Towards the end of 1921, the thirty-three year old Eliot completed the original drafts of *The Waste Land*, and it was published the next year. It came to be recognized as almost *the* poem of the great Modernist Movement, the most important poem of its age, but many of the early reviews were far from favourable. One reviewer called it waste paper:

...one can only say that if Mr. Eliot had been pleased to write in demotic English *The Waste Land* might not have been, as it just is to all but anthropologists and literati, so much waste paper.¹

F. L. Lucas thought Eliot's poetic technique was unmistakably bad:

In brief, in *The Waste Land* Mr. Eliot has shown that he can write real blank verse; but that is all. For the rest he has quoted a great deal, he has parodied and imitated. But the parodies are cheap and the imitations inferior.²

Now that *The Waste Land* has been there for so many years, it is easy to speculate why these reviewers responded to the poem in this manner. One can point out, for instance, that some of the reviewers may have been simply too shocked by Eliot's technique, and may possibly have taken the... anthropological and literary allusions as mere reworkings of the poet's
knowledge of these things. Many of them were irritated by what seemed to be a show off's impudent display of learning, and took the strange style as merely the result of Eliot's inability to write in a truly 'poetic' manner. However, no one can possibly assert that today, eight decades after the publication of the poem, we do not have any doubts about it. If we today know better than some of the early reviewers, we certainly do not and probably will never know enough for the critical debate to cease. After eight decades of *The Waste Land* generating divergent critical opinion, the poem is one of the most widely discussed literary creations. This, of course, is one sign of the poem's greatness.

Again, there were other early reviews which were quite enthusiastic and favourable. Gilbert Seldes thought that together with Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's *The Waste Land* had expressed 'something of supreme relevance to our present life in the everlasting terms of art.' In 1926, I. A. Richards tried to defend Eliot from criticism that complained about the poet's obsession with desolation and despair:

> Both bitterness and desolation are superficial aspects of his poetry. There are those who think that he merely takes his readers into the Waste Land and leaves them there, that in his last poem he confesses his impotence to release the healing waters. The reply is that some readers find in his poetry not only a clearer, fuller realization of their plight, the plight of a whole generation,
than they find elsewhere, but also through the very energies set freq in that realisation a return of the saving passion.⁴

These quoted examples of early critical opinion on *The Waste Land* help to suggest the degree of variance in different assessments of the poem. Between the two extremes of downright rejection or condemnation and exultation or euphoria are any number of responses tinged with varying degrees of admiration or disapproval or both. Now, at this distance of time, it is difficult either to react with unsullied euphoria or with utter dislike. Eliot himself seems to have bothered little about either kind of extreme opinion. He seems to have remained patient with the negative criticism the poem received with a certain prophetic hope that with time, people would be able to take his poem easy. At least that is what is suggested by what he told a *Paris Review* interviewer many years after the publication of the poem, in 1959:

> In *The Waste Land*, I wasn’t even bothering whether I understood what I was saying. These things, however, become easier to people with time. You get used to having *The Waste Land*, or *Ulysses*, about.⁵

Thus, almost three decades after the publication of *The Waste Land*, Eliot could talk about not ‘even bothering’ about understanding the poem. Much before that, however, he was not disposed to welcome criticism that saw the poem as a comment on an entire generation’s feelings. Referring to I.
A. Richard's comment quoted earlier, which tried to describe *The Waste Land* as a poem concerned with the despair and the disillusionment of an entire generation, he said in 1931 that to him, such an assessment was 'nonsense':

> I dislike the word 'generation'...When I wrote a poem called *The Waste Land* some of the more approving critics said I had expressed the 'disillusionment of a generation', which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention.⁶

This does not, of course, help us in trying to understand his intention or in dealing with *The Waste Land*, and few critics would agree that the poem did not in any way reflect the consciousness of its age. In fact, Eliot's comment may very well be used as an example in an argument for the case that a poet need not necessarily be the best judge of his poems. Eliot's words do, however, fulfil one purpose quite well: they serve as a warning against reading *The Waste Land* only as a document of its age. Eliot's comment acts as an antidote against a tendency among some readers to launch into an analysis of the poem based solely on the opinion of an important critic like Richards. This is not to suggest that Richards was wrong. What he says about *The Waste Land* correctly focuses on one important aspect of the poem: its social dimension; only he seems to be mistaken in entirely ignoring the other important dimension: the personal.
Something Eliot said in 1956 can help us in this discussion although what he said was not about *The Waste Land* in particular, but about the appreciation of poetry in general:

...as for the meaning of the poem as a whole, it is not exhausted by any explanation, for the meaning is what the poem means to different sensitive readers.\(^7\)

