

'Somehow Integrated': 'Doctrine' and 'Poetry' in T.S. Eliot Tony Sharpe

I write this as the semi-centenary occurs of Eliot's death in January 1965; his wife Valerie's name has now joined his on the oval tablet at St Michael's, East Coker, which invokes our 'charity' to pray for the repose of their souls. In suddenly-accelerated publication, five volumes of his letters and two of his collected prose have appeared in recent years; a new biography is imminent and a scholarly edition of the complete poetry in prospect. All this offers opportunity to take stock: the time, as might be said, is now propitious.

Yet as early as 1938, Wallace Stevens was describing Eliot's 'prodigious reputation' as 'a great difficulty' for any reader wishing to approach him 'out of the pew'.¹ Whether this surge of scholarship will increase or abate charitable impulses toward the poet and his *oeuvre* remains to be seen: Eliot's visible presence in St Michael's (not the only church in which he is commemorated), together with the accumulating volumes of his writing, could be viewed as part of an official installation already problematical, as hinted in Stevens's mischievous formulation. For it almost became a truth universally acknowledged, that Eliot's poetry was damaged by his Christianity; his faith was travestied as part of an intellectual evasion through which he accepted answers rather than posed questions, and in so doing lost contact with the powerful uncertainties and radical sources of unknowingness that had generated his earlier verse. In espousing Anglo-Catholicism the poet became an apostate from Modernism, it had seemed, and there were certainly fellow-Modernists who resented this: Ezra Pound saw him as having found an irrelevant solution to contemporary problems, and when at length Eliot told Virginia Woolf the news she wrote of a 'shameful and distressing interview', after which she felt him to be 'dead to us all from this day forward'. '[T]here's something obscene', she asserted, 'in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God'.² In the event, she and her husband Leonard continued to admit this walking corpse into their drawing-room on friendly terms; but the prejudices she expressed were not unrepresentative of what would ensue in subsequent criticism, so that more recently Denis Donoghue has felt impelled to redress the imbalance: 'Eliot's conversion to the Anglican communion has been the object of such intemperate comment that a protest is in order.(...) I don't understand why his Christian belief attracts more aggressive attention than any other writer's agnosticism'.³

Eliot and his legacy have been the focus for all sorts of resentment, but one answer to Donoghue's perplexity may lie in a general supposition that, whereas other writers' agnosticism has nourished their art, Eliot's doctrinal affiliations demonstrably weakened his, inducing a sermonising tendency that offers an aspect in which he comes to resemble the Matthew Arnold of whom he wrote in a letter, that 'he seems to be inspired more often by his passion for reading the English a Lesson, rather than by ecstatic enjoyment of any work of art'.⁴ If Prufrock found it impossible to say just what he means, the over-intended poetry of *Four Quartets* exhibits an obverse predicament, as diagnosed by C.H. Sisson, a commentator

¹ Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, revised edition ed. Milton Bates (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 240.

² Pound's comment was made in his review of *After Strange Gods*. For Woolf's, see *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1975 onwards), III (1977), pp. 457-8.

³ Denis Donoghue, *Words Alone: The Poet T.S. Eliot* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 271. Hereafter cited as 'Donoghue'.

⁴ *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden, 5 vols to date (London: Faber and Faber, 1988 onwards), V (2014), p. 554. Hereafter cited as 'L5'.

not necessarily hostile to their Christian content: 'It would have been harder, perhaps, for Eliot to have written what he had to say in prose, but he should have done, for he already knew what he meant, as far as he was going to know'.⁵ The sense, again, is that the poetic process has been voided of any real element of discovery or surprise because, in effect, the overwhelming question has been answered in advance by the terms of the poet's religious belief.

One way in which an agnostic or atheist reader might accommodate awkwardly unwelcome evidence of Eliot's Christianity was to separate it from the poetic essence. If Virginia Woolf's initial outrage foresaw his belief in God as an impediment to mutual understanding impossible to negotiate, their continuing friendship showed how this was not the case personally; nor, artistically, was it something that rendered his subsequent poems wholly inaccessible. That a degree of accessibility persisted was demonstrated by Leonard's response to a presentation copy of *Ash-Wednesday* in 1930, from the terms of which my essay's title in part derives. Woolf had heard Eliot recite an earlier and shorter version, but of the finished article he now wrote to the poet: 'It is amazingly beautiful. I dislike the doctrine, as you probably know, but the poetry remains and shows how unimportant belief or unbelief may be'.⁶ If this implied that Woolf's personal dissent from Eliot's religious beliefs need not impede their continuing friendship, at the level of literary response it equally conceded that 'poetry' could survive 'doctrine'. In making this distinction, Woolf seems consciously to align himself with the position Eliot had recently taken in his essay on Dante (1929), when he discriminated between 'philosophical *belief*' and 'poetic *assent*', clarifying this in a lengthy 'Note' where he asserted: 'I deny, in short, that the reader must share the beliefs of the poet in order to enjoy the poetry fully'.⁷ But however far Woolf's separation occupies ground Eliot himself had cleared, and however closely it resembles some of his other observations on what poetry is and how he came to compose it, there is an aspect of expediency in merely accepting such schism, that gives pause for thought. Evidently Woolf could judge 'belief or unbelief' to be 'unimportant', but Eliot – his comments on Dante notwithstanding – would have been unlikely to concur in such an estimation; and even though he could later assert that 'The poetry does not matter',⁸ I am not convinced that this expresses his fundamental conviction, either (while not doubting that some other things mattered to him more). To separate 'poetry' from 'doctrine' may actually be to misrepresent the nature of both, in Eliot's writing.

