

The Thematic Evolution of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Drama

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Eliot states in an essay on "The Metaphysical Poets" that "poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult."¹⁾ His poetry is a whole complex which "fused the old and the obliterated and the trite, the current and the most civilized mentality."²⁾ It demands very hard labor and concentration to grasp its meaning; very often, the result of hard work to find the meaning of his poetry is discouraging, and the entangled complexities still remain stubborn and obscure.

There has been a growing understanding that Eliot's works compose a continuity and that his individual work can only be fully themselves when they are placed and explored in that continuity. Eliot once wrote: "The whole of Shakespeare's work is *one* poem: and it is the poetry of it in this sense, not the poetry of isolated lines and passages or the poetry of the single figures which he created, that matters most."³⁾ This passage can be applied to the works of art achieved by Eliot himself. Each poem of Eliot's moves up the stairway, an image in *Ash-Wednesday*; its end is significant because it both remembers and fulfills the beginning. In order to understand his poetry more satisfactorily, it should be studied as a continuum. The movement of his poetry draws a spiral as well as circle line so that the beginning of his work can be its end and, vice versa.

My confrontation with the Eliot's literary works of art was discouraging. His works have led me very often into an unknown territory and depressed me very much because there seems to be no bearing in spite of my desperate endeavour to understand the meaning of his work.

So I felt it necessary to set up a sort of guideline to grasp some meaning of his poetry, and the attempt to find the common themes and their evolution throughout his work has helped me a great deal to understand his poetry. The outcome of this study may not be satisfactory: too scanty in substance to carry the abstruse meaning of Eliot's poetry with it. I might have done Eliot injustice by trying an arbitrary outline for the meaning of poetry since he was a poet who stressed all the time that "the meaning of poetry, in verse drama, as in other forms, is that each individual takes from his experience...No explanation in the ordinary sense of a poem is adequate. If you can completely explain a

1) T. S. Eliot (1932), "The Metaphysical Poets" in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd), p.289.

2) T. S. Eliot. (1970), *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber).

3) Eliot, "John Ford," in *Selected Essays*, p.203.

poem, with an exact correspondence between the deliberate intention of the author and the reception of the idea by the reader, then it just is not poetry. One of the things about poetry is that it does excite different reaction from different people."⁴

The themes that I found in Eliot's poetry and drama are double: 1) Man's isolation and his distrust of human relations; and 2) the Religious vocation. The present study will focus on the evolution of the themes throughout his poetry.

1. Man's Isolation and his Distrust of Human Relations

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is drastically different in the way of talking, the mood and the feeling from the conventional love poems. It is the dramatic monologue of a man of certain age who speaks out of a life whose center is a drawing-room of sophisticated society in which he has to "prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet."

Contrary to our expectation for a lover, Prufrock has very unromantic character: he is depicted as a man "with a bald spot in the middle of the hair," and "his legs and arms are thin." The weariness of his feeling has been cited in the line: "I grow old... I grow old..." He is talking to someone suggesting to make a visit. Who is the "you" addressed? Besides the striking features of the protagonist as a lover who wants to declare his love to a woman, we are also struck by the description of his sordid surroundings. It is the evening of a soft October night. The evening is "spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherised upon a table," and he is likely to go to the woman "through certain half-deserted streets/Streets that follow like a tedious argument/Of insidious intent." The woman is suggested to be "in the room/Talking of Michelangelo." Does he go and confess his love? But he is an irresolute person for whom the simplest decision is a matter of strain, speculation and distress. As the poem develops, his state of feeling, strain, hesitation, and fear of being rejected by the woman is illustrated by a series of "overwhelming questions": "How should I begin?"; "Do I dare disturb the universe?"; and "Would it have been worthwhile after all?" Then, suddenly his emotional strain breaks down, and he bursts out: "I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be." Then he resigned; "I have known them all already, known them all." At the end of the poem, he escapes into a sort of day-dreaming, a dream of mermaids.

This is the brief introduction of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Prufrock is one of the most impressive characters Eliot has created in his poetry. He has become "a part of our modern mythology."⁵

T. S. Pearce has stated that "Eliot's first collection of poems has a much greater consistency than his second, though the second has on the whole a single tone. The first collection is full of characters, who are as interesting in themselves as they are as repre-

4) Quote by E. Martin Browne's *The Making of T.S. Eliot's Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p.236.

5) Edmund Wilson (1969), *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), p.112.

sentatives, though they are most important as the latter."⁶⁾ As far as the characters of Eliot's poetry are concerned, we can, I believe, divide them into two groups: that of the individuals, and that of people in general. The characters of Eliot may seem less interesting as individuals than as representatives of mankind in general. Eliot's characters fade until *Ash-Wednesday* in which appear the lady and the flute-player, and in the *Four Quartets* the individual characters disappear from our sight and the figures become remote and vague: the children hidden in the trees, dancers, public men in "East Coker," the anxious worried women lying awake in "The Dry Salvages," and the ghost in "Little Gidding." On this assumption, I think it most appropriate to discuss his early poetry in order to study isolation of the individuals and distrust of human relations which are our main concern of this section.

Throughout Eliot's first collection of poetry, we meet various kinds of people: Prufrock, the sophisticated old lady, the young man, the girl of "La Figlia Che Piange," Aunt Helen, Miss Nancy Ellicott, Mr. Apollinax, etc. The characteristics of these people are similar to those of Prufrock. T.S. Pearce has pointed out that the mood of this first collection is set by the first poem, "The Love Song."⁷⁾ They are mostly educated, sophisticated, self-conscious, self-deceived, misunderstood, and lonely. Also their surroundings are similar: they live in a city, frequently in half-deserted streets in which one-night cheap hotels and sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells are scattered. The city landscape itself is as sordid and futile as the people are: "Spring is broken in a factory yard,"⁸⁾ and "man's soul stretches tight across the skies that fade behind a city block."⁹⁾ What the poet perceives from these people of the city is "the notion of some infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing."¹⁰⁾ Thus the speaker of "Preludes" cynically suggests to the readers:

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh:
The world revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

"Preludes"

He is laughing at himself and at the world. The world is as futile as the plight of the ancient women who must gather fuel in the vacant lots of the city. The image of an old woman looking for fuel in the narrow streets is so lonely that it is rather horrible.

Returning to "Prufrock" again, the details of the poem show us a series of actions of Prufrock which are not real actions but only taking place in his imagination. He proceeds from the half-deserted streets at evening, where he "watched lonely men in shirt sleeves, leaning out of windows" to the women, imagining the experience he would enc-

6) T.S. Pearce (1971), *T.S. Eliot* (London: Evans Brothers Ltd), p.83.

7) Pearce, p.83.

8) T.S. Eliot, "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" 9) Ibid., "Preludes"

10) Eliot, "Preludes"

ounter. He reaches there, descending the stair, in his imagination, and comes away without having attempted what he wanted to do. He is a complete failure. He finds himself self-contradictory: the one self who wants to declare his love to the woman, and the other self who fears the consequences of his declaration. Thus, he begins to justify his inability to take actions: He is not Lazarus come back from the dead with some explanation. Nor is he Prince Hamlet, who despite all his indecision took some action and some responsibility. He does not dare to disturb the universe, and bear the consequences of his action. After all, he has no heroic quality: he has only measured out his life with coffee spoons. The reaction of his disappointment is the way to escape to a fantasy world of unreal love with mermaids, for this is all he can ever do. What we have to note in his attitude is that Prufrock knows, all the while he follows his imaginative actions, that he is doomed to failure, and that is why he wishes to dehumanize: "I should have been a pair of claws/Scuttling across the floors of silent seas." This is because he is not better suited to cope with human experience than a crab. He cannot cope with "human voices." That he yearns for a metamorphosis into a "pair of claws" is relevant to his state of feeling: an eternal inertia. Being unable to reach the stage of communication with human beings, he is always lost, as is shown at the end of the poem drowning when awakened his reverie by "human voices."

Characteristically, Prufrock has gone nowhere and done nothing. He has conducted an "interior monologue." He is aware of being trivial and not heroic, and of his state of feeling and of his problem. And yet he is unable to throw away himself, as it were, "to throw the nerves in patterns on a screen" in order to express just what he means. Herein lies his agony and suffering.