This is in sharp contrast with Eliot's early reaction against readers who read *The Waste Land* as a document of its generation. Here he shows the highest kind of respect for 'sensitive readers', asserting that to different readers the poem legitimately meant different things while in his earlier comment he had quickly reduced at least one kind of reading as 'nonsense'. Here, he seems to recognize the importance and the independence of the reader. Had he used a similar yardstick to measure I. A. Richard’s comment as well, it would have been impossible for him to talk knowingly of his readers’ 'illusion of being disillusioned'. As we have noted, his respectful comment on readers was made in 1956, long after he had published his last poetic masterpiece, *Four Quartets*. By then he was able to revise his notion about the reader's autonomy perhaps because it was then long enough for not just readers but the poet himself to get used to his poems. He had gone through all the different stages of his poetic activity—the early phase, then the period of the *Ariel Poems* and *Ash Wednesday*, and lastly, *Four Quartets*. He had outgrown the style of *The Waste Land* by then.
In this chapter, we have already had occasion to refer to the poet’s comments about *The Waste Land* in a *Paris Review* interview. In that same very interesting interview, the interviewer reminded Eliot about his denying that *The Waste Land* expressed ‘the disillusionment of a generation’. Then he said that to F. R. Leavis, the poem exhibited no progression, while more recent critics found it Christian. He wanted to know if that—probably meaning the last element—was Eliot’s intention. The poet’s answer is worthy of being quoted in full:

No, it wasn’t part of my conscious intention. I think that in ‘Thoughts after Lambeth’ I was speaking of intentions more in a negative than in a positive sense, to say what was not my intention. I wonder what an ‘intention’ means! One wants to get something off one’s chest. One doesn’t know quite what it is that one wants to get off the chest until one’s got it off. But I could not apply the word ‘intention’ positively to any of my poems. Or to any poem.  

Right in the beginning of this quoted passage, Eliot’s emphasis is on the word ‘conscious’ when referring to his intentions. He seems to suggest that to have a conscious intention to translate into poetry is not enough for a poet. He would not use the word ‘intention’ positively to any poem, not just his poems or *The Waste Land*. This, of course, would lead us into a theoretical debate as to whether conscious intentions can never be positively applied to poems. While such a debate is not what we wish to
enter into here, it seems necessary to recognize Eliot's penetration into the psychology of poetic activity. One cannot but agree that just as a poem like *The Waste Land* cannot be reduced to a paraphrase, similarly certain conscious intentions neatly 'translated' into poetry can hardly be considered seriously as poetry. Eliot's comment is charged with far too complex thought to facilitate any easy summary of his poems. Again, the complexity of the process of poetic creation suggested here naturally point to the complexity of the finished product.

Still, at the risk of simplifying things to some extent, it is possible to read *The Waste Land* as a poem through which two parallel themes run: one, the arid spiritual condition of modern civilization and two, frustration and despair in personal relationships. It is true that the poem refuses to be limited in this manner, but it is a valid and to us useful method of reading the poem. So our reading of the poem sees the above mentioned themes running through the poem in such a manner that is integral to the style of the poem. It is a style characterized by something like chaos, but the chaos is only apparent. Further, the poem enacts a deep yearning for spiritual succour, both in terms of society in general and in terms of personal experience. Spiritual starvation and yearning go together here, and this becomes the most important aspect of the poem for our study. *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men* are here considered as the fullest expression of the sceptic mood that pervades the early poems of Eliot, and the despair expressed in these two poems are charged with a yearning for spiritual
regeneration. These two poems differ from the *Ariel Poems* and *Ash Wednesday* in being more concerned with the consciousness of the difficulty of spiritual rejuvenation rather than regeneration itself which becomes the central concern in the later poems.

It is important to note, however, that although we can discern the two themes mentioned above in *The Waste Land* and although the two poems under discussion here look forward to spiritual regeneration, these poems cannot be thought of as creations with pre-determined structures. It is not possible to impose any well-defined structure on these poems. Thus, confident critical analysis and explanation become, in a way, impossible.

What C. K. Stead says about Eliot's early poems may be considered here:

However inadequate to their subjects, the following statements seem to me, in their limited way, true statements: 'Easter 1916' dramatizes a complex, but single, view of a political event. Pope's 'Essay on Man' expresses certain ideas about the human condition. Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' dramatizes the insistent voice of the lover aware of mortality: many of Spencer's poems tell stories. But it seems to me false to say that 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' dramatizes the voice of the middle-aged would-be suitor; just as it seems false to say that there is a 'statement of belief' in 'The Waste Land'.

