sensibility, joins wide and increasingly discriminating reading.\(^{14}\)
It is even more interesting to note why he advocates wide reading.

It is valuable because in the process of being affected by one powerful personality after another, we cease to be dominated by any one, or by any one, or by any small number. The very different views of life, cohabiting our minds, affect each other, and our own personality asserts itself and gives each a place in some arrangement peculiar to ourself.¹⁵

One of the results of Eliot's being affected by 'one personality after another' has been an extreme caution in affirming anything and this produces the sceptic mood that pervades his writing. It is interesting to note that Eliot's ultimate emphasis in the quoted passage is in the individual's own personality asserting itself and accommodating the various views of life in a manner peculiar to itself. To a certain extent, the individual mind is passive, merely absorbing the different influences, but it also asserts its independence in choosing the manner of accommodating the other views. Without a doubt, Eliot's own mind had this capacity for absorbing and assimilating diverse experiences. Further, he made ample use of them in his poetic craft.

What Eliot learned from Laforgue helped him a lot to express himself in the complicated manner he found most suitable for his purpose. Bernard Bergonzi notes what Eliot learnt from Laforgue:

From Laforgue, Eliot learned the possibility of an ironic, self-deprecating diction which offered scope for subtler expression.
than anything currently available to him in English. Laforgue also showed a shy and sensitive young poet the means of distancing and presenting for sardonic contemplation experiences too painful to encounter more intimately.16

The self-deprecation that Prufrock practises glibly and the persona of Portrait of a Lady practises in a subtler manner can be seen as a sort of scepticism about one's own worth. It does not seem very correct, however, to say that in all these instances, the poet is merely revealing one side of his own personality. Perhaps an element of self-deprecation always was a part of the poet's character, but it seems rather like an exaggeration of facts to observe, like Francis Scarfe, that—

The tendency to self-deprecation was fundamental to Eliot's character, and he never shook it off. Though it was his only serious flaw (which yet led him to humility) it emerged at times in a crude form, as in the later poem How Unpleasant to Meet Mr. Eliot. Though written in jest, this poem is meaningful in our context. Why should it be unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot? Why should he constantly see himself from the outside? Why should he or anyone ridicule himself, even for fun? It is the same lack of confidence in themselves or other people that prevented many of Eliot's creations, in his later plays, from becoming characters at all.17
The important thing that Scarfe seems to miss here is the very pronounced jocularity of How Unpleasant to Meet Mr. Eliot. His ‘Though written in jest’ does not carry emphasis. It must not be forgotten that a part of Eliot’s genius was given to creating light verse and indulging in simple buffoonery. Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats\textsuperscript{18} is enough to establish his skill with pure non-sense verse. If How Unpleasant to Meet Mr. Eliot is not nonsense verse, it can be read as just short of being so. The streak of buffoonery in him also explains the bawdy verse he wrote in letters to his close friends like Conrad Aiken:

Now while Columbo and his men
Were drinking ice cream soda
In burst King Bolo’s big black queen
That famous old breech l(oader).
Just then they rang the bell for lunch
And served up—Fried Hyenas;
And Columbo said “Will you take tail?
Or just a bit of p(enis)？”\textsuperscript{19}

Again, it is possible to see the appearance of characters like Sweeny in his poetry as a sort of development of the early bawdy verse. We have briefly discussed the bawdy and the nonsense creations together here because we believe it is the same streak of buffoonery at work in these cases, as in the poem mentioned by Scarfe. Instead of seeing the self-deprecation as a flaw
in Eliot’s character, we should perhaps consider it simply as a certain tendency to clown which remained with him even in later life.

At the same time, however, circumstances of life and surroundings propelled the young Eliot to write poetry that smacked more of negative emotions and impressions than positive ones. But there is the danger of appropriating the self-deprecation of a character like Prufrock entirely as the young poet’s. On the other hand, it has to be kept in mind that Eliot’s general reputation among many of his friends and acquaintances is that of a rather self-conscious, hesitating person at times withdrawn into himself—in other words, a Prufrockian character. Taking all such factors into consideration, it is not possible to explain the self-deprecation enacted in the early verse in simplistic terms, but to a certain extent it may be considered as a sceptic expression of lived experience.

While Prufrock seems unable to say ‘yes’ to life as lived by a thoroughly worldly, earthly person, he does not have any pretensions to spirituality either. Prufrock’s distaste for normal human experience like love finds expression in sordid images that reflect his state of mind:

And I have known the arms already, known them all—
Arms that are braceletted and white and bare
(But in the lamp light, downed with light brown hair!)