Such a separation has, however, been common enough in critical commentary, both as a means of excluding what is felt to be bad and securing what is felt to be good. In 1973 Graham Hough published an essay that sums up agnostic hostility toward Eliot's position, which is judged offensive because unrepresentative: 'The Christian view of history, implied throughout the *Quartets*, no longer has the support of the dominant culture'.⁹ Hough took pains to discriminate the vices of the *Quartets* from Eliot's earlier Christian poems:

The poetry of private devotion like *Ash-Wednesday* does not incur these limitations, for it makes no assertions, addresses no one, asks nothing of its readers, but offers them, if they wish to take it, the opportunity of following an experience. Parts of the

⁵ C.H. Sisson, *English Poetry 1900-1950*, (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 153.

⁶ *The Letters of Leonard Woolf*, ed. Frederic Spotts, (London: Bloomsbury, 1989), p. 238.

⁷ T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), pp. 257, 269. Hereafter cited as 'SE'.

⁸ *East Coker* (II), in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 198. Hereafter cited as 'CP'.

⁹ Graham Hough, 'Vision and Doctrine in *Four Quartets*', *Critical Quarterly*, 15 (1973), pp. 107-28 (p. 109). Hereafter cited as 'Hough'.

Quartets are of this kind: but the poem as whole occupies a position of dogmatism. (Hough, p. 111)

It is the palpable Christian design that Hough objects to in *Four Quartets*, the ‘hectoring’ obtrusiveness of a belief-system that seems to require much more than poetic assent from readers and which, by having such designs, falsifies the truer sources of ‘Eliot’s essential creative processes’ (Hough, p. 123). In defining these latter, Hough draws on C.K. Stead’s account first offered in *The New Poetic* (1964), which emphasised the mysterious and unwilling sources from which, as Hough puts it, ‘all his best poetry’ came (Hough, p. 123). This in turn provides Hough with the touchstone by which such elements as can be, are salvaged from the general mess of dogmatic asseveration otherwise characteristic of Eliot’s last poems:

So far as the *Quartets* were written in response to the old obscure pressures, so far as they assume, as before, non-logical and unpredictable forms, they are on the level of Eliot’s finest poetry. So far as they were composed to fit the demands of formal symmetry or a moral-doctrinal scheme they are on a lower level... (Hough, p. 125)

Without over-estimating the importance of this essay, it states with convenient clarity critical positions more generally discernible: which replicate Leonard Woolf’s ultimately self-protective distinction between ‘poetry’, as something a bit mysterious and therefore imaginatively permissive, and ‘doctrine’, as something a bit over-formulated and therefore ideologically coercive. If you want to praise Eliot, you tend to the former, and if you want to bury him, to the latter. Such oppositions could be represented, for other examples, in the different premises of books whose titles respectively link Eliot to ‘Ideology’ and to ‘Mysticism’. In *T.S. Eliot and Ideology*, Kenneth Asher sees how in the 1930s ‘Eliot’s attempted balance between the emotive-aesthetic and doctrinal evaluation of poetry shifts (...) toward the latter’, inevitably consequent upon the fact that ‘From beginning to end, Eliot’s work, including both the poetry and the prose, was shaped by a political vision inherited from French reactionary thinkers’.¹⁰ Paul Murray, in *T.S. Eliot and Mysticism* (1991), partly answers Hough’s objections to Eliot’s alleged inability to see beauty in the world (unresponsiveness to a ‘doctrine of immanence’) by his contrary espousal of a ‘doctrine of transcendence’ which ‘insists on an almost total separation of the human and the divine’¹¹ and waits for the unwilling apprehension of the eternal, in much the same way that Eliot the poet seems to have waited for the visitation of his muse.

I have some sympathy with the kinds of distinction critics have been apt to draw, and have to a degree reflected them in what I myself have elsewhere written about Eliot. But if we accept what would certainly have been his own view of the matter, which is that from 1927 – to go no earlier – his Christian adherence became the dominant and most significant aspect of his life, it would seem a curious corollary if we then felt the necessity of discounting it, in order to save anything worth having from the poetry he subsequently wrote: even if to do so in some kind reflects the distinction drawn by his early criticism, between ‘the man who suffers’ and ‘the mind which creates’ (*SE*, p. 18). Is it the case that *Ash-Wednesday* is so tactfully uninsistent on the Christianity informing its vision, by comparison with an assertiveness in *Four Quartets* that presumptuously offers to account for our own experience, as well as the poet’s, in Christian terms? What may be required from us, as readers sensitive to the qualities

¹⁰ Kenneth Asher, *T.S. Eliot and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 73, 2-3.

¹¹ Paul Murray, *T.S. Eliot and Mysticism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 79. Hereafter cited as ‘Murray’.

of Eliot's poetry but perhaps resistant to the particularities of his credal positioning, is a more nuanced appreciation of what each involved.

Eliot had expected to be misunderstood in the matter of his faith, and was ruefully unsurprised by the reactions to it he encountered. Where he saw difficulty, others saw ease; where he professed – and seemed to require – a 'daily terror of eternity' (*L5*, p. 210), others at worst supposed him to be basking in the smug assurance of ultimate salvation, or at best he was imagined (as George Orwell put the matter), of having replaced his earlier poetry of 'glowing despair' with the 'melancholy faith' of the *Quartets*.¹² To the same correspondent to whom he wrote of 'terror', he had earlier recorded that 'It [is] rather trying to be supposed to have settled oneself in an easy chair when one has just begun a long journey afoot' (3 Aug 1929);¹³ for although the first poem he published after his baptism and confirmation, 'The Journey of the Magi', had an agreeably Christmassy theme and posed few of the formal and interpretative challenges of his earlier verse, it tells the story of somebody whose world has become 'alien' to him, and whose circular 'journey' has resulted in displacement rather than replacement. None of the other 'Ariel' poems from this period offer solutions, as opposed to posing conundrums, and they deal more with departure than with arrival.¹⁴ The dynamic rather than the fixed state (in which questions of belief are supposed to have been settled once for all) continued to be characteristic of the poetry Eliot the Christian composed.

