CHAPTER FOUR

GLIMPSES OF GRACE: THE ARIEL POEMS AND ASH WEDNESDAY

T. S. Eliot was received into the Church of England on June 29, 1927 in a simple ceremony, 'performed in great secrecy',¹ and was confirmed the next day. The veil of secrecy was blown off, rather dramatically, the next year in the preface to a collection of his essays where he defined his own position:

The general point of view may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion.²

It seems much more than coincidental that the poems Eliot wrote in the year of his conversion and the years that followed immediately, all deal with such things as penitence, special religious grace, and an intense, almost painful, yearning for the peace that comes of faith. Just as conversion implies turning—turning away from the world and towards God—his post-conversion poetry shows signs of a turning away from the earlier style epitomized by The Waste Land towards a new mode of expression. Before the six sections of Ash Wednesday were published together in 1930, the second section had appeared in the Saturday Review of Literature, December 1927, under the title ‘Salutation’, the first section in Commerce, Spring, 1928, and the third section in Commerce, Autumn,
1929. The fourth and the fifth sections were added to complete the sequence. Of the Ariel Poems, Journey of the Magi was published in 1927, A Song for Simeon in 1928, Animula in 1929, and Marina, in 1930. Only one of the Ariel Poems, The Cultivation of Christmas Trees, was published as late as 1954 and it seems a rather laboured work compared to the other, earlier Ariel Poems which are characterized by poetic intensity. The fact that this 1954 poem does not deal with the themes of religious grace and yearning for faith with quite the same intensity as the earlier Ariel Poems and Ash Wednesday, is itself a pointer to the fact that Eliot’s poetic creations from 1927 to 1930 do constitute an important common factor. By the time he came to write The Cultivation of Christmas Trees his religious preoccupations were settled, and he was merely trying to write as a good Christian. This poem has one single reference to conversion when it talks about

...the piety of the convert

Which may be tainted with a self-conceit

Displeasing to God and disrespectful to the children

(The Cultivation of Christmas Trees)

but this has more to do with smug piety than with any intense personal experience of conversion or of the tension in one’s mind while making the decision to be converted.

The time of writing the Ariel Poems and Ash Wednesday was the period when Eliot was trying to shake off the young-unconventional-rebel
image that seemed to cling to the creator of The *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *The Waste Land*. His preoccupations with religious and spiritual matters went together with his attempt to break new ground in poetry—he was striving to translate his religious emotions into a new kind of poetry.

Hoxie Neale Fairchild has noted, in his *Religious Trends in English Poetry* that turning to religion has been a fairly common practice among poets of the twentieth century:

In the poetry of our period, the dry and scattered bones of Christianity have shown unexpected signs of life. Nothing like "an exceeding great army" has emerged. Secularism remains hugely predominant among intellectuals and men of letters. Yet a surprisingly large number of poets write as avowed adherents of the historic faith.⁴

Fairchild in fact traces a steady stream of Christian verse from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Understood in this context, poems like *Ash Wednesday* and the *Ariel Poems*, with their explicitly religious concerns, are not aberrations or exceptions. In a largely secular age, they nevertheless express the doubts of people like Eliot that secularism has its own limitations. His quest for faith and assurance is essentially the quest of his age, although his ultimate point of arrival—Anglo-Catholicism—may not suit everyone. This representative sense of Eliot's efforts is what is in J. B. Priestley's mind when he says of Eliot that 'His has been one of the
major voices of the age, proclaiming its disgust and despair, its guilt and Angst, its struggle to find a faith.\textsuperscript{5}

It is interesting to note that Eliot’s poems composed even before the \textit{Ariel Poems} and \textit{Ash Wednesday} are charged with certain religious overtones. In the early poems\textsuperscript{6}, sometimes certain words and phrases seem to directly suggest a spiritual dimension, as in—

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

\textit{(Preludes, III)}

or in—

\textit{The word within a word, unable to speak a word,
Swaddled with darkness. In the juvescence of the year
Came Christ the tiger}