(*The love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*)
Images of sordidness and ugliness are used again and again in the early poetry to indicate a state of mind which is characterized by such elements as frustration, distaste and boredom:

The morning comes to consciousness
Of faint stale smells of beer
From the sawdust-trampled street
With all its muddy feet that press
To early coffee stands.

(Preludes, II)

and-

The moon has lost her memory.
A washed-out smallpox cracks her face,
Her hand twists a paper rose,
That smells of dust and eau de Cologne

(Rhapsody on a Windy Night)

The utter disgust with life that such lines express can be seen as acute scepticism about lived experience.

It is relevant to note here that these images of ugliness became a characteristic of modern poetry. However, the trend of worshipping ugliness rather than beauty, hailed by the young Eliot's mentor Ezra Pound, was not something universally acclaimed as necessary for good poetry. It has been pointed out that W. B. Yeats, the most distinguished poet of the
period, "probably agreed with his father's view of the kind of poets associated with Pound, 'I am tired of Beauty my wife, says the poet (favoured by Pound), but here is that enchanting mistress ugliness. With her will I live, and what a riot we shall have—not a day shall pass without a fresh horror.'" Yeats himself, at any rate, was not very sure whether to accept the Pound-Eliot style of writing or not, as his comment in a letter to Olivia Shakespeare suggests:

My problem this time will be: 'How far do I like the Ezra, Eliot, Auden school and if I do not, why not?' Then this further problem 'Why do the younger generation like it so much? What do they see or hope?'

The sense of bewilderment that these questions suggest, certainly reveal the poet's sense of irritation with the school of poetry he is talking about. At other times, Yeats even denounced Eliot's style quite openly; at least that is what one gathers from what he once wrote to Dorothy Wellesley:

You have the best language among us....The worst language is

Eliot's in all his poems—a level flatness of rhythm.

Eliot, of course, seems to have had full confidence in his early style, for he persevered in this style until it achieved its natural culmination in The Waste Land and The Hollow Men. As we have already noted in this chapter, during this period of Eliot's poetic career, he learnt and used Laforgue's poetic techniques. It has been pointed out, however, that the lack of faith in
normal human relationships that the poems of this period express, is much more acute in Eliot than in Laforgue. Francis Scarfe convincingly points out a few interesting similarities and differences between Laforgue and Eliot. Scarfe’s argument is particularly relevant to our discussion of Eliot’s scepticism:

Looking back on the Eliot-Laforgue relationship, it is evident that apart from Eliot’s willing apprenticeship to him in technical matters there must have been a close affinity depending on more personal factors, such as the attraction of a philosophy of the Absurd, and self-doubt...Eliot’s temporary identification with Laforgue and Corbiere is more significant than any appraisal of ‘technique’ might suggest, for the three of them portray a self-destructive type of introspection, or auto-irony.23

Scarfe says that “both The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock and Portrait of a Lady are ‘too painful to be tragic’ to use Arnold’s words (as well as too painful to be comic).”24 He also points out that Eliot could be far more detached and even cruel than Laforgue. This suggests an acute scepticism about human affairs that haunted Eliot throughout his life.

It is rather revealing that Eliot wrote only one poem which can be properly called a love poem—the short poem A Dedication to my Wife—which he wrote after his second marriage. The almost Yeatsian intensity of emotion that he achieves in this short poem—

The breathing in unison
Of lovers whose bodies smell of each other
Who think the same thoughts without need of speech
And babble the same speech without need of meaning

(A Dedication to my Wife)

and the seemingly unshakable faith in human relationship, at least in this particular relationship—

No peevish winter wind shall chill
No sullen tropic sun shall wither
The roses in the rose-garden which is ours and ours only

(A Dedication to my Wife)

are never achieved anywhere else by Eliot. Even La Figlia Che Piange, considered to be a statement of intense romantic attraction, is not without an undercurrent of frustration and despair:

And I wonder how they should have been together!
I should have lost a gesture and a pose.
Sometimes these cogitations still amaze
The troubled midnight and the moon’s repose.

(La Figlia Che Piange)

A Dedication to my Wife alone of all his poems, is unsullied by his lack of faith in human relationship. From this we can legitimately infer that the peace that he had been hankering for but never quite achieving in his lived experience was ultimately bequeathed to him in his second marriage by
what he seems to have been running away from: simple human love, and faith in human relationships. Temperamentally Eliot seems to have been reserved, an 'Old Possum' at times, and quite free of inhibitions at other times, as with friends like Conrad Aiken.