The sophisticated lady and the young man in "Portrait of a Lady" show us another illustration of alienated individuals as well as estranged relationship. What to be noted here is that both of them are imprisoned in themselves and pretend to be friends. The old lady who is "near at the end of her journey" and for whom "friendship" is all her life has to hide her pain, through constant affectation to the young man so that she might seek a certain intimate relationship. She would exclaim that "Chopin's soul should be resurrected only among friends, some two or three," and that "without friendship - life, what cauchemar!" Or, she would say to him: "But what have I, but what have I, my friend, /To give you, what can you receive from me?/Only the friendship and the sympathy/Of one about to reach her journey's end." Even further, she would assure the young man of their mutual understanding: "I am always sure that you understand/ My feelings, always sure that you feel, /Sure that across the gulf you reach your hand." This lady's life has been tethered to her drawing-room; she serves tea in "an atmosphere of Juliet's tomb" to the people whom she thought her friends. But all the time she must realize that she is alone.

The young man becomes aware of a definite "false note" in the first section of the

poem between their relationship despite the lady's passionate affirmation. But he hides his feeling: he is bored and anxious to get rid of her. Consciously or unconsciously, he lets time pass in trivial things, "taking the air in a tobacco trance, /Admire the monuments, /Discuss the late events, /Correct our watches by the public clocks." Throughout his affair with the lady which lasts for one year, he "keeps countenance" and "remains self-possessed." That is to say, whatever the lady talks to him or whatever happened to her, he has just shut off his emotional feeling.

Finally their friendship with "a false note" comes to an end. The young man is going abroad. The lady suggests he write letters, assuring him that they are intimate friends and he, being conscious of her affectations, wants to keep certain relationship even if he leaves her. But at the end of the poem, the lady abruptly destroys his expectation when she says they did not become friends, although everybody said "our feelings would relate/So closely! I myself can hardly understand." So the young man's "self-possession gutters; we are really in the dark."

"Gerontion" which is contained in the second collection of poetry is a dramatic monologue like "Prufrock," and as in "Prufrock" we move through a series of consciousness which is much more obscure and complicated. Gerontion is an old man, living in a "decayed house" which is not his real home; and the Jewish landlord is the inheritor of mixed cultures of the world. Gerontion is waiting for rain because he feels dry everywhere: himself, nature, and the world in which he lives. The rain will, he hopes, relieve his own dry spirit, and also will generate life out of the dry season. He knows that he is decayed like a house where he has dwelt. He has never experienced heroic action which might have given his life any meaning, but has only waited for a sign to show that there is something in life to wait for; even when the sign, Christ the tiger, came, he and the people did not know the meaning of its arrival, because they, being mixed and confused with various cultures, are separated each from each: the individuals and the people as well are scattered "in fractured atoms." He is aware of corruption of civilization and perversion of the people. Hence life has become a vortex of confusion, deceptions, and contradictions: "After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now/And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,/ Guides us by vanities." He is also aware that the heroic action he thought of earlier (Notice that Prufrock desperately wanted to do) is useless: "Unnatural vices/Are fathered by our heroism." Being conscious of all these pessimistic views, of his meaningless life, of "history full of cunning passages," and of vanity of the people, he collapses to despair:

I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste
and touch: How should I use them for your closer contact?

This is the bleakest picture of an isolated man Eliot has ever created. In the face of all these horrible circumstances where he has to be reduced to merely "the fractured atoms," is there no way out but to give way to "a sleepy corner"?

All the characters we have seen so far are isolated not only from the people around them but also from themselves. Prufrock's self is divided into two - the outer and inner selves ("I" and "you" addressed in the poem) - that makes him unable to govern himself. This being the case, Prufrock exclaims that it is impossible to say just what he means.

When we come up to *The Waste Land*, Eliot's theme of man's isolation and lack of communication becomes more explicit as defined at the end of the poem:

I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison...

I have mentioned, in the preceding discussion, that Eliot's interest in the people has been expanding from individuals to people in general as his poetic career develops. Here in *The Waste Land* we see not only the individuals such as Marie, the Hyacinth girl, Madame Sosostris, the women in "A Game of Chess," and the typist and the young man carbuncular, but also the crowd over London Bridge. Also the poet's vision goes beyond the sordid landscape of the city in which "the damp souls of housemaids reside." He sees the huge waste land and its "stony rubbish." Because the land is futile and waste, spring is painful to it. Spring stirs the land into life when it has covered with forgetful snow, and the people in this land would rather hibernate through the winter so that they maintain dull, dry and meaningless life. As London is the unreal city to the poet, the people in this city are unreal. When he sees the herd of people flowing over London Bridge, he has to sadly acknowledge the same vision which he had from Dante's *Inferno*: "I had not thought death had undone so many." To him they look like dead because "each man fixed his eyes before his feet," who is all confined within himself. With the quotation from Dante, we all know that these people in *The Waste Land* are analogous to those in *Inferno*. Before Dante enters Hell, he passes through a sort of antechamber where he comes across the spirits of those who have lived futile lives because they have been entirely negative. These people have no hope of anything ever happening to them, and this is almost worse than the punishment of Hell itself, to be regarded as utterly negative.¹¹⁾ In this sense, the following passage of Eliot in his essay on "Baudelaire" is very instructive:

So far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good; so far as we do evil or good, we are human; and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: at least, we exist. It is true to say that the glory of man is his capacity for salvation; it is also true to say that his glory is his capacity for damnation.¹²⁾

For Eliot, the people doing evil are better than those who do nothing because their

11) T.S. Pearce, *T.S. Eliot*, p.97.

12) T.S. Eliot, "Baudelaire" in *Selected Essays*, p.429.

action, although its consequences turn out evil, at least affirms their existence: in the light of this message, *The Waste Land* is a collection of various sequences stating the death of the people and of the civilization. The people inhabiting this waste land are dead because they do nothing which will evoke any change of their life: their preference for winter, life as memory leads them to a state of neither living nor dead. This becomes more direct and obvious as the poem proceeds.

In "A Game of Chess" we encounter two women residing in this waste land. There spring is rejected and rain is feared. The first scene takes place in a room reminiscent of that of Cleopatra. The woman is, of all the exquisite perfumes and splendors of her surroundings, bored so much so that she shows some symptom of insanity. She cannot think of anything to do and constantly demands her partner what she has to do. She can only think of some crazy things, like rushing out into the street with her hair down. Another scene takes place in a pub. The two women certainly belongs to the same world but to different class: the former to the upper class and the latter to the low class. The gossip of the women is about Lil and her husband, Albert. Albert is returning home from the war after four years, and one of the women told Lil to make a bit smart for Albert. Otherwise there will be someone else who will give him "a good time." Lil has already had five children and an abortion; she looks so "antique" at the age of thirty-one. During the chit-chat, Lil's company sharply puts a question to her: "What you get married for if you don't want children?" At the end of this section, there is a very touching allusion to Ophelia; it suggests that the women are mad like Ophelia.

The people of this waste land are lukewarm, neither living nor dead: they belong to, in the terms of Dante, Limbo, or in Eliot's terms, "the twilight kingdom of the dead land" where is no hope either for salvation nor for damnation. The man of "A Game of Chess" replies to the woman who hysterically asks, "What shall we ever do", "And if it rains, a closed car at four." It is because he is afraid of rain which stirs the "dull roots of lilacs" and his life.

In a seduction scene of "The Fire Sermon", we see the typist coming home at the violet hour and eating stale food in tin. She is tired and bored. The young man carbuncular comes to her and makes love. During the scene, she shows no emotion; just passive, automatic and apathetic(morally and emotionally). She is indifferent about what has happened to her. She is not interested in her lover at all: hence she is hardly aware of her departed lover, and she even feels glad(unconsciously) their meeting was over and he has gone. The man is also only interested in himself. He thinks it's propitious time to make love because she is bored and tired after the meal: "His vanity requires no response." As he is so self-centered that he does not notice the girl's indifference. Both of them are imprisoned within their own capsules, and they are self-deceived for they think they are still lovers. Of course, this kind of love does not bring them the intense of glorification, but the same boredom.