Although the formal processes of baptism and confirmation require assent to articles of faith, which was the more deliberated in the case of adult Eliot than it customarily can be in the cases of babies and adolescents, the Christian observance into which he entered, however marked by recurrent rituals of the liturgical cycle and their dogmatic repetitions, was also a dynamic rather than a fixed state. It depended on interplay between stable structures of belief and the assenting (or dissenting) self, that can be characterised by the word 'scepticism' which, Eliot took pains to emphasise, was a vital component of his Christianity. It was precisely this element that hostile non-believers tended to imagine as missing. Notwithstanding, his religious beliefs seem not to have furnished him a spiritual shelter; Anglicanism, after all, enfolds a doctrine of hope: the 'Te Deum', sung or recited in the Order for Morning Prayer, evokes 'the Holy Ghost: the Comforter', and at the Communion Service the Celebrant instructs the congregation to 'Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all who truly turn to him'.¹⁵ 'Comfort', however, seems not to have been characteristic of what Eliot derived from his faith: he wrote to John Hayward in April 1930, 'I know just enough – and no more – of "the peace of God" to know that it is an extraordinarily painful blessing' (*L5*, p. 163); in June that year he took Paul Elmer More to task for asserting that God did not make Hell, explaining that 'To me religion has brought at least the perception of something above morals, and therefore extremely terrifying; it has brought me not happiness but a sense of something above happiness and therefore more terrifying than ordinary pain and misery; the very dark night and the desert' (*L5*, p. 210). He went on, in the same letter, to evoke the 'fear of eternity' quoted above; and perhaps I should affirm, since the question of 'belief' is so near the centre of all this, that for my own part I believe that in such letters Eliot was telling the truth, so far as he could discern it and so far as he could express it, rather than striking an attitude for his own obscure self-gratification.

¹² See *T.S. Eliot: Four Quartets*, ed. Bernard Bergonzi, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1969), p. 83.

¹³ *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden, IV (2013), p. 567. Hereafter cited as 'L4'.

¹⁴ For fuller commentary, see my essay "'Having to Construct": Disassembly Lines in the Ariel Poems and *Ash-Wednesday*' in *A Companion to T.S. Eliot*, ed. David Chinitz, (Malden, Ma. And Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 191-203.

¹⁵ Cited from the *Book of Common Prayer* issued for the reign of George V, pp. 31, 162. Hereafter cited as *BCP*.

The hostile *TLS* reviewer of *For Lancelot Andrewes* had accused the poet of swapping ‘Modernism’ for ‘Medievalism’ (2 December, 1928); but if by this was implied Eliot’s settled acceptance of a stable religious worldview, it misrepresented his position. In fact, dogmatic self-assurance seemed to him characteristic, rather, of contemporary Marxists, with whom he contrasted himself in discussion with Hugh Sykes Davies: ‘They seem so certain of what they believe. My own beliefs are held with a scepticism which I never even hope to be rid of’.¹⁶ Writing about F.H. Bradley in 1926, he had asserted that ‘scepticism and disillusion are a useful equipment for religious understanding’ (*SE*, p. 450); this suggests that scepticism is not a corrosive doubt disabling any act of assent, so much as a continuous testing in whose light belief is the more vividly established. Rather, then, than necessarily implying a retreat from modernism to medievalism, the creative tension that was part and parcel of Eliot’s faith might fruitfully be compared to the definition of ‘wit’ he had offered in his 1921 essay on Andrew Marvell: ‘It involves, probably, a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible’ (*SE* p. 303). A fuller definition of its function in the context of faith was offered in his 1931 essay on Pascal, from which the other element of my essay’s title derives: ‘For every man who thinks and lives by thought must have his own scepticism, that which stops at the question, that which ends in denial, or that which leads to faith and which is somehow integrated into the faith which transcends it’ (*SE*, p. 411).

This formulation resembles a rational sequence, corresponding to what Barry Spurr describes as the ‘grammar of assent’ involved in Eliot’s ‘full Christian commitment’, and which he emphasises, to rebut notions of Eliot’s sudden conversion: ‘His Anglo-Catholicism was the result of a logical progression. It was not a leap of faith’.¹⁷ Jeffrey Perl, describing Eliot’s definition of ‘the etiology of religious conversion’, cites a piece published in *The Listener* (16 March, 1932), where Eliot wrote of ‘the removal of any reason for believing anything else, the erasure of a prejudice, the arrival of the skepticism which is the preface to conversion’; Perl goes on to quote from Eliot’s 1948 Cambridge sermon in which he defined his own Christian faith in terms of ‘pursuing skepticism to its utmost limit’.¹⁸ This quasi-logicality by which the resources of scepticism are finally exhausted in the inevitability of affirmation is part of what leads G. Douglas Atkins to argue that *Four Quartets* is best read as an ‘essay in verse’, deriving from a tradition in which scepticism has been modal: ‘From the beginning,...the essay has been skeptical’.¹⁹ For Eliot, scepticism is fundamental to the dynamic of faith; and that faith is dynamic not fixed is something he continually stressed in correspondence, as when instructing John Middleton Murry that ‘You must not think of my position as in every way settled’, for even its ‘fixed points of Royalism & Catholicism’ were, he insisted, ‘revolutionary’ in tendency (*L5*, p. 758). Similarly, he took issue with H.R. Williamson’s comments on *Ash-Wednesday*: ‘why should the mention of “sitting still” suggest a static conception of life, and is the distinction between the static and the dynamic so easily transferable from physics to ethics as everybody seems to think?’ (*L5*, p. 648).

‘We must be still and still moving’ (*CP*, p. 203): the paradoxical adjuration from *East Coker* may best express Eliot’s conception of his own ‘position’, although *Ash-Wednesday*, the first of his poems that was incontrovertibly Christian in its address, more immediately illustrates

¹⁶ Quoted in *T.S. Eliot: The Man and His Work*, ed. Allen Tate, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1967), p. 360.

¹⁷ Barry Spurr, ‘Anglo-Catholic in Religion’: *T.S. Eliot and Christianity* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2010), pp. 113, 114. Hereafter cited as ‘Spurr’.