Here, Stead seems to make a distinction between the two mentioned poems of Eliot and the other poems by other poets. While he is rightly,
emphasizing the difficulty of reducing Eliot’s poems to simplistic explanations, at the same time he seems to be airing his views in a somewhat inaccurate manner. It is true that *The Waste Land* cannot be reduced to a statement of belief, but it would be wrong to assert that the poem has nothing to do with belief. As we have said in the preceding chapter, in this work we are not trying to extract a list of beliefs and doubts held by the poet, but our effort is to see how certain sceptic moods or yearning for and occasional glimpses of belief seem to pervade the poetry. These states of consciousness are enacted through a poetic technique that involves such things as the use of myth, the presence of many voices, and the complex use of allusions. This method, again, has attracted sharply different reactions from critics. Considering *The Waste Land* ‘the end product of successive movements against abstractable poetic discourse’ and ‘the justification of the Symbolist enterprise’, C. K. Stead thinks it represents ‘the perfection of a method’\(^{10}\) Not all critics, however, found much to praise the method of *The Waste Land*. Even sixteen years after the poem was published, Herbert Palmer could say:

> The poem is a waste land in its methods, in the way it says and does things, even more than in what it actually pretends to say— which is perhaps, that western civilization is coming to an end.\(^{11}\)

Of course, this suggests how Palmer himself had approached the poem: he was looking for what the poem said and was also expecting it to say it in a certain manner. It is interesting to note what Palmer said he found in *The
Waste Land. Since this is exactly how many readers reacted against the poem, we think it worthwhile—in trying to understand their point of view—to quote Palmer's long list of his findings:

(a) Bad grammar of both sense and syntax. (b) Absurd punctuation—which very often amounted to no punctuation at all. (c) Things upside down. (d) Disconnecte asserts, disconnected landscapes of thought, feeling, and occular scenery. (e) The life of a man asleep, particularly of one suffering from a nightmare, rather than the life of one actively conscious. (f) An enormous number of tags, phrases, sentences, and echoes from other poets. (Though Mr. Eliot has confessed to most of these in supplementary notes). (h) The queerest crudities of construction. (i) In at least two instances excessive coarseness of content. (j) An unpoetically assertive, if not pretentious, use of French and German. (k) Too many borrowed backgrounds; nearly as many as in all Milton's works put together.12

This list of judgments on The Waste Land prove that readers who are accustomed to poetry with a discernible tale or thought content, and composed in conformation to certain rules of language and conventions of poetic composition can react violently against such a poem. The Waste Land cannot be said to embody a clearly discernible tale or thought content with a precise beginning, middle and an end; nor does it present just one authoritative poetic persona. The thought needs to be discerned in a
seemingly chaotic collage of images projected through many voices echoing many 'tales': tales from myths, literary texts, personal experience. The mixture is a cocktail strong enough to confuse and bewilder readers like Palmer, but at the same time potent enough to fascinate others, not by the mere collection of allusions, but by the imaginative synthesis involved, and, to use a rather clichéd phrase, by its contemporary relevance.

In this context, it is worthwhile to briefly look at the way some young people in the 1920s and 1930s found *The Waste Land* so exciting. Norman Nicholson first encountered T. S. Eliot's poetry—including *The Waste Land*—in 1934, when he was twenty. He suddenly felt the difference between Eliot's poems, including *The Waste Land*, and other poems of poets he had read before:

...not until then had I any conception of the peculiar shock and sensation of poetry, of the feel of the growth and greatness of words. I had been like a man casually plucking handfuls of grass and not looking what he was doing; now, by accident, I had got hold of a nettle and I looked.13

Nicholson feels that such personal reactions—although generally not considered perceptive enough—'represent the reactions of a whole generation readers'. The enthusiasm with which readers like Nicholson greeted *The Waste Land* was due to a variety of reasons, of which two important ones—the special use of language and the reflection of contemporary society with its hopes and frustrations—are touched upon by
Nicholson in the comments that are quoted below. We are once again reminded of I. A. Richards who talked about The Waste Land as a poem reflecting the plight of an entire generation. Nicholson says that readers like him were impressed by Eliot’s use of language:

Immense new possibilities were opened, and the dictionary became a box of fireworks, every one of them ready to flame and sparkle when it was touched off.\(^{14}\)

However, this special use of language was not the only characteristic of Eliot’s poetry that impressed readers. People saw how their own age had become the focus of his poetry:

The corrupt, calamitous, comic age, which so many were trying to explain in terms of economics, biology, anthropology, psycho-analysis, or even British Israelitism, was suddenly seen to have a significance in itself. The modern world came into focus for the first time.\(^{15}\)

Readers who were themselves trying to understand the modern age suddenly saw it become centre-stage in poems like The Waste Land. The poem did not answer the people’s perplexities about their age, but it certainly made them more acutely aware of the peculiarities of their age. Bonamy Dobrée also felt that in the early poems of Eliot, there was ‘a poet who meant something in terms of today.’\(^{16}\) The great success of Eliot’s early poems and The Waste Land owes a lot to this quality in them which
made Eliot's contemporaries intensely aware about the problems and peculiarities of their own age. Eliot did not have a prescription for the ills of his age, and his personal religious beliefs had not yet started acquiring importance in his poetry, but the way he diagnosed the symptoms of the times struck people as unique.