As we have seen, his poetry up through *The Waste Land* is interwoven with images of the pessimistic qualities of human nature: isolation, self-deception, disillusion, mutual distrust, etc. He has vividly portrayed man in the contemporary world with clarity and poignancy whose feeling of isolation and desolation becomes as poignant and touching as the characters are in our imagination.

Eliot once remarked in his essay on Arnold: "The essential advantage for the poet is that instead of having a beautiful world with which to deal, but rather to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see boredom, and the horror, and the glory."¹³

Indeed, Eliot is, as we have already seen in the preceding section, mainly concerned with the boredom and the horror in the modern metropolis where so many people find themselves caught in a world of monotonous repetition, and reduced to merely "throbbing human engines," living without end or purpose in a world of dim light. From "Prufrock" onwards, the theme of man's isolation and the emptiness of life without belief prevails; Gerontion cries in despair: "I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch: /How shall I use them for your closer contact?"

Eliot's conversion to the Church of England in 1927 has, however, brought a new stage in his poetic career. By his entry into the Anglo-Catholic Church, he has added a step to his development: not to remain in the self-imprisonment, but to painstakingly search for the way out. But this does not mean that he has undergone a drastic change in poetic theme and mood. It is natural process for a man lost in despair to seek something far more powerful than himself, for instance, a supernatural power which might save him from despair. The aspiration for a supernatural power has already been implied in *The Waste Land* when the protagonist speaks to himself: "Shall I at least set my land in order?" And Gerontion is also expressing his fragile passion: "I would meet you upon this honestly." In order to show that Eliot's new stage is not a sudden and abrupt change, Leonard Unger has argued that its emergence may be traced back, even as early as 1917, to his famous essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." But certainly from 1927 onwards, his poetry links with the theme of isolation with the theme of aspiration for a divine order.

F. O. Matthiessen's comments in this respect is noteworthy:

Though they could hardly have been forecast before their appearance, the religious poems follow in natural sequence from such persistent absorption in the nature of spiritual reality. They are scarcely poems of each faith; they mark rather the direction in which the poet's experience is leading him, that he has ascended step by step from the pit of his *Inferno*. They voice the desire for belief, the understanding of its importance to the human spirit, the impalpable movements of the poet's mind from doubt towards acceptance, his gradual comprehension of what, encountering it in Baudelaire, he has called, "the greatest, the most difficult of the Christian virtues, the virtue of humility."¹⁴

13) T. S. Eliot, "Matthew Arnold" in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p.106.

14) F.O. Matthiessen (1947), *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot* (New York & London: Oxford University Press), p.99.

This quotation reveals the gradual development which has brought Eliot from scepticism to the acceptance of faith. For a more explicit understanding of his spiritual pursuit, we have Eliot's own word in his introduction to the *Pensées* of Pascal:

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..... Pascal's disillusioned analysis of human bondage is sometimes integrated to mean that Pascal was really and finally an unbeliever, who, in his despair, was incapable of enduring reality and enjoying the heroic satisfaction of the free man's worship of nothing. His despair, his disillusion are, however, no illustration of personal weakness; they are perfectly objective, because they are essential stage in the progress of the Christian mystic.¹⁵⁾

Four Quartets was won through these stages of Eliot's spiritual journey: suffering, scepticism, and acceptance of faith. In fact, all the ultimate themes of Eliot's poetry culminate in *Four Quartets*. In this poem we have not only a landscape of sordid, futile, meaningless life, but also a spiritual journey that has enabled Eliot to accept life. Standing at the peak of his desperate journey, the poet looks back on the journey which has led him through darkness toward illumination, "the intersection of the timeless with time."

In every third section of the first three Quartets, we have a picture of passengers. The first paragraph of the third section in "Burnt Norton" reminds us of *The Waste Land's* vision of the crowd flowing over London Bridge, the slaves of time, each one imprisoned in his own solitude:

Distracted from distraction by distraction
 Filled with fancies and empty of meaning
 Tumid apathy with no concentration
 Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind
 That blows before and after time,

"Burnt Norton" III

Here we are in "a place of disaffection," in the twilight world of the London Underground. This world belongs to the time before and after, and it is "in a dim light" because it has neither the daylight of plenitude nor the darkness of vacancy. There is "only a flicker" of light over "strained time-ridden faces" in this Underground world; and it is suffocating with "eructation of unhealthy souls/Into the faded air." These are the same people living in the waste land, or the people living in Dante's limbo. Although they are on a journey, they have no destination and find no meaning in their journey. They have no real darkness "in this twittering world."

In the second paragraph, we find a new tone which we did not notice in *The Waste Land*. Eliot suggests we "descend lower, descend only/Into the world of perpetual solitude." This is the crucial line for us because it hints at the possibility of a release from

15) T.S. Eliot, "The 'Pensées' of Pascal" in *Selected Essays*, pp.411-2.

self-imprisonment of the deserted souls of the waste land. The mind, instead of ignoring its solitude and agony, instead of ignoring the present waste land, is asked to accept it, to recognize its destitution and to enter the present.

In "East Coker" we have another very bleak and sombre picture of human life. The poet, who is now "in the middle way", is meditating on the life time of an individual and the life of mankind in general. The life of man and of mankind, and of the works of man is shown to have the same pattern as that of an endless succession of birth, growth, decay and death. His being is charged with rigid determinism: man's life and human history turn on a wheel; hence, the achievements of an individual and the idea of pattern of human history are denied.

What was to be the value of the long looked forward to,
 Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity
 And the wisdom of age? Had they deceived us
 Or deceived themselves, the quiet-voiced elders,
 Bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit?

"East Coker" II

The poet rejects all conventional views on man. For him "The serenity (is) only a deliberate hebetude, /The wisdom only the knowledge derived from experience," and "the knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,/For the pattern is new in every moment."

Then, he goes on further to define man's situation and to draw what might be seen as a conclusion:

In the middle, not only in the middle of the way
 But all the way, in a dark wood, in a bramble,
 On the edge of a grimpen, where is no secure foothold,
 And menaced by monsters, fancy lights,
 Risking enchantment. Do not let me hear
 Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,
 Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,
 Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.
 The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
 Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.

"East Coker" II

Sweeney Agonistes exists only in two fragments, but it is Eliot's first dramatic version in which he dealt with his earlier theme of boredom and horror, trying to achieve both the comic and the tragic effects simultaneously. Carol Smith argues in *T.S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice* that "Eliot dealt, in these fragments, with the theme of spiritual pilgrimage, the theme he has returned again and again in his plays."¹⁶ What interests me in these fragments is that *Sweeney* is dramatized as extremely conscious of boredom and horror in life. He is aware that life is merely a succession of the same eve-

16) Carol H. Smith (1963), *T.S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice: From Sweeney Agonistes to the Elder Statesman*, (Princeton : Princeton University Press), p.74.

nts: the trivial, futile, and meaningless.

Sweeney: Birth, and copulation and death.
 That's all, that's all, that's all, that's all
 Birth, and copulation, and death.

"Fragment of an Agon"

Again Sweeney addresses the audience in more specific terms about his vision of present life:

You dreamt you waked up at seven o'clock and it's
 foggy and it's damp and it's dawn and it's dark
 And you wait for a knock and the turning of a lock
 for you know the hangman's waiting for you.
 And perhaps you're alive
 And perhaps you're dead

"Fragment of an Agon"

We have to notice here several references to *The Waste Land* "foggy," "dawn," "knock," "turning of a lock," "the hangman," etc. Perhaps Eliot might have wanted in this dramatic version to recapitulate what he wanted to say in *The Waste Land*. Being conscious of boredom and horror in life, Sweeney has to suffer, and his suffering lures him into a flight to "a cannibal isle," "a flight into oblivion." And yet his awareness has not reached the stage where he can transcend that reality; hence he helplessly waits for a knock that will eventually deliver him.

All of Eliot's plays written after his conversion deals in one way or another with the discovery of human freedom and the religious vocation. The main characters must accept their doom of loneliness and suffering, and further "perfect their will" so as to make it conform completely with the will of God. By recognizing a supernatural power, or in the terms of Thomas Becket, the "Will of God," the central protagonists free themselves from the determinism of life, and finally choose themselves, according to their lot, the way to lead either for religious pursuit or for communion with people in ordinary life.