\textit{(Gerontion)}

At other times, the spiritual overtones are not easily discernible in the early poems, but their very insistent engagement with the ugly and the dirty itself can be read as a kind of rejection of this world and its things, and rejection of the world is the preliminary stage towards the search for and acceptance of a different order of things. We can connect his constant portrayal of imperfect, dirty, offensive human beings (in the early poems) with the
Christian doctrine of the sinfulness of man. This is what ultimately makes him seek solace in religion, in the Church, in something beyond the imperfect individual self. A quick glance at some of the ‘characters’ of Eliot’s poetry up to *The Hollow Men* would reveal the poet’s obsession with the imperfect, the fallible, the fallen in human nature: Prufrock who wishes he were ‘a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across the floors of silent seas’; the lady and her caller in *Portrait of a Lady*, both guilty of self-deceit, several briefly-sketched ‘characters’ with dirty deeds and dirty souls in *Preludes*; the moon and other ‘characters’ in *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*; the housemaids with ‘damp souls’ in *Morning at the Window*; Mr. Apollinax in *Mr. Apollinax*; Gerontion, the ‘dull head among windy places’ and the likes of Mr. Silvero, Madame de Tornquist and Fräulein von Kulp in *Gerontion*, Burbank, Bleistein and particularly Sweeney in other poems, a host of ‘characters’ like Madame Sosostris, King Tereus, Lil, Lil’s friends, ‘the young man carbuncular’ and his paramour the typist in *The Waste Land*, and the hollow men in *The Hollow Men*.

Hoxie Neale Fairchild, in the book mentioned above, quotes from Kristian Smidt’s *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T. S. Eliot*, showing Eliot himself speaking about his choosing ‘the Christian scheme.’ The quotation is worthy of being reproduced in full here for it is one of Eliot’s rare but frank avowals of his religious orientation. Eliot’s words are from a radio talk on Christianity and Communism, printed in *The Listener* on March 16, 1932. He is speaking of his turning to Christianity.
I believe that one of the reasons was that the Christian scheme seemed to me the only one which would work... That was simply the removal of any reason for believing in anything else, the erasure of a prejudice, the arrival at the scepticism which is the preface to conversion... Among other things, the Christian scheme seemed the only possible scheme which found a place for values which I must maintain or perish... the belief, for instance, in holy living and holy dying, in sanctity, chastity, humility, austerity.7

Clearly, these are the words of a deeply religious person, seriously concerned with the health and fate of his soul. These words also suggest that despite Eliot's long acquaintance with other systems of belief such as Hinduism and Buddhism, Christianity alone seemed perfect for him. His use of Buddhism or Hinduism in his poetry actually serves to define his position: he is willing to acknowledge the wisdom contained in these systems of faith, but when it comes to accepting a system of belief as capable of satisfying him in all ways, then it can only be Christianity. His interest in other religions simply cannot be entirely impartial for he looks at them only from the point of view of the Christian.

His poetry from the *Ariel Poems* onwards is a certain assertion of his religious position, although it would not be quite correct to claim that his conversion made a wholly Christian poet of him. It would be more precise to say that the importance Christian belief has always had in his poetry became more explicit in his post-conversion poetry. Meanwhile, the
struggle with his doubts continued in certain ways: thus, the apparent declaration of faith in the *Ariel Poems* is not presented with unsullied joy, but is mixed up with a sense of pain or bewilderment.

The experience of conversion or of attaining faith is presented in ambiguous terms in the poems of this period. By 'conversion' here, we do not mean merely the ritual of baptism, but 'the deliberate turning of the will to God, the personal acceptance of Christ by faith.' Conversion is inseparable from regeneration or rebirth, and *The Bible* asserts that one must be born again to become a Christian:

> Verily, verily I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.⁹

*Journey of the Magi* enacts, among other things, the painful effort of arriving at the point of conversion. The dramatic experience of the Magi's journey can be read as an analogue to the mind's struggle to get rid of its doubts and attain peace through faith. The struggle is a difficult one, just short of ending in despair:

> Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
> And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
> And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
> And the cities hostile and the town unfriendly
> And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
> A hard time we had of it.

*(Journey of the Magi)*
The birth of Jesus is, in a way, painful to the Magi, signalling the death of their old way of life. The interplay of the words birth/Birth and death/Death towards the end of the poem again stresses the ambiguous sense of happiness and pain involved in the death of the Magi's former self and the birth of a new self marked by faith in the nascent Christ:

...were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

(Journey of the Magi)

In A Song for Simeon, too, spiritual rebirth is enacted in ambiguous terms, as a 'birth season of decease'. 'Birth' and 'Death' become entangled in such a way that their precise distinctions have an effect of being blurred:

I am tired with my own life and the lives of those after me,
I am dying in my own death and the deaths of those after me.
Let thy servant depart,
Having seen thy salvation.

(A Song for Simeon)

Marina, the most ecstatic enactment of rebirth that Eliot produced, might, at first sight, seem quite free from the sort of ambiguity referred to above, but it also happens to be the only Ariel Poem with an epigraph, and this
epigraph has the effect of subverting what the poem proper aspires to do

The epigraph—

Quis hic locus, quae regio, quae mundi plaga?

reads, translated,

"What is this place, what country,
What region of the world?"