The focus on the modern world that Norman Nicholson found exciting was the main reason for the enduring attraction of Eliot's poetry for a generation of younger poets. Stephen Spender, for instance, recalled how *The Waste Land*—along with *Ulysses*—showed him 'that modern life could be material for art, and that the poet, instead of having to set himself apart from his time, could create out of an acceptance of it.' The fascination of many of Eliot's younger followers was, however, later to change into disapproval and indignation when he converted to Anglo-Catholicism and displayed a certain hardening of his religious beliefs. We shall have occasion to discuss this later. In any case, it cannot be denied that Eliot's poetic technique as represented by *The Waste Land* was quickly recognized as new and worthy of being followed by younger poets.

Early readers who found an expression of their own age in *The Waste Land* were responding to Eliot's poetry based on what he had offered up to then. Critics writing years after the publication of *Four Quartets* could discern the religious dimension of not just the later poem but even *The Waste Land*. Thus, M. L. Rosenthal wrote:
The Waste Land can, and in a sense should, be read as a Christian sermon in disguise, and Four Quartets as open religious contemplation. Yet neither work is finally a sermon or devotion. Each explores a relationship between a speaker and his religious awareness poetically, in ways that create something more malleable than dogmatic doctrine. The result is a shifting design worked out of psychological ambiguities such as must engage the modern mind when it confronts issues of belief and morality.

Rosenthal’s comment touches on issues central to our discussion. He clearly recognizes the religious dimension of The Waste Land (as also of Four Quartets) but is quick to point out that the poetic technique of Eliot ultimately creates ‘something more malleable than religious doctrine’. We would rather say that The Waste Land, despite its engagement with religious belief, is so complex and multi-faceted in its entirety, that it cannot be described in terms of a religious doctrine at all, however malleable. The poem is distinguished by both being and not being so many things: it can be treated as a poetic expression of certain beliefs, but it is not merely a conglomeration of some beliefs in poetic garb; it is partially an expression of some of Eliot’s lived experience, but at the same time, it embodies attempts to get beyond personal experience; it is a comment on the condition of its age, but it is not possible to express that comment in simple moralistic terms.
Rosenthal's reading of *The Waste Land* has its own relevance, and it is not our intention to find fault with his interpretation. Here our purpose is only to point out the danger involved in reducing *The Waste Land* to any one kind of interpretation. Rosenthal's comment happens to be of use to us because it shows how difficult it can be not to come to a reductionist conclusion about the poem. Even after being guarded against offering a single, straight-forward explanation, Rosenthal can be exposed to criticism which sees his analysis as still not flexible enough. That is what we tried to show in briefly discussing his comment.

It is not that our discussion here will undo the wrongs committed in criticizing *The Waste Land*, and set the record straight. We would rather suggest that all explanations are likely to be riddled with contradictions, gaps or inaccuracies. We are not so much trying to argue for one right interpretation of the poem as to suggest caution in standing for any one kind of reading. Since our discussion is mainly in terms of scepticism and belief, it is all the more important to follow what we have suggested here.

A host of 'characters' and a babble of voices create such an atmosphere in *The Waste Land* that it becomes impossible to arrive at any final conclusion about to the poet's beliefs. It is possible to suggest, however, that *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men* mark a point in Eliot's poetic career when he achieves maturity in his early style and is straining to change into a new method. This style saw him preoccupied with sceptic, cynic attitudes, and it found its fullest expression in the two poems under discussion here.
While attempting to consider *The Waste Land*—along with *The Hollow Men*—to be an expression of scepticism and yearning for belief in regard to personal and social life, it is important not to forget the fragmentariness of the poem. We can legitimately find an expression of scepticism and a certain strenuous striving for belief in these poems, but it is partly because we choose to consider such a reading as valid and interesting. In reading *The Waste Land* in this manner, we are conscious of not reading it, at least at present, in other possible ways. A large number of possibilities are thrown up by the fragmentary nature of the poem. Generations of perceptive readers have, of course, noted this feature of *The Waste Land*. To quote just one of them:

“The Waste Land” is also a structure of fragments. Like so much other twentieth-century art “The Waste Land” works by the abrupt juxtaposition, without connections, of jagged pieces from diverse contexts. The meaning emerges from the class of adjacent images or from a line of action which the reader creates for himself.”