¹⁸ Cited in Jeffrey Perl, *Skepticism and Modern Enmity: Before and After Eliot* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), all at p. 55.

¹⁹ G. Douglas Atkins, *T.S. Eliot and the Essay* (Waco, Tx.: Baylor University Press, 2010), pp. 92, 31.

relations between stasis and movement, what we know and what we cannot know, and the issues arising between ‘doctrine’ and ‘poetry’. For if there was a logical progression by which Eliot came to Christianity, it also involved something beyond a logic that must be relinquished, much as Virgil could not conduct Dante into Paradise, in order to proceed ‘toward a region where that guide can avail us no farther’;²⁰ or, if we are to retain ‘logic’, it can only be by invoking that distinction Eliot drew in the preface to his translation of *Anabasis*, between a ‘logic of the imagination’ and a ‘logic of concepts’.²¹ When, in 1928 at a reading in Oxford, Eliot was asked the meaning of the first line of what became the second poem of *Ash-Wednesday*, he merely recited it back to the bemused undergraduate; this might correspond to his statement to A.L. Rowse, who had expressed disappointment in *Ash-Wednesday*, that ‘The only justification of faith is that that is what one believes to be true and that is all there is to be said about it’ (*L5*, p. 179). Yet in subsequent correspondence he was happy to assign the three leopards a specifically doctrinal interpretation as ‘the World, the Flesh and the Devil’ (see *L5*, pp. 187, 258, 434). Moreover, he expressed amazement at the ignorance of those reviewers who seemed not to have ‘the faintest knowledge of the Catholic liturgy’ nor the Old Testament (*L5* p. 207; see also p. 257), and was further irritated by the tendency to classify *Ash-Wednesday* as ‘devotional verse’. This not only over-estimated the extent of his spiritual development (see *L5*, p. 258), but under-estimated the extent to which the poem presented a phase of experience, as ‘an attempt to put down in words a certain *stage* of the journey, a journey of which I insist that all my previous verse represents previous stages’ (*L5*, p. 199). Not only, then, did *Ash-Wednesday* not inhabit a static doctrinal position, that ‘sitting-still-ness’ with which a later correspondent taxed him; it also did not effect ideological severance from his earlier work. If he assigned a meaning to his three leopards, Eliot also insisted on the unaccountable origin in dreams of images of yew trees, garden god, and nun (see *L5*, pp. 171, 257), and was as anxious to assert his own rights of ignorance in respect of this poem, as to insist on what he knew about it: ‘Who am I, to know what I mean?’ (*L5*, p. 194), was one Beckettian expostulation; he confessed to Bishop George Bell that Bell would be ‘shocked...to learn how much of the poem I can’t explain myself’ (*L5* p. 257).

Those readers who, like Bishop Bell and Virginia Woolf, confessed themselves unable to understand *Ash-Wednesday* were to that extent satisfying Eliot’s own preference that poems should be ‘merely incomprehensible, as anything living is incomprehensible...“Understanding” poetry seems to me largely to consist of coming to see that it is not necessary to “understand”’ (*L5*, p. 220). Despite her hostility to his religious position, Woolf’s not being able to ‘fathom’ a poem whose dynamic she replicated by interpretative locomotion – ‘I like to roll it round in my mind when I am walking over the downs’ (quoted *L5*, p. 229n) – showed some instinctual alignment with *Ash-Wednesday* as a movement of the spirit. As C.K. Stead pointed out, Eliot’s compositional processes were in themselves unfathomable by the poet; the ‘auditory imagination’, ‘the depths of feeling into which we cannot peer’ and the ‘deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate’,²² along with the recurrent images in dreams that found their way into poems, press toward what he later described as ‘the frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist’ (*OPP*, p. 30). To try to exert too much control over this led to the compositional *impasse* that prioritised ‘meaning’ over poetic ‘experience’, in *The Waste Land*, from which he had required Pound’s help to extricate

²⁰ T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 87. Hereafter cited as ‘*OPP*’.

²¹ *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode, (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 77.

²² T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), pp. 118, 148, 155. Hereafter cited as ‘*UPUC*’.

himself. To Stephen Spender he explained that ‘my theory of writing verse is that one gets a rhythm, and a movement first, and fills it in with some approximation to sense later’ (*L5*, p. 578).

This last, we might suspect, slightly misrepresents a process which, thus expressed, is in any case more a statement of practice than of ‘theory’; but the poem, for Eliot, remains a site of interplay between the known and the unknown, in which something analogous to what he called ‘scepticism’ plays its part. For rather than choosing to believe one or other of the accounts he gave of *Ash-Wednesday*’s leopards, or using the disparity between them to convict Eliot of dishonesty, we perhaps need to see that *both are true*: that the leopards are irreducible visionary emanations as well as symbols for the World, Flesh and Devil. Both doctrine and poetry are present, and, really, inextricable. This might also be seen in what can be discerned of the poem’s composition; for if we suppose that Eliot moved in his career from the suggestiveness of ‘poetry’ toward the prescriptiveness of ‘doctrine’, and that such a sequence would be replicated in his processes of revision, we are mistaken. Although Ronald Bush notes that the fragment from the *Ave Maria* was added in revision to *Ash-Wednesday* (I), elsewhere the effects of alteration were of a contrary nature.²³ Spurr notes, also of the first part, that ‘Eliot had modified his earlier direct address to the Virgin in a draft of the poem: “Holy Mary Mother of God...”’ (Spurr, p. 220), and Bush, commenting on the difference between first and final drafts of part IV (in which ‘White light folded, sheathed about her, folding the flame and green/ Clothes that now clothe her’ became the incontestably more mysterious ‘White light folded, sheathed about her, folded’), observes how ‘in revision Eliot removed the poem’s explicit religious references ... and added elements of his own private phantasmagoria’ (Bush, pp. 147, 262 n.36). This seems in fact to have reversed the sequence Eliot outlined in his letter to Spender, by moving from ‘sense’ back toward ‘rhythm’ or ‘hidden depths of feeling’.