In Seneca’s *Hercules Furens*, Hercules speaks these words on returning to sanity from a fit of madness in which he killed his wife and children. *Marina* celebrates the awakening of the soul to faith, to a new life, while the epigraph deals with Hercules’ waking to a realization of unimaginable horror. Thus, the two things—the poem and its epigraph—function antithetically.

Our purpose in discussing such details concerning certain elements of ambiguity in the *Ariel Poems* is to suggest that they in fact have the effect of enacting a conflict between scepticism and belief. The struggle involved in attaining faith, the struggle with one’s own doubts, gets beautifully dramatized in the *Ariel Poems*. Thus, this post-conversion phase of Eliot’s poetic activity saw a concentration of interest in spiritual regeneration, but the attainment of belief or illumination is constantly underplayed by a sense of painful struggle, by the creation of deliberate ambiguities. The language-play is designed to discourage simple,
deterministic conclusions. Scepticism and belief are in a state of confrontation here, providing richness to the poems that would not have been there without this engagement between the two opposites.

Two essays that Eliot wrote during the period of composing some sections of *Ash Wednesday* and the *Ariel Poems* provide some clues to his orientation towards a religious understanding of things. While these poems express Eliot's religious preoccupations without any doubt, the essays help to make his position quite clear. In ‘The Humanism of Irving Babbitt’ (1928), he argues that humanism has only been sporadic in history, while Christianity has been continuous and has acted as the pivotal force in shaping European culture. And he asserts his religious choice forcefully:

> For us, religion is Christianity; and Christianity implies, I think, the concept of the Church.¹²

Such a statement, unambiguous and direct, helps in defining Eliot’s position, particularly while considering his use of Buddhist or Hindu elements in his poetry. The use that he makes of concepts from other religions does not in any way undermine his own avowed stand. It can even be argued that he makes use of or refers to other systems of belief only to clearly define his own Christian stand in opposition to these other, alien systems. In fact, his statement that ‘religion is Christianity’ is the language of the Church, the language of the Bishops at Lambeth Conference:
We gladly acknowledge the truths contained and emphasized in the great non-Christian religions and systems, but we are not able to admit the widely accepted conclusion that each such religion and system is that which is best suited to the people who hold it, for each of them is less than the gospel of the unsearchable riches of Christ.\(^1\)

Our contention that Eliot’s assertion here of religion being equivalent to Christianity and the Church’s stand on this issue are essentially the same, is further strengthened when we consider a little more of what he says in ‘The Humanism of Irving Babbitt.’ Towards the end of the essay he says:

Professor Babbitt knows too much; and by that I do not mean merely erudition or information or scholarship. I mean that he knows too many religions and philosophies, has assimilated their spirit too thoroughly (there is probably no one in England or America who understands early Buddhism better than he) to be able to give himself to any. The result is humanism.\(^2\)

In contrast to Babbitt, Eliot has not allowed himself to assimilate the spirit of other religions too thoroughly; he has given himself to one religion, to Christianity. His position here does not seem to be very different from the official position of the Anglican Church. If we allow that these prose reflections and the poetry of the same period have at least some connection between them, then the prayerful and penitential words of the *Ariel Poems* and *Ash Wednesday* may be seen as more than just poetic utterances.
without any other significance. To some extent, at least, they express a certain hardening of Eliot’s attitude in regard to the issue of faith. If Professor Babbitt has assimilated the spirit of many religions and philosophies quite thoroughly, Eliot’s preference for and acceptance of Christianity is active and unambiguous; he has consciously checked himself from fully assimilating the spirit of other religions and philosophies.

Thus, the Christian character of a poem like *Ash Wednesday* is only too explicit. We suspect that this is what puts off many readers with a secular outlook. This is certainly one reason why many readers fail to respond as enthusiastically to *Ash Wednesday* as to *The Waste Land* or other earlier poems. And of course, the very shock of discovering the difference between Eliot’s earlier and later poetry contributes to the prejudice against the later poetry. An admirer of the young-unconventional-rebel Eliot of the early poems who has to suddenly grapple with such things as prayer, penitence and humility the moment he comes to read *Ash Wednesday* may quite naturally develop intolerance for this poetry of Christian virtues. Intolerance is often inherent not only in the religious view of things, but the secular outlook as well. That is what seems to partially colour Edmund Wilson’s thoughts in his otherwise excellent book *Axel’s Castle*. He says:

> We feel in contemporary writers like Eliot a desire to believe in religious revelation, a belief that it would be a good thing to
believe, rather than a genuine belief. The faith of the modern
convert seems to burn only with a low blue flame.\textsuperscript{15}