The line of action the reader creates for himself may, of course, differ. Our trying to limit the discussion here to the issue of scepticism and belief is simply because that happens to be the thrust area of this research work, but other possibilities keep surfacing, which cannot be looked into here.

With this cautious preface to our own reading, we would like to touch upon a few elements of the poem that seem important in the context of our discussion.
The epigraph to *The Waste Land* is from Petronius. It reads, translated:

For once I saw with my very own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae
hanging in a cage, and the boys said to her, “Sibyl, what do you
want?” She answered, “I want to die.”

This has the effect of acquainting us with the theme of death-in-life, one of the key issues that the poem explores. The old and withered Sibyl’s death-in-life existence, and her desire to end it, becomes a symbol for despair—both in terms of personal lived experience and in terms of post-war Europe. Later, in Section Three (‘The Fire Sermon’), Tiresias reminds us of the Sibyl again. Eliot’s notes calls Tiresias ‘the most important personage in the poem’ and asserts that what Tiresias sees is, in fact, the substance of the poem. Although the notes are not taken so seriously now, they did spark a lot of explicatory activity among scholars like Grover Smith who took Eliot’s words very seriously, and sometimes explained things rather too glibly or stretched things too far. Our interest in Tiresias and the Sibyl, however, is related to the fact that they can both be seen as very much like at least one earlier ‘character’—Gerontion—and later figures like the Magus in *Journey of the Magi*, Simeon in *A Song for Simeon* and Pericles in *Marina*. Gerontion is an old man, ‘a dull head among windy spaces’ With his dry, desiccated existence, his closeness to the withered Sibyl and Tiresias is obvious. For them, life holds no promises, no hopes. They may be seen as symbols of tepid, luke-warm existence or life utterly empty of
faith. The Magus and Simeon, on the other hand, are old men for whom death itself will be the messenger of hope, of eternal life or salvation. The experience of Pericles, too, may be treated as the tremendously joyful experience of attaining powerful religious faith, of resurrection. The contrast between these two groups of figures—Gerontion, Sibyl and Tiresias on one hand and the Magus, Simeon and Pericles on the other—point to a change in Eliot's concerns. In Gerontion and The Waste Land he is dealing with unregenerate life while in the Ariel Poems he is dealing with life charged with faith.

When, towards the end of "Burial of the Dead", Eliot juxtaposes contemporary London with Dante's hell, he may be said to have made an explicitly Christian message:

Unreal City.
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn.
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many.
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled.
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

(The Waste Land)

The hopeless condition of the two groups of souls alluded to here can be understood as the condition of those without the benefit of true faith. The poem as a whole, however, cannot be said to carry an exclusively Christian message because—among other things—it also contains important
references to Buddhism in the third section (‘The Fire Sermon’) and
Hinduism in the last section (‘What the Thunder Said’) Readers have
sometimes been over-zealous in emphasizing one particular religious
element in the poem—Christian, Buddhist or Hindu—but that seems to go
counter to the nature of the poem, which does not permit a final verdict in
favour of any one side. However that is, twentieth-century society’s lack of
interest in religious or spiritual matters is an important issue in both The
Waste Land and The Hollow Men. In an interview with T. S. Eliot in 1958,
Leslie Paul spoke about Eliot’s concern with the spiritual barrenness of
modern civilization. Leslie Paul wanted to know from him, as ‘the poet of
The Waste Land’, his opinion on the ‘process of spiritual drying up’
witnessed in modern society. Eliot’s answer points towards his belief in
human beings’ absolute need for religion. It is difficult not to see the
reflection of this belief in the two poems under discussion in this chapter.
He said, among other things:

I think that the end of a purely materialistic civilization with all its
technical achievements and its mass amusements is—if, of
course, there’s no actual destruction by explosives—simply
boredom. A people without religion will in the end find that it has
nothing to live for.25

This reminds one of the way the world ends in The Hollow Men, ‘Not with
a bang but a whimper’; and of course, ‘the hollow men’, ‘the stuffed men’
of the poem are human beings in a death-in-life existence, characterized by
utter spiritual emptiness. *The Waste Land*, too, enacts such boredom which can be seen as the result of life entirely devoid of religion or of anything to add significance:

‘What shall I do now? What shall I do?
I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?
What shall we ever do?