In almost all aspects, then, the pattern is more complicated than a binary either/or. Without diminishing the status of that ‘grammar of assent’ by which Eliot became Christian, we can see that it was also accompanied by visionary or mystical episodes, as when in 1926 he fell to his knees before the *Pietà* in St Peter’s, Rome, or prostrated himself in the aisle after early-morning communion in a basement chapel, during his Norton Professorship at Harvard.²⁴ And the way in which ‘scepticism’ is to be transcended by the faith into which it is ‘somehow integrated’ has a resemblance to the ‘leap of faith’, undertaken (in Kierkegaard’s account of the matter) because there is no logical means by which such translation could possibly be justified. The continuity between essentially Christian mystical intrusions and the ‘sense of dispossession by the dead’ (*L5*, p. 287) Eliot reported having experienced at Marlow in 1917 and at Perigueux two years later (which provoked his declaration to a baffled Pound, recorded in Canto XXIX, that he was ‘afraid of the life after death’),²⁵ lends further support to his insistence that his earlier and mid-period poems were stages of the same journey. The point of this journey, he implied to Hayward in 1931, was clarified by his faith:

If I had died even five years ago, everything that I had suffered up to then would, as far as I can see, have been just waste and muddle. Then a pattern suddenly emerges

²³ Ronald Bush, *T.S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 137. Hereafter cited as ‘Bush’.

²⁴ This incident is most fully described in Barbara Newman, ‘Eliot’s Affirmative Way: Julian of Norwich, Charles Williams and *Little Gidding*’, *Modern Philology* 108 (February 2011), 427-61, (see 150-1). Hereafter cited as ‘Newman’.

²⁵ See Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 349.

from it, without one's seeming to have done anything about it oneself. And I don't suppose it is ever the same pattern for any two people. (*L5*, p. 495)

The context for these remarks, however, lay in Eliot's calm rebuttal of Hayward's supposition that he had 'found happiness...through Faith' (quoted *L5*, p. 495n.); and they clearly minimise elements of conscious choice that may have contributed to its emergence.

It has long been known that Eliot's was a dark faith, underpinned by what he had described to More in 1929 as 'the void that I find in the middle of all human happiness and all human relations, and which there is only one thing to fill' (*L4*, p. 432). He further explained that he was 'one whom this sense tends to drive toward asceticism or sensuality, and only Christianity helps to reconcile me to life, which is otherwise disgusting' (*L4*, pp. 432-3). Inevitably, criticism has not overlooked this uncongenial life-denying squeamishness: Murray, for example, refers to 'Eliot's almost obsessional horror of the transient world' (Murray, p. 128). But, if we are not merely to meet Eliot's kind of squeamishness with our own, more perhaps might be made of his potential for 'sensuality', from which he took refuge in 'asceticism', and more might be made of Christianity's role as a means of reconciliation to life, enabling him to receive it as something other than merely 'disgusting', rather than as the means of intensifying his disgust. This is not a question of judging Eliot, but of better judging his poetry. In the same letter in which he had alluded to 'dispossession by the dead' (to W.F. Stead, the poet-priest by whom he had been baptised), Eliot wrote of his long-held theory 'that between the usual subjects of poetry and "devotional" verse there is a very important field still very unexplored by modern poets – the experience of man in search of God, and trying to explain to himself his intenser human feelings in terms of the divine goal'; *Ash-Wednesday*, he declared, had been his attempt 'to do something of that' (*L5*, p. 288, both). To note that 'intenser human feelings' play a part in a poem that has sometimes been seen as an ultra-worldly utterance is to attend to a balancing dimension and to install a different dynamic, from the one in which Eliot is supposed to have effortlessly left humankind and its problems behind him.

Eliot could not 'swallow' the doctrine of Immaculate Conception (*L4*, p. 351), but was wholly committed to the doctrine of Incarnation which, logically, obliged him as a matter of dogmatic obedience to respect the flesh, which Christ had redeemed by sharing it with humankind. This is stated in the penultimate chorus from *The Rock*:

The LORD who created must wish us to create
And employ our creation again in His service
Which is already His service in creating.
For Man is joined spirit and body,
And therefore must serve as spirit and body.
Visible and invisible, two worlds meet in Man;
Visible and invisible must meet in His Temple;
You must not deny the body. (*CP*, p. 182)

Although less memorable as poetry, this final line stands alongside that from 'Animula', 'Fearing the warm reality, the offered good' (*CP*, p. 113), as one of Eliot's more surprising and insufficiently-noted formulations. In respect of the line from *The Rock* I find myself preferring its doctrine to its poetry; but the more significant feature lies in its highlighting those aspects of Eliot apparent in a remarkable letter he wrote to Geoffrey Faber in September 1927, responding to one in which Faber had sought to warn him against 'the

rigidity of [his] way of life'.²⁶ Eliot mounted a defence; he struck some familiar notes in insisting on human relations by themselves as 'a delusion and a cheat', and affirming that only 'the love of God' prevents this;²⁷ referring to Emily Hale, his first love with whom correspondence had been renewed that May, he declared 'I have found my own love for a woman enhanced, intensified and purified by meditation on the Virgin' (L3, p. 711, all). Anticipating that Faber might receive this merely as 'fantastical and puritanical catholicism' (*ibid.*), Eliot insisted that he was not 'preaching abstention' from the good things of life, for which he retained appreciation: 'I take pleasure in Adam of St Victor and in Paul Whiteman; in High Mass at the Madeleine and in the Café des Ambassadeurs. Will you still say that I am a Puritan ascetic?' (L3, p. 712). Having thus amalgamated such disparate experiences as twelfth-century polyphony and contemporary jazz, High Mass and fine dining, Eliot went on to explain how for him the way up and the way down, the drive to asceticism and the pleasures of the senses, might point to one end:

There is another 'good thing['] of life too, which I have only had in flashes. It is the sudden realisation of being separated from all enjoyment, from all things of this earth, even from Hope; a sudden separation and isolation from *everything*; and at that moment of illumination, a recognition of the fact that one can do without these things, a joyful recognition of what John of the Cross means when he says that the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union until it has divested itself of the craving for all created beings. And after this one returns (I do anyway) to the *canard aux oranges* or the *moules marinières* or whatever it be with a keener pleasure, because one is less limited to these things. (L3, pp. 712-13)

The experience of utter 'separation and isolation from *everything*', with its paradoxical 'joyful recognition', is, then, somehow integrated into the resumption of mundane experience, whose mundanity is made less limiting now by the recognition of other kinds of experience which are possible. While it cannot be denied that, as Eliot made plain to More, amongst these other kinds of experience lay the possibilities of Hell (for himself and not just, as he alleged of Pound's Hell projected in the Cantos, 'for other people'),²⁸ what does not of strict necessity follow is an absolute rejection of 'created beings' and associated pleasures. For if human love is, in Eliot's theology, intensified by the love of God, so this can sanctify less exalted experiences as well: he went on to assure Faber that 'a good dinner can lead us toward God, and God can help us to enjoy a good dinner' (L3, p. 713). This resembles the position of a poet whom Eliot came increasingly to value, George Herbert, in 'The Elixir' (subsequently adopted as an Anglican hymn):

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see;
And what I do in anything
To do it as for thee.

To offer such comparison is, however, also to encounter contrast; for Eliot could not easily, as Herbert also does in 'The Elixir', imagine the holiness implicit in a servant's 'drudgerie'.

²⁶ Quoted in *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden, III (2012), p. 710. Hereafter cited as 'L3'.

²⁷ Perhaps significantly, 'Man's life is a cheat and a disappointment' is a line Eliot would give to the Four Tempters, in *Murder in the Cathedral* (see *Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 256); the phrase echoes F.H. Bradley's 'the sensuous curtain is a deception and a cheat' (quoted *SE*, p. 447).

²⁸ T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), p. 47.

His temperamental inclination was instead to make dismissive generalisations about the spiritual incapacity of the lower orders, crammed into their football special trains and ‘listening to the inner voice, which breathes the eternal message of vanity, fear, and lust’ (*SE*, p. 27). After speaking ringingly about scepticism in his Pascal essay, Eliot opined that ‘The majority of mankind is lazy-minded, incurious, absorbed in vanities, and tepid in emotion, and is therefore incapable of either much doubt or much faith’ (*SE*, p. 411): the easy sweep of his dismissal of the spiritual and intellectual scope of ‘the ordinary man’ (*ibid.*), connected as it seems to be with his religious convictions, has given additional grounds for deploring his Christianity. In Eliot’s defence, it might be said that he seemed to treat the middle classes (who frequented only golf-courses) with more odium than the working classes (who at least frequented the Music Hall); and his comment above is not so different from that commonly attributed to Bertrand Russell, that ‘Most people would rather die than think; many do’.

The social attitudes deriving from Eliot’s Christianity are not easily defensible at all points, and have struck many as superciliously cold-hearted; but it is my concern to suggest that in other aspects his faith had more complex consequences for his poetry than is admitted by those inclined to believe that it simplified both his life and his art. *Ash-Wednesday*, notwithstanding its deployment of liturgical echoes that might be thought to represent a drowning of doubt in the communal affirmations of belief, offers a structure of uncertainty. ‘Other kinds of experience’ surely lie behind the passionate evocation in its final poem, where what seems to be a world that has been sensorily inhabited rather than iconically imagined is longingly remembered:

And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices
 In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices
 And the weak spirit quickens to rebel
 For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell
 Quickens to recover
 The cry of quail and the whirling plover (...)
 And smell renews the salt savour of the sandy earth (*CP*, p. 104)

Without our needing to know that the geography here is that of Eliot’s childhood and youth at the family’s sea-coast summer home near Gloucester, Mass., we can surely hear, in the suddenly-gathering rhymes and the front-line emphasis of the repeated paratactical formulation, ‘And the...’, ‘And the...’, how the active verbs – ‘rejoices’, ‘quickens to rebel’, ‘renews’ – contest the inertia in the fourfold iteration of that past participle ‘lost’. The world whose sounds, smells and sights are here catalogued is not one effortlessly or unregretfully transcended. The last line of the whole sequence, ‘And let my cry come unto thee’, quotes from Psalm 102, which the *Book of Common Prayer* prescribes for Evensong of Ash-Wednesday;²⁹ yet, as the preceding line (‘Suffer me not to be separated’) has suggested, you only ‘cry’ to someone at a distance from you. In other words, this is hardly an ending where Christian salvationalism overpowers the ‘poetry’, but one animated by still-active ‘scepticism’.

Eliot encountered external scepticism in respect of his involvement in the Christian pageant *The Rock* (1934), whose goal was to fund-raise toward the construction of new churches in London’s expanding suburbs: when he told the Woolfs about this purpose, Virginia told a

²⁹ See *BCP*, p. 2. Spurr (pp. 218-24) notes parallels to the Roman Catholic Liturgy, and sees the sequence moving allusionally from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday.

correspondent that Leonard asked ‘Why?’ and that, in response, ‘Tom merely chuckled’.³⁰ Leonard was actually right to wonder: Spurr has shown how this project coincided with an upturn in Anglo-Catholic confidence (contrasting, perhaps, with the previous decade’s plan to demolish some of Eliot’s cherished City churches), but was based on an ultimately unjustified prediction of the need. In his assessment, ‘*The Rock* is richest, as poetry, in the use of incantatory language [which] comes directly from ... Eliot’s Anglo-Catholic liturgical experience’ (Spurr, p. 233), to that degree, then, marrying doctrine and poetry; but this also has the capacity to flatten the effects of his music – partly in meeting the choric requirements – in what occasionally sounds like self-imitation on Eliot’s part. The passage quoted above, from Chorus IX, offers unsprightly versification and, in the ensuing final Chorus, Eliot’s enumerations of the types of earthly light that prefigure the ultimate ‘Light Invisible’ only really take fire poetically, when he evokes the lower rather than the higher order: ‘Our gaze is submarine, our eyes look upward/ And see the light that fractures through unquiet water’ (CP, p. 184).