Eliot wrote *The Family Reunion* encouraged by his first reception of *Murder in the Cathedral* on the regular stage, and he attempted this time something quite different, a play that would use the setting and characters of a drawing-room comedy.

Harry, Lord Monchensey in the play, is not a saint or a hero, but an ordinary man who is shown at the turning point in his life. There is no great event which can be applicable to the conventional structure of the plays. The brief actions consist of Harry's home-coming after an absence of eight years for the family reunion arranged for his mother's birthday party; he leaves again, after a few hours, which causes the death of his old mother. We also learn that Harry made a tragic marriage, and that his wife was drowned at sea about a year ago, and that the family are uncertain whether her death was an accident or suicide.

As soon as Harry returns home, he has to face his inability to communicate with his family: "But how can I explain, how can I explain to you?/You will understand less after I have explained to you." For all the articulation he can find, he finds it impossible to explain his state of feeling to anyone else:

The sudden solitude in a crowded desert
 In a thick smoke, many creatures moving
 Without direction, for no direction
 Leads anywhere but round and round in that vapour
 Without purpose, and without principle of conduct
 In flickering intervals of light and darkness,

The Family Reunion, Part I Scene I

He cannot endure his suffering alone any longer, and hence blames the world in which he lives: "It is not my conscience,/Not my mind, that is diseased, but the world I have to live in."

He is aware of "partial anaesthesia of suffering without feeling /And partial observation of one's own automatism" of the modern world, and of the people's wish to "escape by violence," but whatever they attempt to do, "one is alone /In an over-crowded desert, jostled by ghosts."

The tangible reason of his conflict in the play can be traced back to his wife's death. While travelling on an ocean liner in the Mid-Atlantic, she was drowned, and whether her death was an accident or suicide, we are not made to see it clearly. But what is clear in the context is that Harry either pushed his wife overboard or at least watched her slip and drown, and that he had wanted to kill her, and has felt himself pursued ever since by the Furies.

When Harry's aunt, Agatha reminds him that if he really wants no pretences he must make a beginning himself, it becomes obvious that his burden is to be taken away from him. Agatha is playing a role of a psycho-analysist for Harry: she leads him to define his nightmare till "the knot is unknotted /The crossed is uncrossed /And the crooked is made straight." Her urging message penetrates Harry's mind:

We must try to penetrate the other private worlds
 Of make-believe and fear. To rest in our own suffering
 Is evasion of suffering. We must learn to suffer more.

The Family Reunion, Act II Scene I

Encouraged by Agatha, Harry gradually reveals his mind: his awareness of solitude and his sense of sin.

I felt, at first, that sense of separation,
 Of isolation unredeemable, irrevocable
 It's eternal, or gives a knowledge of eternity,
 Because it feels eternal while it lasts. That is one hell.

Then the numbness came to cover it - that is another

The Family Reunion, Part II Scene II

In the course of the revelation, Harry's sense of guilt stemming from his inability to love his wife and family suddenly undergoes a metamorphosis. From the negatives of self-torment and despair, his attitude changes to the positives of repentance and the will to atone. While talking to Agatha, Harry experiences a "moment of illumination" in that "the chain breaks, the wheel stops, and the desert is cleared." And he begins to see that "his business is not to run away, but to pursue, /Not to avoid being found, but to seek," for his story is, as Agatha has mentioned, "not a story of detection, /Of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation." At the moment when Harry perceives his "election" (in his own terms), the drama ends: his exit is not an end but a beginning.

So far, we have observed the theme of isolation and lack of communication in Eliot's major creative works. By way of summarizing this section, let us observe briefly the poet's personal mood and conception of the contemporary world. For this Kristian Smidt has contributed a fairly comprehensive article in his book, *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T.S. Eliot*, and my present understanding as far as this subject is concerned is mainly indebted to his article.

The subjects of most of Eliot's poetry are, as we have seen in detail, trivial, trite, ugly, ludicrous. And the mood, accordingly, is predominantly one of irony or disgust, more rarely one of serious concern.¹⁷⁾

The origin of his despondency can be, Smidt says, generated either by experiences of a private character, or by the outer world. He takes, for an illustration of the poet's perception of isolation, his preference for a dialogue form both in poetry and prose, which enables him to disguise himself and to objectify his emotions and personal experiences. And his preference for a dialogue form has obviously led him to the realm of drama. Smidt further maintains: "In fact all the seemingly 'objectively' conceived characters even in such works as *The Family Reunion* are self-portraits to a great extent than is probably the case in most dramas."¹⁸⁾

In contrast with his wish to search for ideals of order, beauty, and purposeful living to be realized in human society, and which he imagined could be found from the past, the modern world he actually encounters is a chaos full of "contrived corridors," "cheap hotels" to which Sweeney tempts Mrs. Porter; and what Eliot sees in this world is that so many people are living a half-life, numbed in the repetition of mechanic cycle of life just like "the automatic hands" of typists, and each is estranged from others.

Needless to say, the World War I seriously affected Eliot's darkened vision of life as it did to most contemporary writers; hence his vision of a decaying civilization and of de-

17) Kristian Smidt (1949), *Poetry and Belief in the Works of T.S. Eliot* (Oslo: Kommisjon Hos Jacob Dybwed), p.105.

18) *Ibid.*, p.107.

humanization has become not only that of private lives, but also that of the whole civilization to which they belong. These are outer facts generated Eliot's mood; however, the more contingent reason for his mood should go further back to the inner sensibility of his personal character. Having devoted much time to philosophy - both western and eastern, he has formed his own view of life, believing that life for the perceptive people must be painful: indeed, we are constantly reminded of his insistence, both in his prose and poetry, on pain and suffering. What drew Eliot to Baudelaire was in a way his "strength merely to suffer."

He (Baudelaire) could not escape suffering and could not transcend it, so he attracted pain to himself. But what he could do, with that immense passive strength and sensibilities which no pain could impair, was to study his suffering.¹⁹⁾

This remark is quite relevant to Eliot's personal mood. Therefore, we find, in poem after poem, a note of the personal suffering which Eliot believed must be the true subject of poetry. In his essay on "Dante" (1929) Eliot has acknowledged his prejudice of his earlier conviction that "poetry not only must be found through suffering but can find its materials only in suffering."²⁰⁾ He has also confessed that it took him many years to appreciate the *Paradiso* than the *Inferno* due to his hatred of the "cheerfulness, optimism, and hopefulness" of the nineteenth century.

No matter what Eliot has criticized himself, he has, as a poet, unflinchingly penetrated human nature and the sordid reality of contemporary world, and created his art with honesty which ought to be the expression of what he knows to be true, and with firm belief that "the poet must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts."²¹⁾

We have so far examined the theme of man's isolation and distrust of human relations in Eliot's poetry and poetic drama. What strikes us in the course of our investigation is that his work of art forms a unique wholeness as far as the theme is concerned.

The poet's intense awareness of the sordid reality of modern civilization and of man's complete isolation made him suffer so much that he considered, in his early days, suffering as the only genuine material for poetry. Also, his intellectual sensibility has not allowed him to go with the romanticism which predominated in the nineteenth century; instead, he enunciated the Impersonal Theory opposed to the romanticism in which he asserted that "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."²²⁾

In his early period, Eliot's view of life was atomistic: What he saw in life are fragments. *The Waste Land* was composed of fragments of meaningless life in which nothing

19) T.S. Eliot, "Baudelaire" in *Selected Essays*, p.423.

20) *Ibid.*, p.262.

21) *Ibid.*, p.290.

22) *Ibid.*, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in *Selected Essays*, p.21.

coheres; hence the "I" of the poem says, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." Gerontion also sees man as "whirled in fractured atoms!" The problem of the poet at this time was that, in spite of his keen awareness of the incoherence of life, he could not put these fragments together and find a meaning.