While the lack of faith in human affairs generates the predominant sceptic stance in this phase, a deep and very damaging sort of sceptic tone ridicules religious pretensions. The two poems which were composed clearly for ridiculing religious pretensions—*The Hippopotamus* and *Mr Eliot's Sunday Morning Service*—are characterized by a certain directness of purpose. In this sense, these poems have a certain simplicity not to be traced in most other important poems of the period. The reader does not need to work hard at comprehending these two poems. The poetic voice is clear and unambiguous in its criticism of religious pretensions. It is interesting to note that Eliot achieves such clarity and straightforwardness in the act of condemning, denouncing, damagingly criticizing something. It is as if at this stage, the sceptic, cynical side of his personality is much more vigorous and lively than the faithful believer in him. In fact, the vibrant rhythm and the gusto of the early poems make some commentators believe that this is Eliot's best poetic phase, and that the later poetry is a subdued, mild affair compared to this. M. D. Zabel, for instance, is of the opinion that—

Eliot spoke with complete authority in his first phase. In his second he displays a conciliatory attitude which may persuade
few of his contemporaries but which, as a worse consequence, deprives his art of its one incomparable distinction in style and tone.  

D. S. Savage is even more emphatic about presenting Eliot's early poems as far superior to the later ones which, to him, are 'marked down as imperfectly realized summaries of experience, as poetic failures.' He also thinks that Eliot's career resembles 'a fall from the reign of grace to the rule of law.' Such comments seem to take for granted that Eliot's early style constitute his true art, but we would like to stress on the important fact that he changed his style to suit the need of the hour. There can hardly be any doubt that the tremendous sensation the early poems created with their abrupt departure from conventionality had a lasting impact on many readers. And readers of any age would always have to decide for themselves how differently they would react to the early and the later poems of Eliot. For some, a liking for the early poems seems to somehow prevent them from fully accepting the later poems; others find it difficult to accept Eliot's religion, and consequently his later poems, although the two should not always be clubbed together. Comments like those of Zabel and Savage do not reflect the truth if we agree that Eliot actually changed the manner of his poetic utterance at different phases of his career to realize different needs. Our contention is that he abandoned one type of poetic utterance when he achieved complete mastery over it, only to develop another type. Thus, with The Waste Land and Hollow Men, the poetic
technique of the early phase achieves its culmination, and after these poems he develops a new style in the *Ariel Poems* and *Ash Wednesday*. Lastly, *Four Quartets* embodies a different style again, although the change now is not as abrupt as the preceding change of manner. We have asserted that the first phase of Eliot's poetic activity is marked by an all-pervading scepticism about human relationship and the poet's lived experience. It is equally true, however, that the scepticism does not vanish in the later phase, but only gets curbed or modified by an exploration or attainment of religious faith.

In the early phase when the sceptic tone was pronounced, institutionalized religion itself became an object of ridicule. This explains the ruthlessness of the satire in *The Hippopotamus* and *Mr Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service*. In both poems, the church and its conventions become objects of scorn. However, the extremely sharp criticism of the Church with a humour uncompromisingly wry and cynical does not mean that Eliot has momentarily become a non-believer or a pure sceptic in regard to religion. This is evident from the fact that his criticism of the Church in these poems is only the result of his deep concern for the Church. He does not take pleasure in ridiculing religion. The epigraph to *The Hippopotamus* is of special interest in this connection.

And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also

in the Church of the Laodiceans.
This is from St. Paul's epistle to the Colossians, and the effect of this quotation at the head of the poem is abundantly clear. St. Paul's concern for the spiritual well-being of the Colossians and the Laodiceans reflect the poet's concern for the Church as he sees it. There is a wish implied in all this, the wish to see the Church in a healthier, better state. Besides, the very ludicrity of comparing the Church with the hippopotamus undercuts the criticism to some extent. In fact, the hippopotamus is not just compared with but is shown to be much superior to the Church. It is the hippopotamus which finds favour in heaven.

He shall be washed as white as snow,
By all the martyr'd virgins kist,
While the True Church remains below
Wrapt in the old miasmal mist.