No one is going to stake Eliot’s reputation to *The Rock*; but *Four Quartets* is a more problematical example. In them, the impulse toward social or even oratorical verse, initially attempted in the Christian pageant of his first commercially-staged drama, meets the lyric intensities of the earlier poetry; the question is whether this meeting is a fruitful marriage, or a conflict ending in defeat of one of the parties to it. C.K. Stead, by 1986, was sure that poetry had been defeated: he refers to ‘the dark, treadmill verse of much of *Four Quartets*’.³¹ Rather than discontinuity, Ronald Schuchard sees in them a ‘great love poem’ and culmination of Eliot’s exploring ‘intenser human feelings’ in their divine relation: ‘It takes all four quartets to conclude *Ash-Wednesday*’.³² Eliot himself, according to Kristian Smidt, saw the poems in terms of conjunction: ‘He replied that he was not seeking a revelation when writing them, but that he was “seeking the verbal equivalents for small experiences [he] had had, and for knowledge derived from reading”’.³³ The poem, then, is a process for bringing personal intuitions (intense moments) into such alignment as is possible with external authority, through their collocation in a literary structure. The source of the former in ‘the unattended/ Moment’ or ‘The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight’ (CP, pp. 212-13), and the source of the latter in a library well-stocked with theology, might indicate a gulf likely to be bridged only to the former’s disadvantage. But Donoghue, one of the more sensitive interpreters of *Four Quartets*, trying to meet the indignation of critics who have felt ideologically imposed upon by their method, offers a defence which resembles the exemption that Hough, as seen earlier, was prepared to grant to *Ash-Wednesday*:

There is no need to feel affronted: the poetry does not depend upon a doctrine professed but upon a doctrine felt. To read ‘Burnt Norton’ it is necessary only to conceive a form of feeling, different from one’s own if it has to be, and to imagine what the form means to a mind that holds it or is possessed by it. (Donoghue, p. 254)

Donoghue implicitly denies that the poem (and by extension its successor *Quartets*) makes the kind of claim upon a reader that oversteps the limit between poetic assent and philosophical (or religious) belief. But while it is easy enough to grant this of those lyric or visionary passages which satisfy readers who like their poetry mysterious, the tougher test

³⁰ *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, V (1979), p. 256.

³¹ C.K. Stead, *Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), p. 212.

³² Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot’s Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 161.

³³ Kristian Smidt, *Poetry and Belief in the work of T.S. Eliot* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), pp. 155-56.

occurs with the deliberately flattened assertiveness elsewhere encountered, that has the capacity to affront those who dislike their poetry dogmatic.

To move to an example from *Little Gidding* (I): what happens between us and the poem, when we read the following? –

You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid. (CP, p. 215)

On the face of it, this does not seem to leave much room for manoeuvre. We instinctively dislike those who instruct us to kneel down (and there is, as W.H. Auden observed, a Protestant tradition which resists kneeling in church), and might wish not to be constructed as the poem's 'you'. But Donoghue's description seems to me to hold good even here. It would be possible, if slightly interpretatively shabby, to read 'you' as meaning 'I, apostrophising myself'; but even if we decline this common-enough gambit, it can be seen that the 'you' is produced by grammatical hypothesis, emphasised by repeated syntactic parallels organising these parts of the first section: 'If you came this way', 'If you came at night', 'If you came by day', 'If you came this way' (CP, pp. 214, 215). If, that is to say, you are the sort of person who would set out on such a journey, or can imagine being such, then these would be the unexpected but predictable consequences for you. In this sloughing away of the individual agenda, and its absorption into an impersonality that is both abnegation and enlargement of the self (you leave 'Sense and notion' behind, and are beyond 'conscious occupation'), you take a course analogous to that by which 'scepticism' is transcended in 'faith': this in itself is analogous to the process in which you gave your imagination to the poem, and what you achieved by doing so.

Four Quartets is much more about journey than the destination reached, and so retains a dynamism despite the apparent dogmatism of its doctrinal positioning. One of the poem's concerns is how the 'intense moment/ isolated' (CP, p. 203) may be referable to an historical continuum, or one's 'small experiences' relate to the broader context of 'knowledge' (to pick up Eliot's terms from his reply to Smidt, above). 'Burnt Norton', initiating what became a sequence, offers in its first section opening assertions transposed from *Murder in the Cathedral*, whose air of indeed being *ex cathedra* pronouncement is audibly contested by the rhythmic irresponsibility then ensuing ('Footfalls echo...', l. 11 *et seq.*), in which a good deal seems to be 'Hidden excitedly' (CP, pp. 189, 190). Structurally related to *The Waste Land*, in this poem as in that 'different voices' can be heard, although quite clearly a different constructive principle, more amenable to the discursive, governs. The verse, however, remains active; in the second section for example:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity... (CP, p. 191)

Here Eliot adopts strong-stress metre, whose central caesura becomes the axis on which the line pivots, its 'still point'. This has contrasted with the tetrameters preceding it, and, at the line 'The inner freedom from the practical desire', is itself lightened and modified by propulsive enjambments, as the verse itself begins to dance a little.