This problem was solved with the acceptance of the Christian orthodoxy. His pursuit for order which was manifested in "Tradition and the Individual Talent"(1919) found a home in the order and tradition of this belief. His conversion was not sudden. We have his own testimony for his conversion in a speech on "Christianity or Communism":

Towards any profound conviction one is borne gradually, perhaps insensibly over a long period of time, by what Newman called "powerful and concurrent reasons"... At some moment or other, a kind of crystallisation occurs, in which appears an element of faith... In my own case, I believe that one of the reasons was that the Christian scheme seemed to me the only one which would work... Among other things, the Christian scheme seemed the only possible scheme which found a place for values which I must maintain or perish (and belief comes first and practice second), the belief, for instance, in holy living and holy dying, in sanctity, chastity, humility, austerity. And it is in favor of the Christian scheme, from the Christian point of view, that it never has, and never will, work perfectly. No perfect scheme can work perfectly with imperfect man.²³⁾

When he first announced his acceptance of Christianity in the preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1926), he wrote on his position in religion, in politics and in literature: "The general point of view may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion." This statement is significant because the way he announced the event clearly indicates that his "conversion" is not only religious, but also political and literary. He seemed to make sure of himself where he stood ideologically in the world so as not to be shaken in ordinary life or in belief.

Now, the poet is a changed man. He was relieved from the world of sheer loneliness and lack of communication; now he has become a man who breaks the shell of isolation and emerges as a spokesman of the Christian faith for the sake of the people who are to him unconscious of their sordid reality. And thus, the basis of his poetry gradually changed: instead of fragments of meaningless life, we are to have a complete unity of life governed by the absolute order. "One of the main effects of Christianity in Eliot's poetry is the provision of a unifying principle to his vision."²⁴⁾ His own work of art, particularly his prose will certainly demonstrate the history of his spiritual development.

Eliot showed a deep interest in the question of belief long before he accepted the Christian faith. Once he deplored "the decline of orthodoxy theology and its admirable theory of the soul," because owing to this decline, "the unique importance of events has vanished."²⁵⁾ His poetry from "The Love Song" onwards tells us about his preoccupation in

23) "Christianity or Communism" in *The Listener*, March 1932. Quote by Kristian Smidt's *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T.S. Eliot*.

24) Smidt, *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T.S. Eliot*, p.105.

25) T.S. Eliot, "Eeldrop & A." Quote by Kristian Smidt.

the problem of belief, e. g., "Whispers in Immortality," "The Hippopotamus," etc. But he had an agnostic conception at that time which obviously made it hard for him to accept Christianity.

Eliot maintained that the poet or the reader does not necessarily believe in the idea assimilated into the poetry. When he read Dante and found Dante's ideas - the 13th century theology and philosophy, he could not believe in these things; thus he declared that the poet also need not have believed in these things himself: "You are not called upon to believe what Dante believed, for your belief will not give you a groat's worth more of understanding and appreciation."²⁶⁾ Moreover, he said that "we can make a distinction between what Dante believes as a poet and what he believed as a man." But Eliot checks this phrase with another seemingly contradictory phrase: "you cannot afford to ignore Dante's philosophical and theological beliefs, or to skip the passage which express them most clearly." He goes on to say: "If you can read poetry as poetry, you will 'believe' in Dante's theology exactly as you believe in the physical reality of his journey; that is, you suspend both belief and disbelief."²⁷⁾ The above passages give us the impression that Eliot seems to oscillate between belief and disbelief of the poet; but what should be remembered here is that even if Eliot could not accept the belief himself at this stage, he appears to have had a compelling need to make some personal order out of the chaos in which he lived: hence, his phrase, "doubt and uncertainty are merely a variety of belief" is self-revelatory in this respect.

Eliot has maintained the opinion that "literature can be no substitute for religion, not merely because we need literature as well as religion."²⁸⁾ Literature should neither be a substitute for religion, nor should it be subordinate to it. And Eliot began his poetic career by declaring that religion was not important to the artist. He believed that the work of art exists apart from the belief of the artist. But, together with his acceptance of Christianity, his attitude was gradually modified. Thus, in an essay called "Religion and Literature" (1935), he wrote that "the 'greatness' of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards,"²⁹⁾ and "what I want is a literature which should be *unconsciously*, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian."³⁰⁾

Furthermore, he deplored that "the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism, that is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life: of something which I assume to be our primary concern."³¹⁾ Hence, he demanded that religion be the foundation of one's whole life: "Our religion imposes our ethics, our judgment and criticism of ourselves, and our

26) T. S. Eliot, "Dante" in *Selected Essays*, p.258.

27) *Ibid.*, p.258.

28) *Ibid.*, "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" in *Selected Essays*, p.48.

29) *Ibid.*, p.388.

30) *Ibid.*, p.392.

31) *Ibid.*, "Religion and Literature" in *Selected Essays*, p.398.

behaviour towards our fellowmen." His view of literature and religion as belonging to two distinct spheres seems changed by subordinating literature to religion when he wrote this essay.

From Eliot's point of view as a Christian convert, "man is man because he can recognize supernatural realities."³²⁾ "It is doubtful whether civilization can endure without religion."³³⁾ And "there are two and only two finally tenable hypothesis about life: the Catholic and the materialistic"³⁴⁾ And his criticism about the modern humanism:

The modern humanistic view implies that man is either perfectible, or capable of indefinite improvement, because from that point of view the only difference is a difference of degree - so that there is always a hope of a higher degree. It is to the immense credit of Hulme that he found out for himself that there is an *absolute* to which *Man* can never *attain*. For the modern humanist, as for the romantic, 'the problem of evil disappears, the conception of sin disappears.'³⁵⁾

All these statements in Eliot's prose explicitly demonstrate his literary and religious position during the years immediately after he joined the church. His pursuit for order to put the jumbles of what he perceived in life was finally satisfied by his religious faith.

2. The Religious Vocation

Our next concern is how his poetry has been changed since his conversion. Or, how has Eliot expressed his hard won faith in his later poetry? Apparently, his later work of art has added a new theme, the religious one, to those of man's isolation and distrust of human relationships; but this will not likely to be expressed in poetry as explicitly as in prose, for he wants "a literature(which)should be *unconsciously*, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian." In fact, however, when we read some of his poetry, e.g., *Ash-Wednesday*, *Rock*, and *Murder in the Cathedral*, his desire seems not to work, at least, right after his conversion.

Before we discuss his later works related to the religious theme, it will be relevant to find some clue in his pre-Christian stage which developed towards the religious theme. Kristian Smidt states that "the despair of Eliot in the early phase is caused by the loss or lack of a philosophy, particularly a Christian philosophy,"³⁶⁾ and much of his despair is projected into the portrayal of the various characters in his poetry: Sweeney, Mr. Eugenides, the young man carbuncular, etc. What struck Eliot at that time was not their immorality or sexual perversion, but their unawareness of immorality or perversion, lacking knowledge of good and evil.

The reason Eliot valued Baudelaire is that "Baudelaire perceived that what really matters

32) T. S. Eliot, "Second Thoughts about Humanism" in *Selected Essays*, p.485.

33) Eliot, p.479.

34) Eliot, p.514.

35) Eliot, p.490.

36) Kristian Smidt, *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T.S. Eliot*, p.112.

is Sin and Redemption.³⁷⁾ Eliot's comment about Baudelaire reveals Eliot's own concern with this matter: "Baudelaire has perceived that what distinguishes the relation of man and woman from the copulation of beasts is the knowledge of Good and Evil."³⁸⁾

Eliot's characters lack Baudelaire's awareness. In "Gerontion" failure of belief in Christianity is a central subject. Knowledge and understanding of religion is given too late: "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" In this poem we clearly find the idea of the corruption of civilization owing to the decay of religion, which is more fully developed in *The Waste Land*. In *The Waste Land*, after a suffocating journey through the sordid and dreary modern landscape, we are led in the last section to a possible destination, the Chapel Perilous where the Holy Grail might be found. This suggests that we may attain a spiritual regeneration in this waste land, if we achieve a certain spiritual discipline: "give, sympathize, control."