Apparently, Wilson's complaint here is not about the Christian character of
the poem, but its inability to convey strong and vibrant faith, but his choice
of words, particularly in the second of the quoted sentences, seems to
suggest an animus against believers which he has not revealed plainly.
Besides, when considering the expression of faith in \textit{Ash Wednesday}, one
needs to keep in mind the poem's emphasis on humility. In reading a poem
like \textit{Ash Wednesday} with its strong penitential plea or the \textit{Ariel Poems} with
their focus on spiritual regeneration, it does not seem quite proper to see
Eliot's faith or piety as weak or insipid. We need to question the
presupposition that these poems on Christian issues by a believer must
articulate strong faith; for the focus of the poems is not quite on attained
faith as on the Christian's realization of the paramount importance of
virtues such as humility and self-surrender to achieve true faith and peace.
Thus, the critic's unwillingness to be on the side of the poet in terms of his
beliefs—which is quite alright as such—may occasionally prevent the latter
from seeing the poetry for what it is.

One need not, of course, adhere to the poet's system of beliefs to be
able to appreciate the poetry even when the poetry, as in \textit{Ash Wednesday}, is
explicitly concerned with religion or religious themes. That is what is
suggested by Eliot himself in his essay on Dante in 1929:
You are not called upon to believe what Dante believed, for your belief will not give you a groat's worth more of understanding and appreciation; but you are called upon more and more to understand it. If you can read poetry as poetry, you will 'believe' in Dante's theology exactly as you believe in the physical reality of his journey; that is, you suspend both belief and disbelief.16

What Eliot says here about Dante's poetry very well applies to his own poetry, especially his post-conversion work like *Ash Wednesday*. The important thing is to 'read poetry as poetry', as he says, suspending both belief and disbelief. One must, in other words, be prepared to enter the poet's world without any presuppositions; one must have imaginative sympathy with the poet. Even in reading a poem with an explicit concern with belief, it is one's capacity for appreciating poetry that is needed, and being or not being a believer does not really matter.

In addition to this, in reading a poem like *Ash Wednesday*, the reader needs to acknowledge the powerful impact of the experience of conversion itself. The experience of conversion has to be seen as a life-changing one. Pascal, for whom Eliot has expressed unreserved admiration, said that—

Faith received at baptism is the source of the whole life of Christians and of the converted.17

It is at least important to recognize the experience of conversion as a tremendous one for the poet. Only then does much of *Ash Wednesday* make
sense. Helen Gardner feels that Eliot’s conversion certainly had its impact on the poetry:

The change in Mr. Eliot’s poetry cannot be discussed without reference to the fact that the author of *Ash Wednesday* is a Christian while the author of *The Waste Land* was not. Nobody can underrate the momentousness for any mature person of acceptance of all that membership of the Christian Church entails.¹⁸

Miss Gardner explains, however, that the connections between the change in the poetry and Eliot’s joining the Church are extremely complex. To her, *Ash Wednesday* is characterized by a ‘peculiar poignancy of lyric utterance’¹⁹ and is a highly spontaneous creation. It reads ‘as if it had simply come to the poet.’²⁰ Nevertheless, *Ash Wednesday* is spontaneous only in that it seems like a very smooth dramatic monologue. The thought content is extremely dense, involving tortuous reasoning with one’s own self and all this can be seen as dramatizations of attitudes of belief and doubt.

All this makes a difficult poem of *Ash Wednesday*, so that it becomes rather unwise to discuss the poem in explicatory detail. Its very nature defies easy explication. F. R. Leavis has noted that ‘The poetry of the last phase may lack the charged richness and range of *Gerontion* and *The Waste Land*. But it is, perhaps, still more remarkable by reason of the strange and difficult regions of experience that it explores.’²¹ Leavis has
further noted that 'the poems of Ash Wednesday do not admit of paraphrase.'

It may never be possible, for instance, to decide once and for all what the three leopards mean, but what is important is to understand that 'the poem as a whole represents a stage of spiritual progress, in which the demands of the body are to be transcended.'

In one sense, Ash Wednesday 'is a more personal poem than The Waste Land or The Hollow Men'. The poet and the persona melt into one, and he is primarily concerned with equipping his soul with Christian virtues like humility. The title itself establishes this central concern: Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, a period of forty days of fasting and penitence. The poem can be read as the poet's attempt at emptying his soul of the world and filling it with such things as dispassion and humility which make it fit for receiving religious grace. But it is not a devotional exercise alone. It is more than that:

Between the usual subjects of poetry and "devotional" verse there is a very important field still very unexplained by modern poets—the experience of a man in search of God, and trying to explain to himself his intenser human feelings in terms of the divine goal. I have tried to do something of that in Ash Wednesday.

