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In Search of the Grail: The Poetic Development of T.S. Eliot

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IN SEARCH OF THE GRAIL:
THE POETIC DEVELOPMENT OF T.S. ELIOT

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IN SEARCH OF THE GRAIL:
THE POETIC DEVELOPMENT OF T.S. Eliot

William Ronald Bell April 1985 59 pages

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In Poets of Reality, Joseph Hillis Miller seeks to establish T.S. Eliot as a precursor of the modern movement towards romantic subjectivism. By applying his phenomenological critique, Miller claims that several major modern writers, including Eliot, adopt aesthetics based on various forms of philosophical monism.

The point underlying this thesis is that Eliot stands opposed to any such position and, until 1930, breaks with philosophy, monistic or otherwise. His art from this period is instead characterized by a search for solution in poetic artifice, a pure art. However, with "Ash Wednesday," the poet once again enters fully into the realm of ideas, and by Four Quartets has achieved a synthesis of art and idea that is clearly dualistic in nature and affirms the importance of a progressive, and not destructive, tradition. All of this he finally undergirds with a logocentric belief in language as a vehicle to be purified, far from the linguistic nihilism of Miller's "Yale School" colleague, Jacques Derrida.

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Introduction

Writers should be approached on their own terms. But in an age of special interests, it has not been stylish to admit that most artists, particularly modernist, have programmes with which they approach the realms of aesthetics and metaphysics. There was a time, at the end of the 'seventies, when it looked as though a revival of disinterested objectivity based on eclecticism was possible, something that, despite its claims, the New Criticism has failed to yield. But while the structuralist experiment may have failed, its legacy continues in what Wayne Booth calls the more recent "meta-meta-meta-criticisms." Charles Altieri has called Derridean theory "serial structuralism," and Jonathan Culler, speaking of Deconstruction, affirms that "this view is doubtless the legacy of New Criticism."

I have chosen to take issue with Joseph Hillis Miller's Poets of Reality because, while it may not strictly qualify as a deconstructive text, it is one of the most influential examples of what I call contemporary parochial criticism, i.e. criticism with an axiom to grind. For Miller, this means romantic subjectivism, that all major modernist poetry constitutes "a return to some form of monism." In

Eliot's case, Miller says that the poet "begins in exclusion and deprivation, then expands outward to include all of time an space, and finally narrows again"(p. 189). Today, we find Miller working from the same ideological base; although his essays may be more overtly "linguistic," there continues to be a call for subjective relationship. I believe, however, that a clear case can be made that, at least until 1930, Eliot breaks with philosophy, monistic or otherwise. His art from ths period is instead characterized by a search for solution in poetic artifice, a pure art. However, with "Ash Wednesday," the poet once more enters fully into the realm of ideas, and by Four Quartets has achieved a synthesis of art and idea that is clearly dualistic in nature.

These things have implications on a far broader scale. Miller's basic philosophical stance is that "there can be . . . no return to the traditional conception of God," and subsequently there is only "a fugitive spiritual power . . . within things and people, not altogether beyond them"(pp. 10-11). His dialectic in The Disappearance of God and Poets of Reality presents the culmination of Georges Poulet's phenomenological critique, itself a part of the nihilistic tradition. It was Nietzsche who first proclaimed that "God is dead," and bolstered the romantic age with his Dionysian view of art. His process of self-negation continues to earn Nietzsche

favour with the deconstruction critics today, themselves a product of the method called "phenomenology." Miller has recently said that he has little trouble reconciling his present position with his earlier reverence for Poulet's method; they are both open-ended and self-negating.

A comprehensive definition of phenomenology would be impossible, for its proponents are as diverse as their existential cousins. However, it is possible to at least approach the school by way of its chief spokesmen, Husserl and Heidegger.

Husserl had shaken the foundations of classical epistemology by questioning the validity of Descartes' "cogito" on the basis that even Descartes had adopted a false framework upon which to proceed with his dialectic. By applying a method called "epoche," meaning "bracketing," Husserl proposed to negate what he considered invalid--all existence beyond the perception of the individual ego. It was the resulting subjectivity that Husserl's student, Martin Heidegger, came to adopt as the basis for his own mature phenomenology. In his essay on "The Quest for Being," Heidegger begins a discourse that takes him into a search for the pure "essence" of Being, which he finally states is, at its core, "no-thing," literally Nothing. All that is left is to strip reality bare; only then can he begin to reconstruct a new metaphysic. "Each begins," says Miller, "with an experience of

nihilism or its concomitants, and each in his own way enters the new reality"(p. 11). It is here that Heidegger has implications for the artist who can now only float in the "aesthetic manifold," unable to grasp any final reality beyond the "I," which will ultimately fold in upon and negate itself.

The point underlying this thesis is that Eliot is opposed to any such nihilism. Not only is he laying down a position of classical dualism, but it is one that affirms the importance of a progressive, and not destructive, tradition. All of this he finally undergirds with a logocentric belief in language as a vehicle to be purified, far from the linguistic negativism of Miller's "Yale School" colleague, Jacques Derrida.

To some, my approach may seem too simple. I make no apologies for the absence of theoretic gymnastics, which may, unless we are careful, give way to textual manipulation. If it takes a "double bifurcation" to make Professor Miller's interpretation "work," then how much more should we question his method rather than revel in the brilliance of his approach? The reader is not asked to look for many original ideas here, something to which Eliot himself laid no claims. Our publishing industry has, alas, been too often in the business of promoting novelty at the expense of honesty. That is not to imply that there is nothing more to be said about Eliot, only that there can be

rewards in taking inventory and synthesizing our findings in order to bring unity to a life that was itself painfully dedicated to that unity.

Poets of Reality has brought dialogue to the Eliot question for which we should be grateful. Ironically, J. Hillis Miller's theory is destined to become, if it has not already, a part of the tradition that he presently denies, not to be destroyed but forever to change and be changed as the old accommodates the new.

I wish to thank those members of the senior English faculty of Western Kentucky University who have helped in the composition of this essay, Dr. William McMahon and Dr. Frank Steele. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Dorothy McMahon for her endless insight and helpful direction. Credit also goes to my wife, Suzanne, a graduate student who understands.

On the Shore of All We Know (1904-1920)

> It is proverbially easier to destroy than to construct; and as a corollary of this proverb, it is easier for readers to comprehend the destructive than the constructive side of an author's thought.

These words go a long way towards suggesting the kind of allegiances that T.S. Eliot would have had in today's literary world. Perhaps he was even anticipating the recent tides of deconstructive criticism that were destined to misinterpret his own aesthetic. For, he tells us, if a writer possesses "no constructive philosophy, it is not demanded; and if he has, it is overlooked."[1] And so there are those, hardly sharing Eliot's spirit, who would align themselves quite unjustifiably with him. J. Hillis Miller, anxious for allies, claims that "in many twentieth century writers there is a return to some form of monism."[2] Accordingly, Eliot is a prime example.

Although Miller published these claims well in advance of his courtship with Derrida and de Man, Poets of Reality anticipates the marriage that was to take place in the late 'seventies, marking Miller's entrance into the Deconstruction fold. The premise that he

posits in 1965 leads quite clearly to his more recent conclusions. His position is further reinforced by an apparent reluctance to revise any judgements made on Eliot in that book. It is therefore fair to assume that Miller's position has not changed. Indeed, it has probably intensified.

Miller's present critical stance is well known:

> Each scholar is only one of a long line of tillers of the soil; he justifies himself by destroying the scholars who preceded him. The publication of his findings is suicidal in the sense that he is offering himself up to be destroyed in turn by the next scholar.[3]

How different this is from Eliot's famous position in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in which the task of the artist is the synthesize, not annihilate:

> The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered . . . this is conformity between the old and new. (SP, pp. 38-39)

Indeed, Miller's tone makes his critique sound like a parody of Eliot's well established theory. Only when we read Miller's definition of "Deconstruction," "the untangling of the inherence of metaphysics in nihilism and of nihilism in metaphysics by way of the close reading of texts,"[4] are we reminded of his severity.