(The Hippopotamus)

Such extreme criticism, by the very incongruousness of the comparisons, seems to imply a certain playfulness on the part of the poet. However, what he once told a young priest suggests that he seriously wanted to shock his readers about the worldliness of the church. He was unhappy that people had become insensitive to the serious criticism of the church offered by his poem. Many years after the appearance of the poem, he was walking through a zoo with this young priest, one of his devoted admirers, when they talked about The Hippopotamus:
As we walked away from the hippopotamus’s cage, admiring the “ugly” beast, I said that I also admired Eliot’s poem “The Hippopotamus,” adding that the church should be attacked for its worldliness. He said, “That poem shocked many persons when it appeared—and not particularly religious persons. Today it could not possibly shock And I suppose tomorrow it will appear in children’s anthologies!”

Clearly, the poet is saddened by the lack of sensitivity that people apparently showed. He meant to shock his readers with his criticism of the church in this poem, but people got used to it, and did not take it as seriously as he would have liked them to. Compared to The Hippopotamus, however, Mr Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service is even more vicious in its criticism of religious hypocrisy. The difference is evident at the very beginning, the epigraph which is a quotation from The Jew of Malta:

Look, look master, here comes two religious caterpillars

These are the words of Ithanore, the servant of Barabas the Jew. They have just poisoned a convent of nuns and are denouncing the practices of churchmen. The poem concludes with comparing pollinating bees and church priests and by contrasting Sweeney, Eliot’s natural man devoid of spirituality, with ‘masters of the subtle school’, whose useless controversies and polemics the poem has been condemning. There is, however, one place where even in this blasphemous poem, the poet’s wish and concern for simplicity in religion finds unambiguous and forceful expression: the
description, in stanzas three and four, of an Umbrian painting depicting the
baptism of Jesus Christ. The language, which has so far been full of
difficult-sounding words such as 'polyphiloprogenitive' and
'superfetation', suddenly becomes direct and simple. Thus, the fourth
stanza reads:

But through the water pale and thin
Still shine the unoffending feet
And there above the painter set
The Father and the Paraclete

(Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service)

It would not be stretching things too far if we say that in some of
Eliot's poems, where at first sight no clear struggle between scepticism and
belief is apparent, the tension may still be there in some level of possible
meaning. The tussle between scepticism and belief may be evident in
various ways: a persona's apparent psychological attitude, the tone of the
speaking voice, the atmosphere or mood suggested by the poem.

One such poem is Portrait of a Lady. The persona, a young man
come to say goodbye to a society lady before leaving for a tour abroad, is
self-conscious like Prufrock, and the relationship between him and the lady
seems to be defined by mutual suspicion and calculativeness. He is anxious
to wriggle out of a situation in which the lady seems to be making a last-
minute attempt to win him as a lover. The lady's speech shows a continual
recurrence of the words 'friend', 'friends', and 'friendship':
You do not know how much they mean to me, my friends,
And how, how rare and strange it is to find
To find a friend who has these qualities,
Who has and gives
 Those qualities upon which friendship lives.
How much it means that I say this to you—
Without these friendships—life, what cauchemar!

*(Portrait of a Lady)*

But if friendship involves mutual trust and love, the relationship between the lady and her friend is marked by distrust and suspicion. They doubt each other’s words; they try to guess and make calculations about each other’s intentions. There is a constant attempt to outsmart one another. In other words, it is an atmosphere vitiated by scepticism about human relationship: each is sceptical of the other’s words and intentions. The male persona and the lady in the poem are both sceptics—in regard to human relationship in general and their mutual relationship in particular. The poet, in portraying these two characters, is dealing with friendship devoid of trust and love, relationship that is a mere show of social manners. He presents the sceptic psychological atmosphere of the two ‘friends’ without making any direct remark by way of judgement.

Again, at least partially, *Portrait of a Lady* involves a young poet transmuting personal experience into poetry. In a letter to Ezra Pound, Eliot encloses a copy of the poem, briefly comments on it, and then says.
It will please you, I hope, to hear that I had a Christmas card from
the lady, bearing the “ringing greetings of friend to friend at this
season of high festival”. It seems like old times.\textsuperscript{28}

Valerie Eliot explains who the lady is:

Miss Adeleine Moffat, the subject of the poem, lived behind the
State House in Boston and invited selected Harvard
undergraduates to tea. During a visit to London in 1927 she asked
the Eliots to dine, offering ‘a modest choice of dates to sacrifice
yourselves on the altar of New England’, but they were away.\textsuperscript{29}

Despite Eliot’s avowed principle of impersonality, the personal element
remains very clear in a poem such as \textit{Portrait of a Lady}. F R. Leavis also
talks about the personal element of this poem. In discussing “the
impersonality of great poetry” achieved by Eliot in \textit{Gerontion}, Leavis cites
the example of \textit{Portrait of a Lady} as a poem where Eliot had not yet
achieved such impersonality:

The dramatic derivation of the verse is not all that there is
dramatic about \textit{Gerontion}; it has a really dramatic detachment. In
this respect it represents a great advance upon anything printed
earlier in \textit{Poems 1909–1925}. \textit{Prufrock} and \textit{Portrait of a Lady} are
concerned with the directly personal embarrassments, disillusions
and distresses of a sophisticated young man.\textsuperscript{30}
One short poem included in *Poems Written in Early Youth*, strongly reminds one of *Portrait of a Lady*. The poem, entitled *Spleen*, end with this stanza:

> And Life, a Little bald and gray,  
> Languid, fastidious, and bland,  
> Waits, hat and gloves in hand,  
> Punctilious of tie and suit  
> (Somewhat impatient of delay)  
> On the doorstep of the Absolute.\footnote{11}

This early poem seems to have in it seed for poems like *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *Portrait of a Lady*, and the last line anticipates the poet’s later interest in the philosophy of F. H. Bradley. This is a peculiarity with Eliot that some of his early poetic attempts foreshadow some of his later work.

In her book *Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry*, Lillian Feder looks at the way Eliot uses myth in his poetry. She discusses how Eliot’s treatment of myth differs from Yeats’s use of myth in his poetry and how it is similar to Dante’s technique. Ms Feder’s discussion establishes how Eliot’s method succeeds in probing the psychological predicament of a character like Prufrock. The hell, in which Prufrock finds himself trapped, is Dante’s hell, evoked in the epigraph to *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*. The epigraph is from *Inferno* (27; 61-6):
If I thought that I was making my reply
To anyone who would ever go back to the world,
This flame would stay absolutely still;

But since no one ever came back alive
From this deep place, if what I hear is true,
I answer you without fear of infamy. 32

Ms Feder says that these lines show Prufrock to be trapped in hell, but this hell is not a place, but a state—as Eliot defines it in an essay on Dante. It is worthwhile to note at some length what Eliot says about this hell that is not a place:

For the Inferno is relieved from any question of pettiness or arbitrariness in Dante's selection of damned. It reminds us that Hell is not a place but a state; that man is damned or blessed in the creatures of his imagination as well in men who have actually lived; and that Hell, though a state, is a state which can only be thought of, and perhaps only experienced, by the projection of sensory images... 33

Prufrock's hell is also expressed through the projection of sensory images. Besides, the hell that Eliot creates for Prufrock can be understood by relating it to what Eliot says about Pound's hell in the Cantos. Eliot's hell is not what Pound's hell is:
Mr. Pound's Hell, for all its horrors, is a perfectly comfortable one for the modern mind to contemplate, and disturbing to no one's complacency: it is a hell for the other people, the people we read about in the newspapers, not for oneself and one's friends.

What Eliot himself attempted in his early poems is to present a hell in which the modern mind will find itself. It is the hell of boredom, ennui, meaningfulness that pervades modern existence. It is a hell which modern urban life cannot hope to escape. Eliot's later poetry is concerned with finding a way out of his hell—through an attempt to affirm religious belief. And the early phase of his poetic activity that is under discussion here is also charged with religious belief in the sense that he sees a modern, urban person like Prufrock as damned. To be damned, for Eliot, is to affirm at least the possibility of salvation.

One interesting aspect of Eliot's work is that the early poems anticipate the later ones. Although it is not at all our contention that his poetic activity can be represented in terms of a linear movement from one point to another, we can very well discern certain similarities of preoccupation and interest even among poems written very early and other poems written late in his career. Most of the poems printed as Poems Written in Early Youth in The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot read like the work of a novice, but a novice with real promise. This becomes particularly clear when we note that important themes of his later poetry—
like the important theme of time—make their appearance in some of the early poems:

If space and time, as sages say,
Are things that cannot be,
The fly that lives a single day
Has lived as long as we. 35

(Song)

Similarly, the preoccupation with memory and the time-ridden condition of human beings, one of the important themes of *Four Quartets*, can be detected very early in Eliot's career:

Sometimes in distant years when we are grown
Gray-haired and old, whatever be our lot,
We shall desire to see again the spot
Which, whatsoever we have been or done
Or to what distant lands we may have gone,
Through all the years will ne'er have forgot. 36

(At Graduation, VIII)

The genesis of the poem *Portrait of a Lady* can very well be traced to one of the early poems, *On a Portrait* with lines like

The parrot on his bar, a silent spy,
Regards her with a patient curious eye. 37
The relationship of the young man and the lady in *Portrait of a Lady*, a relationship marked by mutual one-upmanship, secretiveness and evasiveness is foreshadowed in lines like these. Studying these very early poems is to observe the seeds of the poet's later creative activity. A poem from the group of poems under the general title *Minor Poems* may also point towards the later poetry. Thus, these lines from *Usk* seem to foreshadow *Four Quartets*:

...do not spell

Old enchantments. Let them sleep.