(*The Waste Land*)

A sense of catastrophe and spiritual doom seems to have pervaded many literary works of the early decades of the twentieth century. George Watson recognized this when he said:

Wanted or not, catastrophe is the master-myth of two literary generations, from D. H. Lawrence’s *Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1920), W. B. Yeats’s ‘Second Coming’ (1920) and, two years later, Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Eliot’s *The Waste Land.*

Watson argues that this sense of an impending catastrophe was a myth. Western civilization has survived the worst fears of its prophets of doom. For most sensitive people in that period of time, however, the sense of doom that blighted their society was very much real. Stephen Spender recalls what Eliot had told him:

Eliot once told me that *The Waste Land* could not have been written at any moment except when it was written—a remark
which, while biographically true in regard to his own life, is also true of the poem's time in European history after World War I. The sense that Western civilization was in a state which was the realization of historic doom lasted from 1920 to 1926. Spender's words also echo our concern with the personal and social aspects of *The Waste Land*: that the sense of despair conveyed by the poem cannot possibly be seen in isolation, that it seems inexorably intertwined—and in difficult and subtle ways—with the lived experience of the poet and the state of his society. The 'historic doom' that Spender talks about and the sense of fear and hopelessness that inevitably go with it pervade *The Waste Land*, and it is strikingly concentrated in lines such as:

What is that sound high in the air
Murmur of maternal lamentation
Who are those hooded hordes swarming
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
Ringed by the flat horizon only

(*The Waste Land*)

That loss of faith that to Eliot, blights modern society, finds expression together with the expression of cataclysmic events that wreck western society:

And upside down in air were towers
Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours
And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells.

(The Waste Land)

In an interesting essay in 1979, Eleanor Cook argues that The Waste Land shows T. S. Eliot’s awareness of his age in his apparent criticism of post-First World War peace in Europe as not real peace, but ‘Carthaginian peace’. The term ‘Carthaginian peace’ was used by John Maynard Keynes whose The Economic Consequences of the Peace was published in December, 1919. Cook argues that as a Lloyds Bank employee engaged in legal issues concerning the Peace Document, T. S. Eliot must have read Keynes’ bestselling book. The term ‘Carthaginian peace’, referring to the Punic wars (between the Romans and the Carthaginians) implies a peace settlement so punitive as to destroy the enemy completely, but it is a peace ‘that slowly but surely deflects back upon the victor.’ Cooks seems to be right in pointing out Eliot’s awareness of the terrible consequences of a Carthaginian peace. It seems that besides being aware of the futility of the efforts of a post-war Europe to achieve peace and order, Eliot was disposed to yearn for a different order of things:

What is this city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling tower
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal        (The Waste Land)
Together with the sense of destruction and doom conveyed by such lines is perhaps the suggestion that no temporal city endures. Hence, a yearning for a different order of things, for the city of God, for religion.

The actual effect of the poem is, of course, such as to never allow a totally religious interpretation, not even in the apparently explicit message of the thunder in ‘What the Thunder Said’. It seems excessively reductionist, for instance, to suggest that in The Waste Land the poet ultimately projects the upanishadic injunction as the panacea for the ills that, according to him, afflict modern individuals and their society. After all, the message of the thunder as it is in the Brihadaranyak Upanishad gets transformed in Eliot’s hands because of its contextual position in the poem—which widens the spectrum of possible meaning—and also because the Sanskrit words in the poem do not mean exactly what they meant in the Upanishad. The triple-injunction of Prajapati Brahma to the gods, human beings and demons consisted in the words damyata, datta, dayadhvam.

The gods, known for their love of luxury and pleasures were asked to exercise self-control (damyata). In ‘What the Thunder Said’ damyata comes last, and it doesn’t quite mean self-control, but control. The first in Eliot’s list is datta: give, Prajapati’s second command. In the Upanishad, men, with their natural covetousness and acquisitiveness, are urged to exercise charity. Eliot’s use of the word is clearly different:

Datta: what have we given?

My friend, blood shaking my heart
The awful daring of a moment's surrender

(The Waste Land)

These lines have the effect of reminding us of a recurrent theme in Eliot—right through *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, *Portrait of a Lady*, *Gerontion*—the theme of desire for experience and the fear of surrendering to it. Eliot seems to be more interested in one’s giving oneself to experience rather than the act of giving, as charity. The later poetry also has echoes of this theme:

...their fear of possession,

of belonging to another, or to others, or to God. (East Coker)

The purpose of this somewhat extended discussion is to suggest that it is incorrect to assert, as is done sometimes, that Eliot’s use of the *Brihadaranyak Upanishad* was such as to impart an upanishadic colour to *The Waste Land*. The last injunction of Prajapati Brahma, *dayadhvam* is second in Eliot’s list and again, it does not seem to suggest what it did in the Upanishad:

Dayadhvam: I have heard the key

Turn in the door once and turn once only

We think of the key, each in his prison

Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison

Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours

Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus  (The Waste Land)
The references to Coriolanus and Ugolino della Gheradesca that these lines evoke seem to point towards the poem's concern with the terrible consequences of egocentricism, of locking oneself up in the prison of one's ego. The upanishadic injunction—to the _asurs_, with their supposed natural cruelty—is to be compassionate.