However, the purpose of this study is not to destroy Professor Miller's methodology, for, in so doing, it might only verify most of his claims. Rather, the attempt here is to rectify several points that would appear to make Eliot a precursor of the modern movement towards romantic subjectivism, and to provide an alternative, and it is hoped more successful, perspective for this poet's eventful career.

Because Deconstruction recognizes no meaning outside the "prisonhouse of language,"[5] it is unequivocably committed to a monistic metaphysic. Miller's point of departure, that "the monism of immediate experience is the truth"(p. 135), provokes the first of a series of yes-but's that demand close scrutiny. For, while Miller's essay is clever, it is far too zealous in its debt to Neitszche to avoid distortions. To be sure, Eliot begins with "immediate experience," but in his poetry this realm is translated into a new unity; the creative process brings a state of liberation, a kind of "stepping out" that would otherwise be impossible.

Miller's interpretation of "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" is predictable: "The reader is plunged with the first words into the spherical enclosure of Prufrock's mind. Everything exists because Prufrock

thinks of it"(p. 137). With copious references to Eliot's Harvard dissertation, Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley, Miller proceeds to drive the poet into metaphysical isolation. "In his essay on Leibniz and Bradley," we are told, Eliot firmly rejects the latter's idea of an 'Absolute' which unifies all finite centers"(p. 140). Because the dissertation "is more or less contemporary with his early poems," Miller infers that it is "the starting point from which all his later development emerges" (p. 134). It is hoped that this thesis will show that the ideas in Knowlege and Experience are not the "starting point," but rather the troublesome grain under the skin that initiates Eliot's search for the pearl of metaphysical resolution, a movement away from monism rather than towards it. For although Eliot's ideas seem firm (such is the nature of a dissertation), he is never completely comfortable with them; later, in 1964, he even goes so far as to say that he has grown "unable to think in the terminology of this essay" (KE, p. 10).

Miller makes two fundamental mistakes. Firstly, he leads us to assume that Prufrock is Eliot, itself an absurdity, since an individual so impotent could surely never create such a masterpiece. And secondly, he assumes that the early poetry is merely a vehicle for the philosophical ideas that Eliot was exposed to in

the Harvard years.

It may be that an understanding of Bradley and Leibniz is helpful in approaching Prufrock's more difficult allusions. In fact, The Monadology could be to the poem what Jessie Weston's From Ritual to Romance is to The Waste Land, a sort of map which, since it was so vital in the composition, serves to guide the reader through almost cryptic passages. In this way, we can frame Prufrock's need "to squeeze the universe into a ball," or his strange desire to become "a pair of ragged claws," otherwise impossible.[6]

But knowing what a persona is saying is not necessarily understanding a poem, to which any reader of Donne, Eliot's mentor, can attest. Prufrock's isolation and logical incongruity make him reminiscent of Donne's fragmentary characters. But while Donne's men can make "one little room, an every where,"[7] the poet himself adopts a far broader metaphysic. It is another seventeenth century writer who tells us that "jocond his muse was, but his life was chast."[8] Eliot, in the Metaphysical tradition, is not called upon to show consistency of philosophy and artistic content. Later, in his essay on "Dante," he is to warn against poetry's becoming a horse upon which philosophy rides. But even as early as 1918, Eliot commends Henry James for "his mastery over, his baffling escape from, Ideas," saying that such mastery is "perhaps the last

test of a superior intelligence"(SP, p. 151). It is for this very reason that Edmund Wilson rebukes Eliot's "almost impossible attempt to make aesthetic values independent of all other values,"[9] a definite anathema to Deconstruction. Geoffrey Hartman, in the introduction to Deconstruction and Criticism, says that "the separation of philosophy from literary study has not worked to the benefit of either."[10] But this trend did not begin with Eliot. Lionel Trilling uncovers a similar tendency in Matthew Arnold when he says that "it is the problem of the antagonism between the creative imagination and the critical intellect which lies at the heart of the romantic philosophy." Perhaps Arnold was spreading the first seeds of the "objective correlative" when he recognized that the poetic form should be "in itself a meaning and a 'message.'"[11]

When Eliot wrote his dissertation, it was as a student of philosophy; when he takes up the poet's pen it is to play a different game, one governed by a very different set of rules. This idea is shared and perhaps best developed by a fellow New Critic, I.A. Richards, who, claiming that there are exclusive standards for "poetical truth," decries the introduction of "inappropriate kinds of believing into poetry [for] to do so is . . . profanation of poetry."12

In 1917, Eliot stands, Kant-like, between two spheres: the rationalism of Leibniz, demanding the loneliness of J. Alfred Prufrock, and the idealism of Bradley, allowing the free play of aesthetic values based on a concept of absolute. The freedom that poetry gives to Eliot may suggest why, after leaving Harvard, he abandons the formal study of philosophy; there was perhaps a personal solution in poetic form. Eliot's philosophical position, as far as we can tell, does seem to indicate a definite return to Leibnizian monadism; but aesthetically, the creative act provides for the early Eliot what was not available to Prufrock: the power of subject over object and a recognized difference between them. Although Miller gives lip service to this dualism, he discredits its importance by saying that it is "an alienation from reality" (p. 135). True to phenomenological form, "consciousness" and "reality" become muddy in the critic's mind, leading to an interpretation that in uneffacedly romantic.

Eliot is not Prufrock. Nor does he inhabit the same world. Miller's failure to recognize this distinction leads him to conclude that "'objective correlatives' are not invented by the poet. They are encountered in an all-inclusive subjective realm" (p. 138). But while Eliot's mind may not create objective correlatives (they are, after all,

objective), it is not nearly so passive as Miller would make it seem. "When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work," says Eliot, "it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience"(SP, p. 64). Of course, these words were not written until 1921; however, judging by the frequency with which Eliot employs the metaphysical conceit in this first decade, he definitely had such things in mind. Surely he was thinking of Donne's "A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,"[12] when he wrote: "Arms that are braceleted and white and bare/[But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!]"(CPP, p. 3). Eliot's mind stands outside the material; thus Wilson is able to conclude that "Eliot believes that a work of art is not an oracular outpouring, but an object which has been constructed deliberately with the aim of producing a certain effect."[14] Similarly, Richards sees the job of the poet as giving "order and coherence, and so freedom, to a body of experience."[15] In his "Reflections on 'Vers Libre,'" Eliot begins to lay down the foundation for the poetic form that is to stay with him for the rest of his life. An adherence to convention is important, and despite his personal unrest, there is little to suggest that he is anywhere near Miller, anywhere near anarchy--or nihilism. For "freedom is only truly freedom when it appears against a backdrop of artificial limitation"(SP, p. 35).

It is unfortunate that we have very little literary criticism from Eliot's first years as a poet. It is perhaps more unfortunate that in 1965, Miller did not have access to The Poems Written in Early Youth, released by Valerie Eliot only two years later. For although these may not be counted among Eliot's best poems, they show a part of his development that has, as yet, received limited critical attention.

The young Eliot wrote about the anxieties and concerns that would preoccupy any serious student. The prospect of a career in letters was no doubt a challenge, as one of the earliest poems, [At Graduation 1905], begins with these formidable words:

> Standing on the shore of all we know
> We linger for a moment doubtfully . . .
> No light to warn of rocks below,
> But let us put forth courageously.
> (PWEY, p. 11)

Perhaps the most striking feature of these poems is the clear sense of optimism that seems to overcome the uncertainty of his world. And in "Song" we see Eliot, for the first time, subordinating philosophy for a poetic ideal, the power of Love:

> If space and time, as sages say,
> Are things that cannot be,
> The fly that lives a single day
> Has lived as long as we.
> But let us live while yet we may,
> While love and life are free,
> Fot time is time, and runs away,
> Though sages disagree. (PWEY, p. 10)

But all was not well with Eliot in those early years. He must have had "Spleen" in mind when he wrote "Prufrock"; the diction and imagery are too similar to have been composed in isolation. Here, too, is the world of "evenings, lights, and tea," inhabited by the same protagonist "a little bald and gray,/Languid, fastidious, and bland,/ . . . punctilious of tie and suit." This earlier poem is not so subtle and tells us exactly what Eliot is thinking. It concludes with the character, "Life," who "waits, hat and gloves in hand/(Somewhat impatient of delay)/On the doorstep of the Absolute"(PWEY, p. 26). The sentiment in this last line is clearly Bradleian; it is the frustration of "Appearance" and "Reality," more than the genuine grasp of a monism.