"The Hollow Men" which appeared just before Eliot's conversion plainly shows the struggle between his despair and his awareness of the presence of the supernatural power. This poem depicts scarecrow-like people of this world who are physically and spiritually damned because they are unable to meet the supernatural power with "direct eyes." "One of these is the speaker himself, waiting for the consuming fire. To this state he has come, apparently through his refusal of the vision; like Tiresias or Dante's Ugolino at the last, he is sightless."³⁹⁾

Life is agony, and is terrible to those who have not passed over the river to the "death's other kingdom," the actual death. The speaker knows that he has to "cross" with direct eyes, "to death's other kingdom," in order to see "the perpetual star, /Multifoliate rose /Of death's twilight kingdom"; nevertheless, the speaker is trapped in the dead land where even his suffering is futile and unreal. Hence, to get the vision of "multifoliate rose" for the hollow men is remote. It is important, however, to note here that the speaker declares, despite his desire to think of himself as a scarecrow, his hope for the eyes: "Sightless, unless /The eyes reappear /As the perpetual star /Multifoliate rose /Of death's twilight kingdom."

To summarize, in his early period Eliot's view of life was entirely pessimistic. And, as Kristian Smidt infers, "his philosophical pessimism presupposes, not necessarily religious belief, but certainly a religious attitude and point of view"⁴⁰⁾ It is, therefore, fairly easy to trace the religious theme in his early poetry; there pain and suffering were stressed. That obviously corresponds to the Christian doctrine which sees in suffering a means to attain renunciation.

Indeed, Christian ideas are ubiquitous in Eliot's poetry. Eliot thinks that "the intellec-

37) T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p.427.

38) *Ibid.*, pp.428-9.

39) Grover Smith, *T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p.103.

40) Kristian Smidt, *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T.S. Eliot*, p.118.

tual souls must necessarily experience moments of despair and disillusion," and the despair is often caused by their sense of guilt for being incapable to attain love or faith; e.g., "The Love Song," "Gerontion," *The Waste Land*, etc. In his essay on Dante's *Vita Nuova*, he talks about "the Catholic philosophy of disillusion," the gist of which seems to be this: "Not to expect more from *life* than it can give or more from *human* beings than they can give."⁴¹ His despair of life, particularly caused by his inability to surrender himself to the religious belief in younger days, was supplemented by this "Catholic philosophy of disillusion."

Ash-Wednesday presents us, like his earlier poems, a conflict between values of flesh and spirit. The speaker wishes, on the one hand, not to turn again to the state of emotional futility; on the other hand, he strives hard towards the grace of God. He is depicted as a man keenly conscious of "I who am here dissembled." And he rejects the temptations of life, concluding with an earnest prayer to the Virgin for humility and for an end to the painful separation from God: "suffer me not to be separated."

As indicated thus far, Eliot's work of art, particularly his later poetry and drama have dealt with the ultimate question of how man can attain his final freedom, or spiritual salvation in this world. His preoccupation with this problem has given coherence to his works. Accordingly, our study of his works enables us to find some hints for salvation of man, a kind of prerequisites in order to be redeemed. The prerequisites can be epitomized as 1) an awareness of original sin; 2) renunciation; 3) atonement; and 4) humility. To put it differently, Eliot's spiritual quest for order in his creative works will be fulfilled when man who either belongs to the world of "high dream" or to the world of "low dream" complies with these four conditions. A brief consideration for each of these elements seems needed for a more specific understanding of his poetry and drama.

1) An Awareness of 'Original Sin'

The starting point of Eliot's poetry was, as we have already seen, man's awareness of isolation and of decaying civilization, and even of the horror of life, which was very often juxtaposed with his imaginary ideal past where the unity and harmony could be found. What matters to Eliot is not only an awareness of the conflict between the physical and the spiritual, but also the depth of consciousness of the people. Eliot considered that the majority of people of this world were scarcely alive just like "hollow men," or in the terms of Harry, the hero of *The Family Reunion*, they are in "the partial anaesthesia of suffering without feeling."

Among these half-living people, some appear to intuitively penetrate their reality, and Eliot's characters are those who must suffer because of their acute consciousness. Eliot believed that those who become aware of their real situation can be generally divided into two groups according to their reaction: those who want to escape into oblivion and live a

41) T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p.275.

kind of "death-in-life"; e.g., Prufrock, Gerontion, Sweeney, etc., and those who recognize and accept the reality, the intense suffering like Harry.

Those who become aware of their reality will be naturally led to the notion of doom because what they perceive around them is not merely the failure of communication but also sheer lack of morality by which their action are to be measured. Balachandra Rajan rightly points out the importance of self-awareness of Eliot's characters:

This self-awareness of the protagonists should be an important and possibly the most important element in our assessment of those minute but crucial increments of advance that orient the movement being made in the direction of meaning. Though futility is not redeemed by the intense consciousness of futility, there can be no hope of redeeming it without this initial recognition.⁴²⁾

We are, therefore, prepared to see that Eliot's doomed characters have the possibility to be redeemed, according to their reaction, from the wheel of life. I have said before that the despair engendered in Eliot by difficulties of embracing Christianity was supplemented by "the Catholic philosophy of disillusion" which he found exemplified in Dante's *Vita Nuova*. Kristian Smidt says in his book that "the Catholic philosophy of disillusion is connected with the doctrine of sin."⁴³⁾

The subject of sin was not directly mentioned in his early poetry. Very often it was connected with the idea of doom. In "Gerontion" and *The Waste Land*, the awareness of doom is so acute that they regard damnation as a mode of salvation, because "the possibility of damnation is also so immense a relief in a world of electoral reform, plebiscites, sex reform and dress reform, that damnation itself is an immediate form of salvation - of salvation from the ennui of modern life, because it at least gives some significance to living."⁴⁴⁾ Sometimes, the notion of sin is stated explicitly in his poetry:

I knew a man once did a girl in.
Any man might do a girl in
Any man has to, needs to, wants to
Once in a lifetime, do a girl in

"Fragment of an Agon"

Eliot affirms that "the recognition of reality of Sin is a New Life,"⁴⁵⁾ but the recognition of Sin is not always conscious. In "Hollow Men" the notion of sin appears as "the shadow". In "Journey of the Magi" we see an old man who has achieved belief by witnessing the birth of Christ, and yet he cannot break loose from the past. Oppressed by a sense of "death-in-life," he is content to submit to another death:

I had seen birth and death,

42) Balachandra Rajan (1976), *The Overwhelming Question: A Study of the Poetry of T.S. Eliot* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), p.44.

43) Kristian Smidt, *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T.S. Eliot*, p.118.

44) T.S. Eliot, "Baudelaire" in *Selected Essays*, p.427.

45) *Ibid.*, p.427.

But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

“Journey of the Magi”

It is not that the Birth that is also Death has brought him hope of a new life, but that it has revealed to him the hopelessness of the previous life. Hence, the Magi realize, although they are not aware of their sin in the past, how worthless they are in comparison with the perfection they have witnessed.

With his acceptance of the Christian faith, the sense of sin is almost directly expressed in his poetry. In *Ash-Wednesday*, the protagonist is haunted by a sense of sin. He knows that the people of this world “affirms before the world and deny between the rocks... spitting from the mouth the withered apple-seed.” Hence, he offers prayer to the Virgin: “Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.” In “Marina” Eliot enumerates the sins of human beings distinctively:

Those who sharpened the tooth of the dogs, meaning
Death
Those who glitter with the glory of the hummingbird, meaning
Death
Those who sit in the sty of contentment, meaning
Death
Those who suffer the ecstasy of the animals, meaning
Death “Marina”

The sense of sin is increasingly attached to the doctrine of Original Sin, as Harry has come to realize through his personal agony:

I can clean my skin,
Purify my life, void my mind,
But always the filthness, that lies a little deeper...

The Family Reunion, Part II Scene I

About Eliot's adherence to the doctrine of Original Sin, Kristian Smidt explains that “it was at first welcomed, perhaps, chiefly because it lent a semi-mythical support to Eliot's opposition to the romantic-humanistic view of life. But this opposition was inspired in turn by a deep realisation of human imperfection.”⁴⁶⁾

The phrase of T.E. Hulme in regard to the conception of human imperfection which Eliot quoted in his essay “Baudelaire” was accorded with his feeling and thought:

In the light of these absolute values, man himself is judged to be essentially limited and imperfect. He is endowed with Original Sin. While he can occasionally accomplish acts which partake of perfection, he can never himself be perfect. Certain secondary results in regard to ordinary human action in society follow from this. A man is essentially bad, he can only accomplish anything of value by discipline ethical and political.⁴⁷⁾

46) Kristian Smidt, *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T.S. Eliot*, p.149.