...... ...... ...... ......

Seek only there

Where the grey light meets the green air

The hermit's chapel, the pilgrim's prayer.

*(Usk)*

Such lines certainly have something of the meditativeness, the seriousness of purpose *Four Quartets* display. In a strange way, reading them seems to add to our appreciation of the later poem, at least to some extent.

*Sweeney Agonistes*, grouped under *Unfinished Poems*, on the other hand, echoes the sentiment of dissatisfaction with worldly existence which has been a recurring theme in much of the poetry of the early period:

You'd be bored.

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.
You don't remember, but I remember,
Once is enough.

(Sweeney Agonistes)

The distaste that Sweeney's experience suggests is the impetus for Eliot's movement towards a different order of things. The frustration with the earthly caused the search for the divine as enacted in later poems like *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*. Of course, the consistent movement towards religion and assurance does not begin before the poetic consciousness touches the nadir of doubt and despair in *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*, the subjects of our next chapter.
NOTES


8. Schuchard, Ronald. ‘Eliot and Hume in 1916: Towards a Revaluation of Eliot’s Critical and Spiritual Development.’ *PMLA* 88 (1973): 1091. Schuchard convincingly argues in this essay about the essential continuity in Eliot’s artistic and philosophical development at the time of composing his early poems. He asserts that in 1916—years before the abrupt announcement of his religious, political and literary positions in the Preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes*—Eliot’s ‘classical, royalist and religious point of view was already formulated’ and that T. E. Hulme had a definite role to play in defining Eliot’s critical and religious position during 1915-1916.


18. Every poem in *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* is delightful

with sheer nonsense. ‘The Naming of Cats’, for instance, ends with.

When you notice a cat in profound meditation,

The reason, I tell you, is always the same:

His mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation

Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name:

His ineffable effable
Effanineffable

Deep and inscrutable singular Name.

‘The Old Gumbie Cat’ begins with:

I have a Gumbie Cat in mind, her name is Jennyanydots;
Her coat is of the tabby kind, with tiger stripes and leopard spots
All day she sits upon the stair or on the steps or on the mat:
She sits and sits and sits and sits and—that’s what makes a Gumbie cat!

One interesting thing to observe here is that both *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* and *The Idea of a Christian Society* appeared in the same year: 1939. Thus, the grave Christian social critic and the humorist co-existed in Eliot. His personality gains an interesting dimension from his engagements with the purely humorous and nonsense, and perhaps it is proper not to forget this aspect of his personality even when dealing with his serious work.

19. *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, Ed. Valerie Eliot. Vol.1 (1898-1922). London: Faber and Faber, 1988. 42 In his letters to friends like Conrad Aiken, Eliot often revealed the joker in him. As suggested earlier, understanding this aspect of his personality is important because very often he gave the impression of being unapproachable and a man with a dead earnestness of purpose. Sometimes, the joker in him extended his activity in ‘serious’ areas as in writing the notes to *The Waste Land*. The notes help in dealing with the poem, but at
the same time, they may lead one quite away from the poem into exotic areas of search like the Grail Legends and Fraser's anthropological research and the Bhagawat Geeta.

20. Macrae, Alasdair D. F. *W. B. Yeats: A Literary Life*. London: Macmillan, 1995. 169. Rabindranath Tagore, in a Bengali essay, 'Modern Poetry' (Rabindra-rachanawali. Vol 12. Vishwabharati, Kolkata. 1910. 463-472; in the compilation *Sahityer Pothe*) writes uncompromisingly against the modern western poet's insistence on dealing with the ugly. He says, for instance, that if a poet speaks about the lovely smile of a maiden, then that information is welcome. But if in the very next instant, the poet starts describing how the dentist came, examined the girl's teeth and found them infected with caries, then even if that also is information, it is not such news that everyone should be called and told about it. If however, someone shows a particularly keen interest in giving the latter bit of information, then he himself might be considered mentally unsound. Tagore says that the modern poets may claim that earlier poets were selective, that they dealt only with so-called poetic themes, but the modern poets are also selective, only they prefer the ugly and the filthy while their predecessors preferred the beautiful.