'The poetry is the thing, isn't it?' asks Donoghue, yet offers an immediate qualification: 'But the poetry, especially *Four Quartets*, is implicated in social and religious thought'

(Donoghue, p. 224). The knottily negative or apophatic theology of these poems seems to bring Eliot close to the misanthropic Timon, who finally declares ‘My long sickness/ Of health and living now begins to mend,/ And nothing brings me all things’.³⁴ If the whole earth is our hospital, then everywhere is a site of equal illness; despite starting from place, each Quartet dispenses with it as a source of value: ‘here’ or ‘there’ does not matter, we are told, as the ‘poetry’ does not matter. What seems left is the unavoidably religious significance, whose dark certitude has discomfited both Christian and non-Christian readers. Yet was Eliot as secure in his meanings as Sisson, for example, alleged? Eliot’s notes for *Little Gidding* saw it from the outset as a poem of transfiguration, but during its difficult, obstructed composition the purpose – to adapt his own words – grew beyond the end he figured, in a manner that repeated those alterations of *Ash-Wednesday* which moved away from liturgical formulations toward less externally accountable impulses. Barbara Newman has even found herself able to write about ‘Eliot’s Affirmative Way’, drawing attention to the fact that the quotations from Dame Julian and *The Cloud of Unknowing* that so decisively define the poem’s closing tone were ‘eleventh hour revisions’ (Newman, p. 461). She describes the final passage as ‘a lyric of such uncharacteristic joy that it casts a bright shadow back over all four quartets, leaving an impression of balance between the Two Ways when, in fact, the *via negativa* has by far predominated’ (Newman, p. 460). One might, without impertinence, suggest that in this it foretold the effect Eliot’s late, happy marriage may have had on his own sense of his life; but in thus admitting the words of ‘a mystic whose theological vision was almost the precise opposite of his own’ (Newman, p. 461), he showed an unexpectedly generous sense of how precisions of doctrine might lose importance in a more inclusive process of poetic signification. Although this cannot annul his negativity toward so much of what constitutes ordinary human life, it surely modifies its imaginative claim. The poem’s war-time composition possibly encouraged this spirit-lifting tone, which would be heard by some as an act of ingratiating with his readers; interestingly, the earlier world war had offered a precedent public appropriation of Julian’s words, when Eric Gill inscribed them on the memorial (featuring Madonna and Child) at Briantspuddle, Dorset, consecrated soon after the 1918 armistice. But if the in-folding of ‘the fire’ with ‘the rose’ at the end of *Little Gidding* embodies a rhetorical triumphalism far beyond the hesitancy of being ‘somehow integrated’ – Newman describes the poem’s last three lines as ‘among the most over-determined in modern poetry’ (Newman 460-1) – it remains a declaration of faith in a future, rather than something demanding intellectual compliance. This might not abolish reservations we may have regarding the essentially Christian basis of the poem’s optimism; but, since Eliot’s sense of ‘the void’ pre-dated his faith, it does perhaps illustrate how Christianity may have moderated his capacity for negative response.

Donoghue starts his book by emphasising the ‘musical’ rather than ‘referential’ source of Eliot’s poetic authority, and comes to the conclusion that ‘Eliot’s Christianity was not Franciscan, but his poetry was enlivened by a Franciscan scruple.(...) For me, the poetry is saved by the scruple’ (Donoghue, pp. xi and 293). Are the premises underlying *Four Quartets* such as permit a reader’s demurral? Contemporary with ‘Burnt Norton’ was Eliot’s essay ‘Religion and Literature’ (1935), which opens by yoking poetry and doctrine together – ‘Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint’ (*SE*, p. 388) – and which goes on to deplore ‘Secularism’ and to insist on ‘the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life’ (*SE*, p. 398). A 1929 essay had asserted that ‘Man is man because he can recognize supernatural realities, not because he can invent them’ (*SE*, p. 485). This expresses the theological standpoint of *Four Quartets*; but it is in the

³⁴ *Timon of Athens*, V.i.184-6. *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ‘The Alexander Text’, (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1951).

nature of poetry to enable hypothetical inhabitation of belief systems, and (evidencing Donoghue's saving 'scruple') there are points in these poems when Eliot seems more receptive to this world's beauty than he might have been, on purely ideological grounds. He declared more than once that he was not seeking to 'convert' anybody, and suggested to Virginia Woolf that it was better to re-read a poem many times, in order to accommodate its otherness, than to destroy the otherness in 'understanding' the poem; but, despite what he told Spender, we cannot credit any implication that 'sense' or 'meaning' are somehow injected during a poem's composition, like concrete pumped beneath the foundations of a subsiding building.

The integration of 'poetry' with 'doctrine' and our emerging sense of what a poem 'means' are more reliably analogised to that accommodation between the 'individual talent' and 'tradition', through which the past can be modified by the perspective of the present. If the influence of the dead constitutes a threat when figured as unchangeably inert, the influence of the living threatens parochial imprisonment in present-ness and mere accidents of 'personality'. Yet equally, the past with its literature and liturgy offers a resource, as a context within which the intense moments of an individual's experience (the resources of the present) can be redeemed from their isolation in contemporaneity – 'having their meaning together not apart', as Eliot's initial notes for *Little Gidding* put it.³⁵ If 'History is now and England', that poem has nonetheless evoked 'other places' and times of which the same might be said (*CP*, pp. 222, 215). Any Churchillian assertiveness threatening to distort reception of this ringing phrase needs to be moderated by the poem's earlier awareness that 'Here, the intersection of the timeless moment/ Is England and nowhere. Never and always' (*CP* p. 215): a formulation whose complementary antiphonies, like the Heraclitan 'way up and way down', are truer together than apart, and whose categorical antitheses exhaust a purely propositional logic. Perhaps, finally, the reader's rights in respect of *Four Quartets* are less compromised by dogmatic declamation, than they are secured by the kind of latitude Coleridge outlined in a Notebook entry (1801), anticipating Donoghue's distinction between 'a doctrine professed' and 'a doctrine felt':

I do not wish you to act from these truths. No! still and always act from your feelings; but only meditate often on these truths, that sometime or other they may become your feelings.³⁶

³⁵ See Helen Gardner, *The Composition of FOUR QUARTETS* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), p. 157.

³⁶ Coleridge: *Select Poetry and Prose*, ed. Stephen Potter, (London: Nonesuch Press, no date), p. 159.