Although he was surely uncomfortable with his metaphysics after the Great War, Eliot was even more distressed by the real life misery that surrounded him. It is here that Miller misses the true genius behind these poems. To make Eliot walk in Prufrock's shoes is to miss the cutting satire that permeates, for Prufrock's disorder is not Eliot's.

All of the 1917 poems inhabit the same cruel landscape, fractured inside and out, under the clumsy weight of its own futility. In Prufrock and Other Observations, Eliot is creating a vast social drama in

which a cast of sharply or mildly grotesque characters parades across a stage not unlike Joyce's Dublin. It is a place where "showers beat/On broken blinds and chimney pots"(CPP, p. 12). This is the world that Prufrock leaves to make his "visit."

But the world of "tea and cakes and ices" is just as stagnant, in its own way, as the "tedious" streets through which he has come. For here one can do no more that measure out one's days "with coffee spoons." This is the world that Henry James satirizes, of inactive high society and brittle, dull gentility. Its splendor may seem incompatible with the squalour of "vacant lots," but they are both, at their cores, bankrupt of reality.

As its name suggests, Prufrock and Other Observations presents images of a tragi-comic world from which the poet is removed. Eliot has taken James's advice; he has set his characters in motion and is watching them quite scientifically. Hugh Kenner notes that "it was genius that separated the speaker of the monologue from the writer of the poem by the solitary device of affixing an unforgettable title."[16] The writer is aloof. And yet there are times when his voice breaks through, almost giving asides, clues, to the reader who is watching with him. One such comment appears, appropriately, in "Preludes," and serves to tell us what these scenes mean:

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

"Preludes," a series of short vignettes appearing in the middle of the "Prufrock" collection, provides an explanation of the "thousand sordid images" that Eliot paints in the poems. "You had such a vision of the street," he writes, "as the street hardly understands." It is this vision of suffering that allows him to so sympathize with poor Prufrock that it is as if "his soul stretched tight across the skies"(CPP, p. 13). We are invited into another man's mind. Like Virgil, Eliot dares us to follow, tracing psychological avenues that will lead to an inner landscape, a world within a world:

> Let us go then, you and I,
> As the evening is spread out against the sky
> Like a patient etherised upon a table;
> Let us go through certain half-deserted streets,
> The muttering retreats
> Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
> And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
> Streets that follow like a tedious argument
> Of insidious intent. (CPP, p. 3)

But Eliot always takes care to temper his internal structures, not with the randomness Miller would like to see, but with a sense of schema. This is the true significance of the Heraclitus passage: despite the appearance of fragmented lives, his characters move and

relate in a general context of pattern. Eliot recognizes this same technique in Henry James when he claims that each of the novelist's characters "is extracted out of a reality of its own . . . everything given is true for that individual; but what is given is chosen with great art for its place in the general scheme." It is here, too, that Eliot first explores the possibilities of cultural unity, since "the real hero, in any of James's stories, is a social entity of which men and women are constituents"(SP, p. 151).

James's short story "Crapy Cornelia," upon which "Prufrock" is probably based in part, tells of a forty-eight year old bachelor, extremely conscious of his age, who sets out to propose marriage to a presumably rich widow. Upon meeting an old acquaintance at the lady's home, he is distracted into forfeiting his opportunity to pose "the question:" "He had the happy consciousness of having exposed the important question to the crucial test, and of having escaped, by that persistent logic, a grave mistake."[17] This kind of internal dialogue leads to the endless indecision that characterizes Prufrock's timidity; he is a stranger in the twentieth century. In the James story, at least, the protagonist finds fulfillment in recalled memories which allow him to see beyond "the arrangements of pretended hourly time that dash themselves forever to pieces,"[18] something

that Prufrock is incapable of. The James character says, "There are so many connections--there will be so many. I feel now . . . they must all come up again."[19] Is James suggesting that modern man can find resolution in such recalled experiences? Probably not, but this could have been what first attracted Eliot to the relatively obscure story of Mr. White-Mason. In the "Graduation" poem, there is a calm assurance that "the passing years/ . . . shall not have power to quench the memory"(PWEY, p. 15).

Miller minimizes the influence of Bergson on Eliot, saying that "it would be difficult to find two intuitions of time more different in quality"(p. 146). It is not necessarily the quality of Bergson's time that Eliot adopts, but rather his belief in the power of memory to initiate transcendent intuition. It is quite possible that Eliot saw hope for modern man in his ability to grasp his own memories and to weigh them in much the same way that the Symbolists achieved synthesis by the sharp juxtaposition of unrelated images. There is a sense in which an individual can become almost victimized by his thoughts and immediate experiences but, like Bradley's hermeneutic, perception need not shape consciousness if used effectively as a tool for conceptualization.

It is the arrangement of otherwise irrational ideas that Eliot sees in the Symbolists which gives him

a suitable form with which to begin his quest for a suitable answer to the overwhelming metaphysical question. We sense that he has exhausted the world of his ideas and is ready to push off into a sea of darkness, courageously, because therein lies hope. Bergson had also found empiricism bankrupt and had turned to psychology for a solution. There is no denying that Eliot's poems from this period are strongly "psychological"--one reason why Miller's thesis may seem so convincing--but it must be remembered that memory and experience are only tools with which to intuit reality. Bergson suggests a reality of continual flux that can, nevertheless, be frozen in "time capsule" images. For the philosopher, this means memory; for Eliot, poetry. Both are founded on a principle that is foreign to Miller, because both suggest resolution and coherence.

Eliot is purposely paradoxical when he says that "it is this contrast between fixity and flux . . . which is the very life of verse"(SP, p. 33). Aware of the problematics of his own vision, he is content to avoid any kind of philosophical dogmatism, monistic or otherwise. As early as 1959, Kenner saw that "discussion of the poems . . . slips off into ideas, when it doesn't begin there."[20]

Even though Eliot's poetic career does not begin with ideas, his life was to become a search for

artistic and philosophical unity. By the time he had finished Four Quartets the fusion had taken place. But the result was not a monism, as Miller suggests, but rather an affirmation of the real existence of subject and object, accompanied by metaphysical and aesthetic reconciliation. In the meantime, however, Eliot is not ready to lock himself in Prufrock's cell. He must continue to probe. He must go in search of his own artistic Grail.

Notes

[1]Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot [hereafter (SP)], ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt, 1975), p. 277. All other material from Eliot will be designated by the following abbreviations: (ASG)--After Strange Gods: A Primer in Modern Heresy (London: Faber, 1934); (CPP)--The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950 (New York: Harcourt, 1971); (KE)--Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley (London: Faber, 1964); (OPP)--On Poetry and Poets (New York: Farrar, 1979); (PWEY)--Poems Written in Early Youth, ed. Justin Hayward (New York: Farrar, 1967); (SW)--The Sacred Wood: Essays in Poetry and Criticism (London: Methuen, 1920); (SE)--Selected Essays (London: Harcourt, 1964).

[2]Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth Century

Writers (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), p. 134. All subsequent quotations from Miller will be taken from this book unless otherwise indicated.

[3]Quoted by William E. Cain, "Deconstruction in America: The Recent Literary Criticism of J. Hillis Miller," College English, 6 (1979), 367.

[4]"The Critic as Host," Deconstruction and Criticism, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Seabury, 1979), p. 230.

[5]Miller, Deconstruction and Criticism, p. 223.

[6]Leibniz suggests that by reflective self-consciousness men, unlike animals, are capable of asking questions of metaphysical significance. Each created monad represents the whole universe within itself.

[7]"The Good Morrow," The Complete English Poems of John Donne, ed. A.J. Smith (New York: St. Martin's, 1971), p. 60.

[8]Robert Herrick, "The Pillar of Fame," The Poems of Robert Herrick, L.C. Martin (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), p. 335.

[9]Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930 (New York: Scribner, 1932), p. 119.

[10]Wilson, p. ix.