47) Quote from *Selected Essays*, p.430.

2) Renunciation

It is obvious that Eliot's mind occupied with the sense of Original Sin tried to seek a salvation by discipline that Hulme asserted as an essential necessity for an imperfect man. Indeed, Eliot's emphatic appeal to renunciation can be heard throughout all of his poems. "What the Thunder said" in *The Waste Land* illustrates, in my opinion, Eliot's effort to work out salvation by way of disciplines: if the people of the waste land are to be disciplined in accordance with the Thunder's revelation, they would be redeemed from the sordid reality.

The protagonist of *Ash-Wednesday* ascends the stairs of renunciation in order to be united with the grace of God: "Struggling with the devil of the stairs who wears/The deceitful face of hope and despair." He has to overcome the temptations of life seen as "an enchanting pastoral scene," and passes through the "fetid air" and the stair "which is dark damp, jagged, like an old man's mouth drivelling."

Eliot demands in his poetry that life be an ascetic discipline. Without suffering and toils, happiness will not be found. And, Eliot's inclination to regard suffering as a unique source of something valuable to attain spiritual freedom accords to the Christian mystics' notion that the renunciation is achieved primarily through suffering.

If renunciation is to be complete, it must involve complete self-denial. The gist of renunciation is this: desiccation of the soul and the body. This idea is thoroughly expounded in the *Four Quartets*:

Descend lower, descend only
 Into the world of perpetual solitude,
 World not world, but that which is not world,
 Internal darkness, deprivation
 And destitution of all property,
 Desiccation of the world of sense,
 Evacuation of the world of fancy,
 Inoperancy of the world of spirit.

"Burnt Norton" III

Agatha who leads Harry to attain salvation "had to fight for many years to win my dispossession." To liberate oneself from the human wheel, one must renounce all the temporal and spiritual lust and reach to the state of dispossession. Archbishop Thomas Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral* has to resist the temptations of sensual pleasure, the temporal and the spiritual power in order to attain his ultimate freedom.

Eliot's appeal to this conception is "partly that Eliot was attracted to what is difficult, partly that the corruption of mankind has made him to see the need of a spiritual discipline, and partly that he has found askesis the best way of integrating the personality."⁴⁸⁾

3) Atonement

In an attempt to understand Eliot's idea of atonement in relation to his poetry it will

48) Kristian Smidt, *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T.S. Eliot*, p.152.

be perhaps relevant to consider a little Dante's influence on Eliot in assumption that Eliot's poetry, in a broader sense, dealt with the purgatorial theme of Dante for which atonement is the prime virtue. Eliot wrote in "What Dante Means to Me" that "the kind of debt that I owe to Dante is the kind which goes on accumulating, the kind which is not the debt of one period or another of one's life."⁴⁹⁾ In addition, he said:

I have borrowed lines from him, in the attempt to reproduce, or rather to arouse in the reader's mind the memory, of some Dantesque scene, and thus establish a relationship between the medieval inferno and modern life.⁵⁰⁾

It seems, therefore, compatible to compare Eliot's whole works to Dante's *Divine Comedy*: "*The Waste Land* reads like a modern version of Dante's *Inferno*; the Ariel-poems and *Ash-Wednesday*, describing the slow and painful ascent towards the light, seem to correspond to Dante's *Purgatorio*, whereas the *Four Quartets* with their intimation of paradise has much in common with Dante's *Paradiso*.⁵¹⁾

Among other things, Eliot especially preferred the episode of Arnaut Daniel in Dante's *Purgatorio*. What struck Eliot in this episode was that Arnaut voluntarily accepted the torment of flame in order to be redeemed. In Purgatory, "the souls suffer," Eliot says, "because they wish to suffer for purgation. And observe that they suffer more actively and keenly, being souls preparing for blessedness, than Virgil suffers in eternal limbo. In their suffering is hope, in the anaesthesia of Virgil is hopelessness; that is the difference."⁵²⁾

Eliot considered that the people of the modern world are scarcely alive, hovering in a twilight between salvation and damnation. It is almost impossible for them to cross "with direct eyes, to death's other kingdom," because they are weak and fearful of disturbance. But Eliot thinks that the only hope for them, if they are to avoid damnation, lies in the purgation. So, Eliot makes his central characters undergo purgation like Harry who chooses to go "to the worship in the desert, the thirst and deprivation." The people partly living in the waste land must not take refuge in the oblivion, but accept suffering and renunciation as a form of atonement.

The frequency of the imagery of the stair and fire throughout his poetry is very significant in effort of atonement and purification of the soul: e.g., "burning, burning, burning, burning /O Lord Thou pluckest me out..." in *The Waste Land*; "The only hope, or else despair /Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre-/To be redeemed from fire by fire," in "Little Gidding"; and *Ash-Wednesday* shows us the protagonist ascending the stair of atonement. Also, the symbol of atonement is, Smidt suggests, usually that of voluntary isolation in a desert, which because of its association with the story of Christ in the wil-

49) T.S. Eliot (1965), "What Dante Means to Me," in *To Criticize the Critic* (London: Faber and Faber), p.126.

50) *Ibid.*, p.128.

51) H. Servotte, *English Literature in the Twentieth Century: Survey and Anthology* (Leuven: Acco Press), p.41.

52) T.S. Eliot, "Dante" in *Selected Essays*, p.256.

derness includes the idea of renunciation and the victory over temptations.

4) Humility

Eliot's emphasis on the virtue of humility is heard repeatedly not only in his poetry but also in his prose. He says in "Shakespeare and the Stocism of Seneca"(1927) that "humility is the most difficult of all virtues to achieve; nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself."⁵³⁾ In a speech he stressed the necessity of humility for a poet: "I am sure that for a poet humility is the most essential virtue."⁵⁴⁾ Also, Eliot's passage in "Baudelaire in Our Time" seems self-revelatory:

The important face about Baudelaire is that he was essentially a Christian, born out of his due time, and a classist, born out his due time... And being the kind of Christian that he was, born when he was, he had to discover Christianity for himself. In this pursuit he was alone in the solitude which is only known to Saints. To him the notion of Original Sin came spontaneously, and the need for prayer... And Baudelaire came to attain the greatest, the most difficult, of the Christian virtues, the virtue of humility.⁵⁵⁾

The stress Eliot placed on humility seems to suggest his acceptance of Christianity has not been an easy one. He had to fight with his doubt and pride which was finally overcome at the time of entering into the Anglican Church. Eliot considers humility as the only state of mind which can embrace Christianity. Hence, the doctrine of Original Sin and the virtue of humility were to be a central subject in Eliot's drama after his conversion, especially in *Murder in the Cathedral*.

Murder in the Cathedral is a verse drama in which Eliot dealt with the martyrdom of Archbishop Thomas Becket. Eliot dealt, also, with the conflict of the spiritual and the temporal power, the relation of the Church and the State. In this play Eliot attempted to show us, through the martyrdom of Thomas Becket and the reactions of the Chorus which represents the ordinary human beings, how the virtue of humility is important to attain the spiritual redemption.

As soon as the hero, Thomas Becket, appears on the stage, he says to the priests, "All things prepare the event, Watch." This clearly indicates that his mind is set on doing his duty, whatever the consequences are. Even before his own words, we have an evidence of his determination not to avoid martyrdom from the messenger's comment:

It is common knowledge that when the Archbishop
Parted from the King, he said to the King
My Lord, he said, I leave you as man
Whom in this life I shall not see again.

And thus, to prepare the event(martyrdom), he has to undergo a series of ordeals, which appear to him as Tempters.

The dramatic purpose of the Tempters, except the Fourth Tempter, seems not, in fact,

53) *Ibid.*, p.130.

54) Quote from Kristian Smidt, p.44.

55) T.S. Eliot, "Baudelaire in Our Time" in *For Lancelot Andrewes*, pp.97-99.

to tempt the hero since they offer Becket choices of sensual pleasures and temporal power which he has already rejected in the past. Their purpose is to show the audience the past of Becket and his relation to the King. As a matter of fact, Thomas Becket can hardly be said to be tempted, for the play opens so near its climax that any inner development is impossible. For Becket, "But what was once exaltation / Would now be only mean descent."