Just as it is impossible to reduce the message of _The Waste Land_ in upanishadic terms, similarly, no one kind of ultimate suggestion is possible: be it Christian, Buddhist or Hindu. One device that seems to have been employed for this purpose is simply to project more than one important communication at the same place. Referring to the echoes from St. Augustine and the Buddha in

_To Carthage then I came_

_Burning burning burning burning_

_O Lord Thou pluckest me out_

_O Lord Thou pluckest burning_

_(The Waste Land)_

Eliot suggests that 'The collocation of these two representatives of eastern and western asceticism, as the culmination of this part of the poem, is not an accident.' The important thing to observe in our discussion is the contrast between the eastern and western schools of asceticism. Buddha's stress is on self-control, and St. Augustine's on self-surrender. According to the Buddha, the fires of passion must be controlled by exercising the will,
hence the emphasis on one's own effort. St. Augustine, on the other hand, does not rely on his own will or effort, but chooses to surrender his will completely to God. Eliot does not seem to specially highlight or favour any one of these two contrasting methods. Such mixing up of messages is taking place in *The Waste Land* all the time, not merely at the end of the poem where the thickly sprinkled quotes and echoes make the method too obvious.

On first sight, *The Hollow Men* may seem to differ from *The Waste Land* in not being ostensibly connected with comments on contemporary society or civilization, but on closer scrutiny, this difference does not seem to be very important, or, in a way the difference seems to disappear: if *The Waste Land* is full of comments on contemporary western civilization, *The Hollow Men* is a penetrating vision into the soul of contemporary western man. The waste land is populated by hollow men. Hollow men have made the waste land possible. In fact, the two poems can very well be studied together, as complimentary pieces. Readers have also recognized the structural similarities between the two poems. It has been pointed out, for example, that although *The Hollow Men* 'is not a mere appendage to *The Waste Land*, it may most profitably be read as an extension of the same design of quest and failure'.\(^{31}\) The quest that ends in failure in these poems is shown to achieve some success in the poems that follow: the *Ariel Poems* and *Ash Wednesday*. The quest itself can be understood in terms of a spiritual exercise, an attempt at achieving faith and assurance. The two
poems under discussion in this chapter deal with the failure of modern man’s quest for assurance, his spiritual deprivation

Commentators like Grover Smith and B. C. Southam have discussed how Eliot’s poem *The Hollow Men* is full of allusions to central issues in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Dante’s *Divinia Commedia*, and the Gunpowder Plot. It is useful to keep such things in mind in reading the poem, but we do not wish to go into explicatory details here. It seems necessary, however, to note in this discussion, something that Eliot himself wrote five years after the publication of *The Hollow Men*, in his essay ‘Baudelaire’:

> So far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good; so far as we do evil or good, we are human; and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than do nothing: at least, we exist. **52**

These words can serve as the key to our reading of *The Hollow Men*. The spiritual emptiness that the hollow men represent consists in the inability to do anything, even evil. In Eliot’s thinking, to lose even the capacity to be damned is to meet the worst fate possible to human beings. This is essentially Christian theological thinking involving the eternal opposites, good and evil. Eliot seems to acknowledge that it is possible to live outside the theological universe of good and evil, but to do so is to be damned in the worst possible manner. The hollow men are damned in that manner. They seek to be remembered—
not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men

(The Hollow Men)

And of course, they remind us of the spiritually dry atmosphere of *The Waste Land* where

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many.

(The Waste Land)

What Eliot poetically expressed in such lines and what he said in the quoted portion of his essay on Baudelaire actually echo one of his deepest concerns both in his art and his life. It is possible to argue, for instance, that Eliot's own overwhelming concern to escape the fate of the emotionally tepid and spiritually dry Prufrock or Gerontion or the crowd that ‘flowed over London Bridge’ or the hollow men made him take the plunge into institutionalized faith when he entered the Anglo-Catholic Church in 1927 and subsequently wrote poetry concerned with religious conversion and grace, but that is properly our subject in the next chapter. Of course, this must have partly been because of Eliot's temperamental peculiarity. The need to escape the fate of the hollow men and to attain some assurance of faith was of such importance to Eliot because of his natural thirst for
spirituality, and every human being certainly does not feel so strongly about the need to achieve faith.