[11]Matthew Arnold (New York: Norton, 1939), p. 24.

[12]*Science and Poetry* (London: Kegan Paul, 1935), p. 67.

[13]This is the example that Eliot himself uses in "The Metaphysical Poets" essay.

[14]Wilson, p. 117.

[15]Richards, p. 61.

[16]*T.S. Eliot: The Invisible Poet* (New York: Ivan Oblensky, 1959), p. 4.

[17]*The American Novels and Short Stories of Henry James*, ed. F.O. Mattheissen (New York: Knopf, 1964), p. 822.

[18]James, p. 836.

[19]James, p. 840.

[20]Kenner, p. x.

In Search of the Grail (1920-1930)

Let the son of Gahmuret ride on!
for suffering lies in store for him,
albeit joy and honour also.
(Parzival, book V)

In 1925, Eliot published The Waste Land, the poem for which he was to become best known. This second decade also saw him become the most influential voice in modern criticism with the publication of The Sacred Wood, the collection that included what might be called his early critical trilogy: "Tradition and the Individual Talent"(1919), "The Metaphysical Poets"(1921), and "The Function of Criticism"(1923). There has been considerable disagreement about the compatibility between Eliot's theory and practise from this period, but a close examination of the work indicates that the criticism, in particular the three crucial essays already mentioned, provides an articulate expression of the method with which the poetry is worked out, insofar as prose can accomplish that task; we must therefore strive to see all of Eliot's work as a unified effort.[1]

It is one thing to say that in these years Eliot abandons the formal study of philosophy in favour of a

solution in poetic form;[2] it is quite another to say, as John Crowe Ransom has, that "the poet clashed with the critic."[3] In "The Music of Poetry" Eliot writes:

> The poet, when he talks or writes about poetry . . . is always trying to defend the kind of poetry he is writing, or to formulate the kind he wants to write . . . . What he writes about poetry, in short, must be assessed in relation to the poetry he writes. (OPP, p. 26)

When we attempt to criticize the critic, we should at least take the clues he gives us. Who, after all, having Freud on the analytical couch, would not ask about his mother?

Curiously, Miller manages to conveniently ignore those parts of Eliot's theory that run directly against the Poets of Reality thesis. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," written just a year after Prufrock and Other Observations, there is a clear denial of monism in light of a search for unifying centres. "The ode of Keats," we are told, "contains a number of feelings which have nothing particular to do with the nightingale, but which the nightingale . . . served to bring together"(SE, p. 9). Here is--according to the categories of Abrams--a severely objective interpretation of one so often called "expressive." The true value of the nightingale symbol lies not in the way it is perceived, but in its ability "to bring

things together." This is the objective correlative at work. Eliot follows in the tradition of one whose endeavour "to see the object as in itself it really is" helped bring classical objectivity to modern criticism. Interestingly, Arnold too has fallen prey to a similarly romantic interpretation in Miller's The Disappearance of God.[4]

Eliot goes on to give us his chemical formula for the composition of truly objective poetry:

> When the two gases [oxygen and sulphur dioxide] . . . are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of the platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. (SE, p. 7)

In this way, the creative element remains crucial, but is prevented from giving way to subjectivism. This is the very method that Eliot employs in The Waste Land. Tieresias, the poem's central figure and probably a symbol for the artist's mind, is a seer and not primarily a creator. He perceives things as they are; his role is sheer objectivity--this is part of his pain.

> (And I Tieresias have foresuffered all
> Enacted on this same divan or bed;
> I who have sat by Thebes below the wall
> And walked among the lowest of the dead.)
> (CPP, p. 44)

Recent publications, such as Peter Ackroyd's T.S. Eliot: A Life,[5] have resulted in extremes of biographical interpretation. Such criticism is useful, as far as it goes, but does not necessarily suggest inconsistency on the poet's part. For as long as we can continue to see the artist's mind as the catalyst which serves to bring experience together, Ulysses will continue to be more than a book about Joyce and Sons and Lovers more than a biography of Lawrence. But the willingness with which he subjects his work to the surgical pen of Ezra Pound is perhaps the best evidence for Eliot's strong belief in the suppression of the artistic ego.

Eliot's view of the literary tradition works on the same principle: "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relationship to the dead poets and artists"(SE, p. 4). The emphasis is on the "tradition" and not any single artist's creative process. The tradition becomes an absolute force by which the artist, if he is successful, is guided. Gone is the personal muse of antiquity. In this light, Eliot's use of The Golden Bough is no mystery: he is, once again, working with the essentially universal. His concern is not with personal experience but with culture as the vehicle which brings it together. The

vegetation myths of Frazer weave themselves in and out of the Grail tapestry, bringing the perennial hope of fertiliy to "the dead land." The synthetic methods by which both Frazer and Weston attempt to amalgamate disparate mythology yield finished products that are understandably appealing to the poet of The Waste Land.

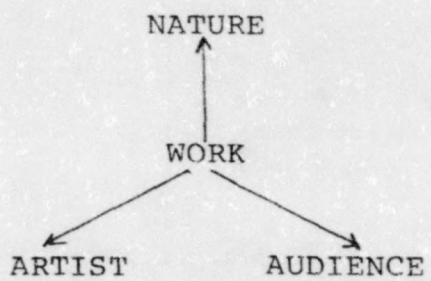
In the introduction to From Ritual to Romance Jessie Weston had said,

> Were I not convinced that the theory advocated in the following pages contains in itself the elements that will resolve these conflicting ingredients into one harmonious compound I should hardly feel justified in offering a further contribution to the subject.[6]

Miss Weston's business was, then, synthesis, an attempt to bring unity to the fragmented sources of the Grail legend. It was no accident that Eliot chose her particular assimilation of the legend as the basis for his own project. Like the composition of The Waste Land, the evolution of the story of Parcival was the work of various cultural traditions and not merely the invention of one writer. It was central to East and West and yet belonged to none, in that numerous influences had converged and had therefore given it an impersonal quality. The contributing authors had been "catalysts," unconscious servants of a higher order. Charles Hartman tells us that, for Eliot, "poems are not created out of nothing by the poet, but somehow

exist before he writes them down."[7]

M.H. Abrams' The Mirror and the Lamp theory is by now familiar to all of us. His schema for "objective art"[8] is simple, but useful:



In Eliot's case, we might substitute, quite comfortably, the "tradition" for the "work," thereby making the shift from "art for art's sake" to "art for the sake of culture." It is not the self, nor even the poem, but the literary tradition that is absolute in Eliot's mind. It is here that Eliot most strongly differs from the critics with whom he has been so freely associated. If Eliot is the father of New Criticism, then the Fugitives must be the disobedient sons who, whilst rallying under his banner "objectivity," like the deconstruction critics, isolate the text at the virtual exclusion of supporting data--not at all the method with which Eliot himself approaches the discussion of literary works in his own essays. Nor would Eliot have any apologies for liberal materialists like Peter Widdowson whose audience takes precedence over a tradition which doesn't exist.[9] Undoubtedly, Miller would have us put Eliot himself in

the middle of the picture, making his art chiefly expressive, a legacy of nineteenth century Romanticism, for which there are some strong words in "The Function of Criticism." "For those who obey the inner voice," we read, "nothing that I can say about criticism will have the slightest value"(SP, p. 72). Curiously, Miller isolates the poetry, rarely looking at the criticism that renders his interpretation suspect. "The difference [between Classicism and Romanticism] seems to me," says Eliot, "the difference between the complete and fragmentary, the adult and the immature, the orderly and the chaotic"(SP, p. 70). And yet, the chaotic and the fragmentary are all that Miller manages to see in Eliot. By separating the poet from the critic, as Ransom has done, he has given himself the liberty to decorate The Waste Land with his own prejudices. It is an easy target for, being perhaps the most enigmatic piece of this century, it has been subject to many extremes of interpretation. Because it is such a difficult poem, most are content to merely probe metaphors whilst denying any underlying theme.[10] According to Miller, the images "are thrown together in pell-mell confusion"(p. 145), implying that Eliot is relying on, if anything, the "Whiggery" that he so strongly condemns in "The Function of Criticism." As we have already seen, appearance is not reality, and it is not the

broken-ness that the poet wishes us to see, but the inter-relatedness of objects, a lesson learned from John Donne.