The Fourth Tempter is the only one who really tempts Thomas because he tempts him with his own thoughts and desire: the aspiration of "an enduring crown to be won" through martyrdom:

What can compare with glory of Saints
 Dwelling forever in presence of God?

 Seek the way of martyrdom, make yourself the lowest
 On earth, to be high in heaven.

Thomas recognizes what the Fourth Tempter says are his own thoughts, and knowing that he is "tempting with my own desire," he cries:

Can sinful pride be driven out
 Only by more sinful? Can I neither act nor suffer
 Without perdition?

The Fourth Tempter penetrates Thomas to the same level of understanding and lures him. That was a real temptation to the proud mind and Thomas perceives his chief peril. The Fourth Tempter speaks to him the very words he used to the chorus:

You know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer.
 You know and do not know, that action is suffering,
 And suffering action. Neither does the agent suffer
 Nor the patient act. But both are fixed
 In an eternal action, an eternal patience
 To which all must consent that it may be willed
 And which all must suffer that they may will it
 That the pattern may subsist, that the wheel may turn and still
 Be forever still.

Murder in the Cathedral, Part I

"One meaning of the passage is that every cause predicates an effect, and every effect a cause; they cannot occur independently. When Becket speaks to the chorus he thinks of himself as the actor, the source of will, and of the women as passive recipients of sorrows and benefits resulting from his choice of martyrdom. But when the Fourth Tempter flings the same words back in his teeth, Becket seems to realize that unless the sufferer refrains from willing to suffer and thus from soiling his hands with his own blood, he cannot be

a true martyr."⁵⁶⁾

The Archbishop thus reveals the contradiction in his thinking. He thought that he had submitted to God by denying the temptations of sensual pleasures and temporal power. But, when the Fourth Tempter repeats to him his own speech to the chorus, he realizes that he has been seeking martyrdom out of his pride and desire for glory.

Then, why was Thomas put into a chief peril? How is he seen by the audience? Obviously Becket is presented as man of "virtues," "impartiality," and "generosity," "Loathing power given by temporal devolution, /Wishing subjection to God alone." But these positive aspects of his character is disgraced by his pride. The First Priest says:

His pride always feeding upon his own virtues,
Pride drawing sustenance from impartiality,
Pride drawing sustenance from generosity.

That Thomas is a proud man has been stressed, besides the above passage, by the messenger and the First Tempter; e.g., "He comes in pride and sorrow, affirming all his claims"; "Your Lordship is too proud!" As such, Becket's awareness of his sinful pride has led him to cry in despair: "Is there no way, in my souls sickness, /Does not lead to damnation in pride?" Because of his pride, Becket runs the danger of willing martyrdom.

After the Fourth Tempter reacted against Becket with his own words, he remains silent. E. Martin Browne writes in *The Making of T.S. Eliot's Plays*, that to his question of how complete was the victory over the Fourth Tempter, Eliot replied that "none of us can attain final victory while we live."⁵⁷⁾ At last, the earnest plea of the chorus, "Save us, save us, save yourself that we may be saved," penetrates his heart and enables him to overcome his crisis:

Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain;
Temptation shall not come in this kind again.
The last temptation is the great treason;
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.

By this phrase, we are granted to know that he has moved beyond the wheel of life, and that he has got an insight into the great pattern of God to which not only the women but he himself must submit.

The evolution of the Chorus in this play is no less important than the martyrdom of Becket, for they represent the ordinary people and they are redeemed by their virtue of humility. It seems to me that Eliot exhibited, by depicting the spiritual evolution, or spiritual education of the chorus, the way of redemption for the ordinary people, from the state of emotional sterility to the state of full consciousness of the meaning of their life.

At the beginning of the play, they want to be let alone as they are in the state of

56) Grover Smith, *T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, p.187.

57) E. Martin Browne, *The Making of T.S. Eliot's Plays*, p.43.

“living and partly living.” They are passive under the oppression of the State and the personal agony: “We have all had our private terrors, /Our particular shadows, our secret fears.” And knowing instinctively that something which would break their routine will happen in Canterbury, they fear the disturbance and regard it as “some malady.”

- As Becket’s destiny becomes clear, their fear also increases till in the last chorus of Part I they express their terror as “oppression and torture” “extortion and violence.” At the crisis of Thomas, the chorus feel his failure of faith; they obscurely know that if he is safe, they are safe, too. They implore him to save himself for their sake.

Till the moment of Thomas’ wrangling with the Knights, their terror reaches the extreme of realizing that they are involved in this murder and share its guilt; and yet, it is so hard for them to perceive or accept the eternal pattern of God that they feel as if they were violated:

It was here, in the kitchen, in the passage,
 In the mews in the barn in the byre in the market-place
 In our veins our bowels our skull as well

 Nothing is possible but the shamed swoon
 Of those consenting to the last humiliation.
 I have consented, Lord Archbishop, have consented.
 Am torn away, subdued, violated,

Murder in the Cathedral, Part II

At the end of the play, however, they reach the realm of lucid consciousness to the meaning of what they witnessed, and it is expressed as a form of prayer:

Forgive us, O Lord, we acknowledge ourselves as types of the common man,

 We acknowledge our trespass, our weakness, our fault; we acknowledge
 That sin of the world is upon our heads, that the blood of martyrs and the agony of the saints
 Is upon our heads.

Carol Smith’s passage on the chorus deserves to be quoted for our comprehension:

The full involvement of the chorus in Thomas’ martyrdom, for example, is intended to enable the audience to observe their own representative group, “the type of the common man,” travel the Christian path. The author hoped that those in the audience unable to identify with Thomas could perhaps identify with the women of Canterbury. While Eliot’s esteem for the common man has never been high, in his conception of the chorus in *Murder in the Cathedral* he adopted “a view at least more complimentary than that which he held when he wrote *Sweeney Agonistes*, when he felt that the majority of the audience would be incapable of sharing any response except that of the visionless and materialistic characters of that play. At least, the chorus has come to an understanding on their own level which can involve them in salvation.⁵⁸⁾

Indeed, *Murder in the Cathedral* is the story of salvation both for Becket and for the

58) Carol H. Smith (1963), *T.S. Eliot’s Dramatic Theory and Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p.101.

women of Canterbury thanks to their virtue of humility. Particularly, the audience can experience a moment of illumination by identifying themselves with the chorus, whose spiritual evolution enables them to perceive the presence of the supernatural power in the natural world. As such, the spiritual education of the chorus must not be underestimated in this play. Perhaps it was the main purpose of the author when he consented to write a verse drama for the Canterbury festival.

Stephen Spender has stated in his review of Eliot's poetic drama: "the true theme of Eliot's plays after his conversion is the discovery by heroes, and one heroine, of their religious vocation."⁵⁹⁾

My attempt to find Eliot's common themes seems justified by an awareness of his constant preoccupation in man's reality, which coheres, as most critics observed, all his works into a pattern as far as the theme is concerned. From "Prufrock" onwards he has devoted himself to describe a man's spiritual journey in quest of the meaning and order in life. His suffering and despair at not finding them in this world dominated by materialistic concerns led him to Manichaeism or even to Agnosticism, but finally his quest for a supernatural order has found a home in Christianity.

What attracts me most in his pursuit for order is the weight of his suffering which he had to endure. His poetry reveals a painstaking step towards the spiritual liberation, or as a kind of a milestone in his spiritual journey. In other words, his poetry, while each poem remains itself, is endowed with meaning by other pieces, by the whole context of his works, gradually forming an Eliotian pattern.

Eliot is a poet who tried to embody the whole picture of life, and to create a kind of order through religion in the natural world. The remarkable thing about him is that he has faced the nature of life without illusion. "He has not written as he would like to feel, or as he thinks he ought to feel, but as he does feel."⁶⁰⁾ Thus, the thematic evolution of his works represents itself as the experiences the author has gone through. Therefore, the themes of man's isolation, distrust of human relations and of the religious vocation seem to be, as it were, the extracts of his autobiography. Among these themes, the theme of the religious vocation has a special significance for us because it does require, in the whole context, to reinterpret and re-evaluate his previous themes.

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59) Stephen Spender, *Eliot* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1975), p.189.

60) F.O. Matthiessen (1947), *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press), p.121.