It is the engagement with vital questions on the human situation that lends Ash Wednesday a universal character. The religious and Dantesque symbols and methods, the echoes from some of the Psalms and other Biblical sources, all represent 'a withdrawal from the outer world and an
exploration of the inner life under the guidance of Christianity\textsuperscript{26}, but at the same time \textit{Ash Wednesday} as a whole succeeds in persuading the reader that the ‘intenser human feelings’ the poet is trying to explain ‘in terms of the divine goal’ constitute some of the reader’s own feelings and questions on human affairs. Thus, \textit{Ash Wednesday} transcends the limits of Christian verse or ‘devotional verse’.

This is so even in the intense prayer that ends the poem. The individual soul’s yearning for union with God can be read as one’s craving for wholeness, for fulfilment through a satisfaction of all questions, through freedom from scepticism. It is, however, a yearning, a longing, and not a realized state that the last lines suggest:

\begin{quote}
Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden,
Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Even among these rocks,
Our peace in his will
And even among these rocks
Sister, mother
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
And let my cry come unto Thee. \textit{(Ash Wednesday)}
\end{quote}
This plea for intercession, this prayer for divine help springs from dissatisfaction with the affairs of this world. In other words, scepticism about earthly life propelled the poet to turn to religion. The distrust of worldly life that leads him to religion is very deep-seated in Eliot. A part of his religious consciousness consists of being suspicious about worldly life, or of not being able to accept this existence as enjoyable and good like most people do. To understand his dissatisfaction with the world and specifically with normal human relationship, we may take note of what Eliot once wrote to Bonamy Dobrée on this issue. Dobrée ‘had long been revolted’ by a quotation that is a part of the epigraph to *Sweeney Agonistes*:

‘Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings.’ When, in 1936, Dobrée told Eliot that he regarded this with horror, Eliot wrote that the quotation, from St. John of the Cross, did not mean that we simply needed to kill our human affections to arrive at the love of God, but that ‘the love of God is capable of informing, intensifying and elevating our human affections, which otherwise have little to distinguish them from the ‘natural’ affections of animals.’ He also said that he considered Dobrée’s belief that through the love of created beings we can approach the love of God to be untrue. Thus, the cynicism about the value of worldly life and normal human relations that became apparent in the early poems gained stronger religious emphasis in the post-conversion poems. At the same time, glorification of Christian
values and virtues became more pronounced. All this suggests a dilution of the sceptic stance and a new emphasis on belief.
NOTES

1. Ackroyd, Peter. *T. S. Eliot.* 1984. London: Cardinal, 1988. 162. Ackroyd has rightly noted that many major events of Eliot's life were performed in great secrecy. This trait in his character actually seems to have encouraged people to be inquisitive about his private life. To a certain extent, even his reputation as a poet seems to have been decided by people's ideas—based on scanty information—about Eliot the man. Besides, despite his insistence not to read the poetry in terms of biography or anything else, readers have elicited biography from the poetry.


6. The early poems have already been discussed in Chapter Three, but there the emphasis was on the doubts and despair conveyed through them. Here, the opposite fact—the struggle towards belief is
stressed. In this, they share common ground with the poems under discussion in this chapter.


9. John 3:3

10. Despite the ecstatic tone of *Marina*, however, critics have noted elements of ambiguity in the poem. The deliberate use of expressions with opposite meanings—in normal use—for instance, reinforce the sense of ambiguity, and make easy explanations impossible: ‘What is this face, less clear and clearer/ The pulse in the arm, less strong and stronger--/ Given or lent? More distant than the stars and nearer than the eye…’


13. *The Lambeth Conferences* (1867-1948). London: SPCK, 1948. 189. Obviously, the bishops are merely being polite towards other religions in their official acknowledgement of the truths contained in them. The fact that this acknowledgement is immediately
followed by their declaration of the superiority of Christianity actually has the effect of politely slighting the other religions. Our suggestion that Eliot's language echoes the language of the bishops does not, however, directly refer to the poems which owe their beauty to ambiguities and ambivalences of expression, to the deliberate enactment of the struggle between scepticism and belief. At the same time, however, it is difficult to believe that these prose utterances and the poems of the same period do not have any connection whatsoever.


the Prayer Book in his later poetry should not hinder the reader from seeing the modern elements of the poetry, the modes of feeling, apprehension and expression as totally different from the earlier poetry.