In "The Metaphysical Poets," Eliot ascribes to Donne and his school the position of "the direct current of English poetry"(SE, p. 250). In so doing, he almost single-handedly brought about a re-evaluation of the seventeenth century poetic tradition. Saying that Ben Jonson's poetry was not necessarily "mainstream" was indeed a bold statement, but we may suppose that he was not altogether without motive since the similarities between Donne's art and his own are substantial. In both Donne and Eliot there is an acute sense of cosmological disorder. Eliot remarks that "in the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in from which we have never recovered"(SE, p. 247). Indeed, Donne has often been called a "modern" in spirit. A.G. George notes that "in the stark realism, the disillusionment of Donne's poetry, one gets a foretaste of the twentieth century view of man."[11] Surely this was the main appeal to the poet facing not an Elizabethan England in an age of shifting values but a post-war Europe challenged by an equally uncertain future. The cyclical nature of aesthetic theory had brought about a revolt against Georgian Romanticism on the part of the moderns; thus Eliot regarded his seventeenth century counterparts as closer relatives

than the intervening centuries could have given him. Donne had had his own wasteland. According to Tillyard, he "thought the whole creation corrupt in its decrepitude."[12] This state of affairs was manifest in the severe aesthetic problem that Eliot called "dissociation." Emotion and intellect, he felt, had been fragmented, and it was the artist's place to reconcile them. Donne, like Webster, was able "to probe the skull beneath the skin," and therefore, by applying his perceptive conceit emerged successfully, reassembling the shattered pieces of sensibility "in a new unity." To suggest that a return to monism is involved here is to fail to see the continued schism between art and idea, even in The Waste Land. Although Eliot may choose certain "philosophical" materials for his poetry, he tells us that "its truth or falsity . . . ceases to matter"(SP, p. 65). What is important, however, is that the artist continues to strive to overcome dissociation by creating a complex pattern of otherwise discrete elements in the hope that their true inter-relatedness will overcome. By being "more and more comprehensive, more and more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary," the poet must attempt to forge "language into his meaning"(SP, p. 65). This is why we see elements of Shakespeare, St. John, and the Buddha side by side--the problem of unity and diversity demands a

solution in form. Had Miller looked closely at "The Metaphysical Poets," he might have caught a glimpse of himself, the ordinary man, whose

> experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. (SE, p. 247)

Immediate experience, no matter how personal, becomes universal in poetry.

Nowhere in Eliot's poetry is his critical theory more blatantly put than "Whispers of Immortality." There is an almost coy respect for Donne and the Metaphysicals:

> Daffodil bulbs instead of balls
> Stared from the sockets of the eyes!
> He knew that thought clings round dead limbs
> Tightening its lusts and luxuries.
>
> Donne, I suppose was such another
> Who found no substitute for sense,
> To seize and clutch and penetrate;
> Expert beyond experience. (CPP, p. 32)

"I will show you fear," says the narrator of The Waste Land, "in a handful of dust." It was Donne's use of the shocking image, the word made flesh, that Eliot also admired, his ability to get to the core of the matter at hand. "Racine and Donne," he says, "looked into a good deal more than the heart." In other words, their ability to look beyond the mere subjective

experience of the romantics took them "into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts"(SE, p. 250). In this way, the human experience becomes a microcosm, the poetic method itself a pseudo-metaphysic:

> And even the Abstract Entities
> Circumambulate her charm;
> But our lot crawls between dry ribs
> To keep our metaphysics warm. (CPP, p. 33)

Eliot's method, then, is hardly madness, and The Waste Land escapes dislocation by finding primary meaning in its unifying symbol, the Quest for the Grail. In his response to Ulysses, Eliot had said that "instead of the narrative method, we may now use the mythic method"(p. 178). If Joyce had his classical model, Eliot had a medieval one. Parcival's quest for the legendary relic becomes for Eliot a symbol for his own life--what Grover Smith has called "the idealist's quest for union."[13] If Prufrock, like Parcival, was unable to ask "the overwhelming question," Eliot himself was determined to set things right. Although the Grail legend was the legacy of another age, Eliot converts the quester's search for a solution into a modern epic. "The real decline," says Northrop Frye, "is from an ideal which may be symbolized by medieval culture, but remains in the present to condemn and challenge the contemporary world."[14]

So strong was Eliot's conviction, and so sure was he of the task's magnitude, that The Waste Land vision becomes no less than religious. By "Dans le Restaurant" the poet had already assumed for himself the mystical role of priest for modern man. The poem tells of a meeting between a young man and a dirty old garcon who recounts, penitently, his first sexual experiences with a young female, possibly a prototype for the hyacinth girl. Written in 1920, just two years before The Waste Land, the poem states quite clearly the position of the poet in Eliot's mind. The decrepit waiter, who is more akin to Prufrock than any other character in the poems, slobbers ("Do I dare to eat a peach?") and is the victim of age and decadence ("I grow old, I grow old.") The patron we may assume to be Eliot himself. Although Eliot was in France in 1920, the actuality of the meeting's ever having taken place is not really relevant. What is important, however, is that we see the poet as priest, the old waiter his confessor. The young man's parting admonition is ironic, bearing all the marks of a mock-religious ritual:

> Va t'en te décrotter les rides du visage;
> Tiens, ma fourchette, décrasse-toi le crâne.
> De quel droit payes-tu des expériences comme moi?
> Tiens, voilà dix sous, pour la salle-de-bains.[15]

Indeed, what right had the waiter to tell these things? Although such behaviour is offensive, it is the poet's lot to see to the soul, regardless of how putrid. In this way, the old man is representative of all that confronted Eliot in 1920. The land had indeed been laid waste and the pieces, he felt, were his to pick up.

In "Le Directeur" the poet is called "spectateur." He is a stranger in a land contaminated by a corrupt government, ironically called "conservateur." The Thames, a symbol for Western culture, is polluted as it flows through the land from which it is somehow detached: "Malheur à la malheureuse Tamise"(CPP, p. 28). All is decadent but the tradition (water) and the artist (youth). The Thames image reoccurs in The Waste Land, as the poet calls, "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song," mourning the river with "cardboard boxes, cigarette ends"(CPP, p. 42) as evidence of its pollution. In the Fisher King legend the lack of rain causes stagnation. One feels that if the poet ever does end his song, things will be well again. For now, Europe is rotten to the core and it is the poet's job to resolve the situation by bringing things together in aesthetic ritual.

We see youth and age again in "Gerontion:" "Here I am, an old man in a dry month,/Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain." Even here we see hints of the

Fisher King legend. His home is "a decayed house." He remembers "the juvescence of the year" when "came Christ the tiger/To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk/Among whispers"(CPP, pp. 21,22). But as we learn from "Dans le Restaurant," the precious cargo has been lost. The poem's conclusion constitutes the "Death By Water" section of The Waste Land, with some minor differences:

> Phlébas, le Phénicien, pendant quinze jours noyé,
> Oubliait les cris des mouettes et la houle de Cournouaille,
> Et les profits et les pertes, et la cargaison d'étain:
> Un courant de sous-mer l'emporta très loin.[16]

What is this strange "cargo of pewter?" Why was it lost in "the Cornish sea?" One explanation may be that Eliot was already thinking of the mystical chalice, traditionally associated with the court of Arthur, according to legend, situated in Cornwall. Could it be that this little poem, written in French and rarely translated, holds the key to the motivation behind The Waste Land? If so, this is where Eliot first finds his calling: "Figurez-vous donc, c'était un sorte pénible;/Cependant, ce fut jadis un bel homme, de haute taille." Very literally, we might say that these lines are telling us to consider the fate of one who was once a tall and handsome man but has been transformed by

some terrible ordeal. Smith has suggested that "Dans le Restaurant" is "full of puns and ironies,"[17] and is best understood on a hidden level. In Mr. Eugenides' "demotic French" we may find ourselves with an alternate translation: "Create, therefore, this is a terrible task;/However, it will make a tall and beautiful man." Eliot has put himself in the place of the Grail hero. Coming after the episode with the old waiter, there is a sense in which a prophetic challenge has been issued. If the poet fails to "create" and merely leaves us with fragmentation, the Grail will not be found. But judging by the metaphysical method and the very content that he brings to The Waste Land, Eliot is determined to bring synthesis and, in due time, heal the external world.