One important thing to note about *The Hollow Men* is that it does not simply enact bottomless despair, but involves an essentially Christian notion of dealing with despair. Even in their gloomiest moment of hopelessness, the hollow men can turn towards the multifold rose, the rose symbolic of everlasting Divine Love, the rose that would later appear at the end of the most explicitly and seriously Christian of Eliot’s poems, *Four Quartets*. Barbara Seward makes an interesting comment on this issue:

*The Hollow Men* (1925), like the preceding poems, emphasizes sterility. Here, however, for the first time Eliot’s themes of emotional failure and fear of rebirth are given Christian overtones, and the flower imagery linked with these themes appropriately becomes the Christian rose. Although it appears only once in the poem, the rose is a symbol of central importance, as it is the poem’s final expression of spiritual redemption...

Thus the transition from this poem to *Ash Wednesday* and the *Ariel Poems* is not at all abrupt, but seems like a natural step in the progress of the poet. It is interesting to note that the despair which is enacted in *The Hollow Men* is the deepest despair possible because of its Christian suggestions; but whatever hope is made possible is also through the Christian suggestions.
The next few poems composed by Eliot explicitly deal with the Christian hope of receiving grace.

Before closing this chapter, however, we would like to once again refer to Stephen Spender’s observation—quoted earlier—about Eliot’s telling him that ‘The Waste Land could not have been written at any moment except when it was written’. One important fact to be considered in this context is Eliot’s experience as an extension lecturer during 1916-1919. Ronald Schuchard has argued convincingly that Eliot’s syllabuses for these courses ‘show how thorough was Eliot’s grounding in French and English literature, literary criticism, social and intellectual currents moral and philosophical attitudes, political and economic theories as he began to formulate his own critical position’.34 Schuchard’s long and exhaustive account of the syllabuses of Eliot’s extension lecturing for both Oxford and the University of London prove beyond a doubt Eliot’s serious engagement with literary-cultural issues that are voiced in The Waste Land. His Harvard years had already provided him with a wide spectrum of knowledge on different areas, and the necessities of extension lecturing further propelled him to study a wide range of literary and cultural issues with renewed vigour. Schuchard’s account gives us some idea of the earnestness with which Eliot did his work. The rich allusiveness of The Waste Land can, therefore, be regarded as at least partially stemming from the poet’s engagement with the courses he was teaching. His reading, preparations and lectures constituted an experience that got transformed into poetry—at
least partially. After all, it was Eliot who wrote in 1919—again close to the composition of *The Waste Land*—that:

> The poet’s mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together. 35

By the time he finished *The Waste Land*, however, Eliot was already straining for change. On 15 November, 1922, he wrote:

> As for *The Waste Land*, that is a thing of the past so far as I am concerned and I am now feeling toward a new form and style 36

While *The Hollow Men* is his next poem, it seems unlikely that it is wholly the product of his ‘feeling toward a new form and style’, because it does not suggest a radical departure from the style of *The Waste Land*. It has affinities with the earlier poem in terms of content, too. The new form and style actually produce the *Ariel Poems* and *Ash Wednesday*, which become the subjects of our concern in the next chapter. If Eliot plunged to the abyss of despair in *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*, that despair is not without elements of religious belief, and religion is always the door to hope. Of course, religious hope is not concerned with the mundane reality of worldly life—although that is the only reality to unbelievers—but with saving one’s soul from damnation. In the two poems discussed in this chapter, particularly *The Hollow Men*, damnation is synonymous with
inability to attain faith, and the striving for religious grace becomes the primary concern of the poems of the next phase. Up to now, Eliot was obsessed with the emptiness of modern life, and in the next phase of his poetic activity 'Christianity offered him a resolution for his feelings about the emptiness of life, by stressing the greater significance of the afterlife' \(^{37}\)
NOTES


24. Eliot’s notes to the poem direct us to *Inferno* III, 55-57 and *Inferno* IV-25-27, which depict the bottomless despair of two groups of people: those who neither pleased God, nor were his enemies; and those who had lived and died unbaptised, before the coming of Christ.


34. Schuchard, Ronald. ‘T. S. Eliot as an Extension Lecturer, 1916-1919’. *The Review of English Studies*. Vol.25. No.98. 163-173; No.99. 292-304. Schuchard also says that even after the lectures were over, after 1920, Eliot continued to read and explore the areas covered by the lectures, and that these issues were covered by many of his later essays. His formulations on the Elizabethan dramatists and poets can also be traced to his concerns with Elizabethan literature in these lectures. Schuchard believes that studying about Eliot’s engagements with the wide variety of topics for extension
lecturing can enlarge our understanding of 'one of the most synthesizing minds of the twentieth century.'