Although Eliot more than once called himself a classicist, it is difficult to believe that he regarded himself after the order of, say, Homer or Sophocles. He believed, rather, that a modern poet should, like Dante, be somewhat a product of his age. And in an age as complex as our own it becomes increasingly difficult to speak of art in terms of "Classicism" and "Romanticism," for such categories now lack necessary precision. It is impossible to look at Eliot's New Classicism without recognizing the seminal influence of T.E. Hulme on his perception of the place and purpose of art.[18] In predicting a classical revival Hulme

had paved the way for Eliot's vision. This modern Classicism, said Hulme, would "be different because it has passed through a romantic period."[19] He therefore recognizes a new dichotomy with which to classify all aesthetic endeavour: "vital" and "geometric" art. The Waste Land belongs to the latter.

Vital art, which is more akin to the old Romanticism of Rousseau and Wordsworth, presupposes the innate goodness of man in a benevolent universe and the ultimate freedom of the ego to succeed on its own terms. Ironically, the freedom of the vital position is finally illusory because it is forced to justify itself on metaphysical grounds, thereby making itself nothing more than "spilt religion."[20] It is this exact problem that drives Eliot towards geometric form which, on the other hand, recognizes the imperfect ego in a broken environment and places emphasis on object over emotion, form over freedom, and art over idea. According to Hulme, only this kind of art can bring about "adjustment between man and the outside world."[21] If The Waste Land is about alienation, it represents, at the same time, an artificial attempt to restore cosmological order. This is at the heart of the Grail story; by asking the appropriate question, Parcival will heal the Fisher King and restore the land.

In his essay on "Baudelaire" Eliot cites Hulme's

position on original sin. It is because of "original sin" or "dissociation" that man's perception of his place in the cosmos is perverted. Frye says that Eliot's

> ordinary personality is Rousseau's noble savage: it regards the community as a limitation of its freedom, and judges the community according to the amount of inconvenience to the ego that it causes. Eliot starts from Burke's view that society is prior to the individual.[22]

Far from being evidence of the romantic tendency, therefore, The Waste Land becomes another indictment of it--with one difference: as a picture of fallen man in a degenerate society, it is an attempt to go beyond or see through its context. While Eliot may appear to immerse himself in the negative element, he is careful to tell us that the "illusion is being disillusioned" (SP, p. 368). The epigraphs from Conrad show the kinship that he shares with the novelist who also appears to have embraced the negative, at least in Miller's mind.[23] Nevertheless, Eliot, like Conrad's Jim, avoids drowning in a sea of nihilism by treading water with artistic finesse.

The vulnerability of his position leads Eliot to no conclusive metaphysical system in The Waste Land. "The poet's job," he had said, was "to express the greatest emotional intensity of his time, based on whatever his time happened to think"(SE, pp. 117-118),

and there is nothing to suggest that, by this time, he had modified this position. Eliot does, however, take personal comfort in his creative endeavour. We are to take him quite seriously when he tells us, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." The poem represents, in other words, a bulwark against which the tides of nihilism can only lap. According to Derek Traversi,

> The final lines may be taken as a summary of the position reached by the poet as a result of this particular creative effort. . . . He is still in sight of the "arid plain"--the Waste Land through which we have passed with him--but it is now behind him, in a sense overpassed. . . . The individual can at least aspire to some measure of control over his own existence, and that it is his human obligation, even in a time of desolation, to achieve such degree of personal order as is within his reach.[24]

He had at least put his own lands in order and had subsequently given himself a clear view of the problem as it existed. The solution, it seems, was not to come until 1930 with the final phase of his development.

Notes

[1]Examples of claims that Eliot's poetry creates a unity with his criticism from this period are

Peter Quennell, "Mr. T.S. Eliot," Life and Letters, 2 (1929), 179-190 and Richard Aldington, "The Poetry of T.S. Eliot," Outlook (London), 49 (1922), 12-13.

[2]Remarking on The Waste Land, I.A. Richards (Science and Poetry [New York: Norton, 1926], p. 76.) said that Eliot had created "a complete severance between his poetry and all beliefs."

[3]The New Criticism (Norfolk, Conn: New Directions, 1971), p. 136.

[4]The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth Century Writers (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963).

[5]New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984.

[6](Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1920), p. 1.

[7]"Condensation: The Critical Vocabulary of Pound and Eliot," College English, 39, Oct. 1977, p. 189.

[8]The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (New York: Norton, 1958), p. 6.

[9]See Widdowson's controversial Marxist approach to post-structuralism: Re-reading English (London: Methuen, 1982).

[10]The unity of the poem has been, since its publication, a point of contention among critics. Ransom ("Waste Lands," New York Evening Post Literary Review, 3 [1923], 825-826), taking Wordsworth's ideals, claimed that The Waste Land fails because of its lack

of unity. Allen Tate, in reply ("Waste Lands," NYEPLR, 3 [1923], 886), claimed that its unity is an essential part of the poem's success.

[11]T.S. Eliot: His Mind and Art (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962), p. 56.

[12]The Elizabethan World Picture (New York: Random, 1948), p. 36.

[13]T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 6.

[14]T.S. Eliot: An Introduction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 10.

[15]Go and clean your wrinkled face;
Take my fork and scrape the filth from your skull.
What right do you have to tell me these things?
Here's ten shillings for a bath(CPP, p. 32).

[16]Phlebas, the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,
Forgot the cries of gulls and the swell of the Cornish Sea,
All the profits and losses, and the cargo of pewter;
Which an undersea current had carried far away (CPP, p. 32).

[17]Smith, p. 36.

[18]For a further study of the influence of Hulme on Eliot see Marion Belgion's "In Memory of T.E. Hulme," Saturday Review, Oct. 1, 1917, pp. 154-155.

[19]Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1924), p. 125.

[20]Hulme, p. 188.

[21]Hulme, p. 87.

[22]Frye, p. 11.

[23]Miller denies the lasting value of artifice in his chapter on Conrad also. He begins by saying that "Conrad respected those who could keep up appearances in the wilderness"(p. 73), but goes on to proclaim that "the human world is a lie. All human ideals, even the ideal of fidelity, are lies. . . . They derive from man himself and are supported by nothing outside him"(p. 17).

[24]T.S. Eliot: The Longer Poems (London: Harcourt, 1976), pp. 52-55.

The Fire and the Rose (1930-1945)

Yet had the land been
waste, but by his coming had
folk and land alike been
delivered.
(Diu Crone)

"Ash Wednesday" represents the watershed in Eliot's life. It is the bittersweet moment of his maturing vision, a point of transition--not reversal. Some critics felt betrayed as Eliot moved closer to a philosophic art. Allen Tate, saying that "the historic religious mode is illegitimate," remarked bitterly that "critics are a little less able to see the poetry for Westminster Abbey."[1] Tate's vision was too narrow to accept the all-consuming purpose that drove Eliot to a synthesis of art and idea. It is perhaps unfair to judge his disappointment harshly, knowing what we know today, for we are looking back with time on our side. The dust has settled, and we are now able to see that there were hints all along in Eliot's development that suggested only one direction.[2]

Eliot saw his own evolution as progressive, and not as a series of self-negating positions, each isolated from those before. This development is the subject of "Landscapes," a collection of vignettes in

verse, each representing a stage of life, from the "first world" of childhood to the "aged eagle" of old age. Not only is the poem contemporary with Four Quartets, but its images and language are strikingly similar:

> Children's voices in the orchard
> Between the blossom- and the fruit-time:
> Golden head, crimson head,
> Between the green tip and the root.
> Black wing, brown wing, hover over;
> Twenty years and the spring is over;
> To-day grieves, to-morrow grieves,
> Cover me over, light-in-leaves;
> Golden head, black wing,
> Cling, swing,
> Spring, sing,
> Swing up into the apple-tree. (CPP, p. 93)

This opening section, "New Hampshire," is the first of a chronological catalogue. These are the "children's voices" heard in "Burnt Norton," the lost youth that the Harvard years buried. He is remembering a time "between the green tip and the root," probably adolescence before the pain of manhood. The children, trees, and birds convey a deep longing for freshness and power, yet the human stance is grief. The "Virginia" section takes us into The Waste Land years:

> Red river, red river,
> Slow flow heat is silence
> No will is still as a river
> Still . . .
> Delay, decay. Living, living,
> Never moving. Ever moving
> Iron thoughts came with me
> And go with me:
> Red river, river, river. (CPP, p. 94)

Here Eliot, even if Tate and others were not sympathetic, shows that the order of nature is mechanical and changeless, and not sufficient for the hunger of the soul. The third section, "Usk," is the most interesting and stylistically superior. It shows a distinct change in direction, probably supplemental to the "Ash Wednesday" experience:

> Do not suddenly break the branch, or
> Hope to find
> The white hart behind the white well.
> Glance aside, not for the lance, do not spell
> Old enchantments. Let them sleep.
> "Gently dip, but not too deep,"
> Lift your eyes
> Where the roads dip and where the roads rise
> Seek only there
> Where the grey light meets the green air
> The hermit's chapel, the pilgrim's prayer.
> (CPP, p. 94)

The Christian grail quest goes beyond the world of nature. The pilgrim has arrived at "the empty chapel," only to find that he must "turn aside," rejecting any simplistic return to old myths, looking ahead towards belief and deity. This is exactly where Eliot differs from Yeats; merely human perfection is simply not enough for the human soul, and the old myths cannot be revived. The pilgrim's prayer, the poet's voice, has found a dwelling in the hermit's chapel, a metaphysical home beyond nature, in the realm of meditation.

Eliot's movement is paralleled and illustrated by his changing attitude towards the theory of Paul Elmer

More. In The Sacred Wood Eliot maintained that More was "led astray . . . by his guide Sainte-Beauve [because] neither . . . is primarily interested in art"(SW, p. 40). More had always believed that art was inseparable from morals and, as a follower of Babbitt, the young Eliot had seen fit to accuse him of being the model of the imperfect critic because "an interest in morals will not produce sound criticism of art."[3] This is hardly surprising because, as we have seen, until 1930 Eliot had endeavoured to divorce his art from metaphysics. But as he moved towards the synthesis of "Ash Wednesday," Eliot was able to make the concession that he expresses in the introduction to After Strange Gods:

> Some years ago I wrote an essay entitled "Tradition and the Individual Talent." During the course of the subsequent fifteen years I have discovered . . . some unsatisfactory phrasing and at least one or more doubtful analogy. But I do not repudiate what I wrote in that essay any more fully than I should expect to do after such a lapse of time. The problem, naturally, does not seem to me so simple as it seemed then, nor could I treat it now as a purely literary one. (ASG, p. 15)

Eliot does not countermand his earlier position and, as Northrop Frye has said, "the new attitude was consistent enough with the earlier one, only the content being changed,"[4] but Eliot does see now the need for the mutual accommodation of art with

metaphysics and faith. In "Religion and Literature" this accomodation is brought sharply into focus when Eliot affirms that "literary criticism should be completed from a definite ethical and theological standpoint"(SE, p. 343). Not surprisingly this change was reflected in a renewed view of More, whom he now called "the finest literary critic of our time,"[5] saying that in More "I came to find an auxiliary to my own progress of thought, which no English theologian at the time could have given me."[6] If this is true, then Eliot's calling More an "Anglican Platonist"[7] should tell us something of his own position. Harry Antrim recognizes that in the Quartets

> Images of God are not . . . mere creations of man's own image-making propensity but are at worst faint copies of what God introduces into the stream of time and space, at best fair copies of the image of God Himself.[8]

This is the traditional Christian content couched in Plato's dualism. As a result of his view of the collective tradition, Eliot had more than once associated his Classicism with Christian orthodoxy, and this is what appealed most about The Greek Tradition, which he considered "More's greatest work. . . . a masterly treatment of the process through which Greek thought influences Christianity."[9] This was reiterated in his interest in Christopher Dawson's treatises on religion and culture which followed a

similar line of reasoning, resulting in Eliot's own "Idea of a Christian Society," itself modelled on the Athenian social ideal. For Miller to say that Eliot had "abandoned . . . his identification with the mind of Europe"(p. 183) and to read monism into such a position is absurd since it is this cultural orthodoxy that, in After Strange Gods, Eliot sets in opposition to the heretical romantic heterodoxy. Miller, once again, simply re-writes Eliot's life to make it endorse the very Romanticism which it rejects. James Gribble has recently pointed out that the problem of parochialism in much post-structuralism stems from "the subordination of criticism to theory."[10] Such subordination, he claims, hinders the deconstruction critic from approaching his subject on its own terms. Miller himself warns against such subjectivism "exclusively derived . . . from the experiences of a self-enclosed mind" lest the critic finds himself "unwittingly making over in his own image."[11] Ironically, this is exactly what Miller has done with The Disappearance of God and Poets of Reality. In an attempt to approach two very diverse ages thematically, he has made his theory an end in itself rather than keeping it secondary and has subsequently made Eliot over in his own subjective image.

"When religious feeling disappears," says Eliot, "the words in which the poet struggled to express it

become meaningless"(OPP, p. 15). Central to his final vision is the importance of linguistic resolution. "Any study of Eliot," says Harry Antrim, "must . . . center on his understanding of language"(p. 3). Eliot had often said that communication was a matter of word choice, and it had been Prufrock's inability "to say exactly" what he really meant that caused so much frustration. In The Waste Land the misinterpretation of the nightingale's "inviolable voice" yields only "Jug Jug" in dirty ears, and in "Ash Wednesday" the noisy world continuously competes with "the Word." Always there is the conscious "raid on the inarticulate," and this is at the heart of the poet's struggle and the measure of his creative success. To acknowledge that there is a right word, a proper symbol, is to make a basic assumption about language and its relation to reality, to reader, and to poet. According to Harold Bloom,

> Language, in relation to poetry, can be conceived in two valid ways. . . . Either one can believe in a magical theory of all language, as the Kabbalists, many poets, and Walter Benjamin did, or else one must yield to a throughgoing linguistic nihilism, which in its most refined mode is now called Deconstruction.[12]

Bloom's comment, besides being a deplorable example of the black-white fallacy, is interesting since it appears in the Deconstruction and Criticism collection,

alongside a more recent essay by Hillis Miller entitled "The Critic as Host" in which he fully establishes himself as a proponent of the latter view, that metaphysics is merely "a phantom generated within the house of language by the play of language."[13] Language, then, ceases to be a symbol for objective reality but instead creates its own subjective reality. All is self-referential and nothing is absolute. In T.S. Eliot's Concept of Language, whose direction, claims its author, Harry Antrim, "was largely suggested by Poets of Reality"(p. 2), we read that "being itself subjectivized, language can communicate, ultimately, with no one but its user"(p. 5). While Antrim is wrong to see any such position in the early Eliot, he steps out from the shadow of Miller to assert his own very honest synthetic view of the later poetry:

> Belief in Incarnation enables Eliot to take hold of a world in which language is something other than what the mind makes of it. Language can be a means of both real communication and thus may be especially useful when overtly public. (p. 3)

And so whilst Antrim commends Miller, he must dismiss his final assessment and calls his own last chapter "The Romantic Inheritance Overcome." Although he should have perhaps given more thought to the importance of the Logos in the Incarnation, Antrim claims that somewhere between The Waste Land and "Ash

Wednesday" Eliot abandons his earlier idealism for a belief in the "extrinsic meaning"(p. 44) that comes with Christian thought: "After 1935, Eliot's poetry and drama are everywhere filled with the realizations of external reality"(p. 57). Four Quartets is indeed full of concrete images for which the appropriate word is in no way ambiguous. We know, clearly and precisely, what is being said. Even Eliot's abstract ideas are crisp and intact, evidence of the seriousness with which he approaches the Logos, the point at which he thinks all correct aesthetic and religious theories converge. The poet, by theorizing skillfully, himself dances around the "still point" and as a result touches the mind of God at momentary points along the locus. In order to take such a logocentric stance, the poet, out of philosophic necessity, adopts a belief in the absoluteness of words in order to fulfil his responsibility "to purify the dialect of the tribe." So much for the movement towards monism and language games.

Gregory S. Jay, unwilling to let Eliot out of the subjective prisonhouse, has more recently provided us with a Derridean deconstruction of Eliot's poetics, in which he suggests that Four Quartets is not a movement towards solution but only "enlightened disillusionment."[14] Such interpretations, after Miller, should not surprise us; they are becoming more

commonplace as the new radical Romanticism gains momentum. We must remember, however, that this is a movement to which Eliot laid no claim at any stage, and it is impossible that had he been alive today he would have sat still for such perverse misreadings.

In "Ash Wednesday" the poet verifies his belief in the Johannine Logos, a power which warrants sweeping objective correlatives, a power flowing from the "still point":

> If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent
> If the unheard, unspoken
> Word is unspoken, unheard;
> Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,
> The Word without a word, the Word within
> The world and for the world;
> And the light shone in darkness and
> Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled
> About the centre of the silent Word.
>
> (CPP, p. 65)

In Eliot's opinion language does not imprison metaphysics but, as Aristotle taught, is an effective tool for the conceptualization of reality, a tool to be mastered. In Miller, all that exists is the word spoken; but for Eliot, there is a Platonic ideal, communicable only in a special and precise language which employs liturgical repetition and logical metaphor. For Eliot, this is the cause of his constant struggle which, in "Burnt Norton," shows the poet still fighting the "voices of temptation"(CPP, p. 122):

> Words strain,
> Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
> Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
> Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
> Will not stay still. (CPP, p. 121)

At first, this might look like the beginning of a deconstructive linguistic, but as we move through the Quartets we see the poet come to rest elsewhere. If "Burnt Norton" is the first leg of the spiritual journey then "Little Gidding" is home and shows final faith in a language sufficient to hold up under the stress and, like the Chinese jar, reach beyond its stillness:

> . . . every phrase
> And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
> Taking its place to support the others,
> The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
> An easy commerce of the old and the new,
> The common word exact without vulgarity,
> The formal word precise but not pedantic,
> The complete consort dancing together)
> Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
> Every poem an epitaph. (CPP, p. 144)

Besides the obviously mature tone that comes with time, Eliot's poetic method had changed very little. His new belief in philosophic art he illustrates with a final metaphysical conceit, a thoroughly modern adaptation of a clearly seventeenth century form:

> The wounded surgeon plies the steel
> That questions the distempered part;
> Beneath the bleeding hands we feel

> The sharp compassion of the healer's art
> Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.
> (CPP, p. 127)

Even the masculine rhyme and iambic tetrameter are characteristic of Donne's school. In "The Music of Poetry" Eliot had said that the form should fit the content, and his choice of oxymoron in this section serves well the idea of religious paradox--"All the world's a hospital"--and the difficult concept of trinity is illustrated by three ironic personalities: "the wounded surgeon," "the dying nurse," and the "ruined millionaire." The form is symmetrical and works with the content to give one stanza to each crucial part of the redemptive process: the Spirit, the Son, the Father, the individual ego, and finally the reconciliation in the practise of Eucharist: "The dripping blood our only drink,/The bloody flesh our only food"(CPP, p. 128).

On a larger scale, the Four Quartets themselves hold together thematically as the record of a spiritual journey; from the uncertainty of the first poem, through darkness, to the resolution of the last, Eliot follows a musical pattern, each poem its own movement and yet an intrinsic part of the larger symphony.

The final and most obvious argument against Miller is that Eliot becomes an Anglican and could not have embraced such a system of belief without recognizing the real existence of subject and object. The Grail

Quest was now given a context in Christian dogma. The cosmological adjustment that is brought about by the Incarnation, the point at which the natural meets the supernatural in space and time, provides an answer to the problem of separation for both the individual and the "dead land." The implications of the Ash Wednesday liturgy had undoubtedly brought Eliot face to face with his own mortality and whether or not we agree with his final position, we must say that he appears secure in it when he unashamedly announces that

> I am convinced that if this "supernatural" is suppressed . . . the dualism of man and nature collapses at once. Man is man because he can recognize supernatural realities, not because he can invent them. (SE, p. 433)

The content of Christianity fitted the framework that he valued so well that dissociation became original sin, the objective correlative became the Incarnation, impersonality became humility, the tradition became the church and its poetry the liturgy of the ages. The Grail took on full significance as the redemptive vessel and "the peace that passes all understanding" became the peace that accompanies knowledge when the pentecostal fire is fused with the aesthetic rose.

Curiously, Miller not only comes to admit that Eliot has a synthetic purpose in The Waste Land ("the poet had been defined as a man who can unify

heterogeneous elements with dancelike form"(p. 187)) but also that he embraces an almost Platonic dualism ("If Eliot comes to accept the fact that men and women have bodies, he also comes to recover a physical world, external to himself"(p. 185)). This he explains by saying that after "Ash Wednesday," however, the poet returns to his cell: "Eliot begins in exclusion and deprivation, then expands outward to include all time and space, and finally narrows again"(p. 189).

In his introduction, Miller had said that "if the disappearance of God is presupposed by much Victorian poetry, the death of God is the starting point for many twentieth-century writers"(p. 2). Unable to accept dualism in any form, he says that "Eliot too goes beyond the vanishing of God"(p. 189). He thinks Eliot's new found dualism is, in other words, deceptive since it is only really an extension of the old self. But, as we have seen, for Eliot, at least until 1930, the metaphysical had not crucially mattered. He had not, like Neitszche, killed God; he had simply not considered the possibility. In his essay on Wittgenstein and Derrida, Charles Altieri has said that the only real way out of the subjective dialectic "is to deny the way in."[15] Similarly, Eliot does not "go beyond" the death of God since he never recognizes it in the first place. The nihilistic "way in" was never taken by Eliot.

Interestingly, Miller does not end where Eliot does. Miller's final choice of lines is revealing. We are left not with the hopeful affirmation of "the fire and the rose," but lines that would make a better epitaph for Miller himself than for Eliot:

> Quick now, here, now, always--
> Ridiculous the waste sad time
> Stretching before and after.

Notes

[1]"T.S. Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday,'" Essays of Four Decades (Chicago: Swallow, 1968), p. 463.

[2]J.M. Murry ("Towards a Synthesis," Criterion, 5 [1927], 294-313) claims that Eliot has put himself in Aquinas's camp, a position that, he predicted, would result in Eliot's embracing the Christian faith; and in 1930 Edna Lou Walton ("T.S. Eliot Turns to Religious Verse," NYTBR, July 20, 1930, p. 9) noted that "anyone who cares to analyze The Waste Land will find in it the seeds of religious poetry to which Eliot has of late given himself."

[3]"The Local Flavour," Athaeneum, Dec. 12, 1919, p. 1333.

[4]T.S. Eliot: An Introduction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 3.

[5]Review of Selected Shelburne Essays, Criterion, 15 (1936), 363.

[6]"Paul Elmer More," Princeton Alumni Weekly, Feb. 5, 1937, p. 373.

[7]"An Anglican Platonist: Paul Elmer More," TLS, Oct. 30, 1937, p. 792.

[8]T.S. Eliot's Concept of Language: A Study of Its Development (Gainesville: Univ. of Florida Press, 1971), p. 44.

[9]"Paul Elmer More," p. 373.

[10]Literary Education: A Revaluation (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), p. 77.

[11]"Literature and Religion," Religion and Modern Literature: Essays in Theory and Criticism, eds. G.B. Tennyson & E.E. Ericson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 44, 39.

[12]"The Breaking of Form," Deconstruction and Criticism (New York: Seabury, 1979), p. 4.

[13]Deconstruction and Criticism, p.229.

[14]T.S. Eliot and the Poetics of Literary History (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1983), p. 248.

[15]"Wittgenstein on Consciousness and Language: A Challenge to Derridean Literary Theory," Modern Language Notes, 91 (1976), 1423.

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