

Reviews

ELIOT'S LONGER POEMS

Derek Traversi, *T. S. Eliot: The Longer Poems*, The Bodley Head, 1976.

It is odd that Derek Traversi, well known for his books on Shakespeare, should have contemplated this exegetical study on the eve of the appearance of Helen Gardner's edition of the *Four Quartets* manuscripts, and with the expectation in the air of Valerie Eliot's selection of her husband's correspondence. Perhaps Mr Traversi does not consider that material of this kind would modify his observations about what he would have us believe he regards as autotelic poetry. No one would deny that there is a good deal of misleading speculation abroad, but even a journalistic study such as T. S. Matthews's recent *Great Tom: Notes towards the definition of T. S. Eliot*, presents new facts that a scholar is wise to mark and digest. Yet what is especially intriguing about Mr Traversi's method is that in a work purporting to reject suggestions that Eliot's extra-literary convictions need to be understood if his poetry is to be properly appreciated—a reckless gesture, certainly—and that they are, indeed, essential to its non-trivial character, Mr Traversi countenances no restraint in indulging in polemic about what he construes to be in fact the true character of those convictions. We could ignore this contradiction of his professed approach if the ensuing polemic appeared to draw sustenance from the beliefs which we know to have been close to Eliot's heart at any period of his life: it would on the contrary be gratefully received by those readers who are of the opinion that commentators on his poetry have taken Eliot too literally at his word in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and have too rigorously separated the intellectual and spiritual consciousness from the poetic craftsmanship.

However, Mr Traversi appears to espouse a religious humanism of the sort promulgated by, for instance, John Middleton Murry and Irving Babbitt, which was the source of an abiding tension in their relationships with the poet. Writing in *The Criterion* in January 1926—before his "conversion" to Christianity—Eliot described Middleton Murry's convictions as amounting, more or less, to a "religion" (he used to refer to Communism in the same vein) which "I am totally unable to understand"¹ (he professed at least to an understanding of Communism insofar as its "great merit" was "the same as one merit of the Catholic Church, that there is something in it which minds on every level can grasp"²) and remarked, six years later, on the type of absurdity to which his friend's beliefs had reduced him: "it was Mr Murry who first perceived the extraordinary resemblance between Jesus Christ and D. H. Lawrence".³

Then, Irving Babbitt "and his disciples" were chastized by Eliot at the Malvern Conference in 1941—the poet's participation in which, incidentally, is a useful example of his wholehearted incorporation into a particular branch of the Anglican establishment about the time of the composition of the last three *Quartets*—for attempting to "devise a

1 "The Idea of a Literary Review", p. 6n.

2 "Commentary", *The Criterion*, July 1933, p. 644.

3 "Commentary", *The Criterion*, April 1932, p. 468.

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philosophy of life without a metaphysic . . . humanism of its nature stops short of a philosophy".⁴ Not only, in other words, was humanism spiritually offensive to Eliot ("what faith in life may be, I know not. For the Christian faith in death is what matters"⁵) he judged its intellectual credentials to be suspect also. So it should be noted that this resentment of humanism had at least as much to do with Eliot's repudiation of his parents' — and therefore his childhood's — Unitarianism during his study at Harvard of the Eastern religions and his enthusiasm at Oxford for the writings of F. H. Bradley, as it did with his later positive commitment to Anglo-Catholicism which came with middle age and English citizenship in 1927. Eliot's dissatisfaction with the "religion of blue sky, the grass and flowers"⁶ (as he described Unitarianism, that muscular brand of pious humanism) drew its initial animus, that is to say, from a secular source: an impatience with its intellectual bankruptcy, just as his admiration for the Caroline divines, such as Lancelot Andrewes, depended more, initially, on Eliot's attraction to the precision of their writings and various aspects of their creative method — such as the *pasticcio* technique which he used to advantage in *The Waste Land* — than on an acute apprehension of an Anglo-Catholic kinship. The poet rejoiced to recall the merciless treatment meted out by Bradley to the humanistic pseudo-religion of Matthew Arnold — a creed, like Unitarianism, divorced (in Eliot's opinion) "from thought":

"Is there a God?" asks the reader. "Oh yes", replies Mr Arnold, "and I can verify him in experience." "And what is he then?" cries the reader. "Be virtuous, and as a rule you will be happy", is the answer. "Well, and God?" "That is God," says Mr Arnold; "there is no deception, and what more do you want?" I suppose we do want a good deal more. Most of us, certainly the public which Mr Arnold addresses, want something they can worship; and they will not find that in an hypostasized copy-book heading, which is not much more adorable than "Honesty is the best policy", or "Handsome is that handsome does", or various other edifying maxims, which have not yet come to an apotheosis.⁸

Certainly Eliot thought of himself and is remembered as a poet rather than a philosopher — he claimed, a few years before his death, to be unable to understand his doctoral thesis on Bradley — but an appreciation of his dissatisfaction with humanism is the key, in my opinion, to an understanding of both those attitudes towards humanity which his poetry imparts and his orthodox Christianity, which, eventually, set those insights within a precise intellectual and spiritual tradition. Mr Traversi's scheme to pilot the vital thematic deliverances of *The Waste Land*, *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets* towards an humanistic apotheosis is doomed to failure from the outset, and seriously misrepresents in its wake the true tone of the poetry; for Eliot travelled in the opposite direction.

I

The issue of the presence or the absence of "progression" in *The Waste Land* is a popular one with commentators and Mr Traversi belongs to that desperate band who are committed to finding in the poem a movement

4 *Malvern, 1941* (London, 1941), pp. 204, 206.

5 "Commentary", *The Criterion*, January 1933, p. 248.

6 *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London, 1939), p. 71.

7 "Arnold and Pater", *Selected Essays* (London, 1932), p. 434.

8 "Francis Herbert Bradley", *Selected Essays*, p. 451.

towards an expression of hope in and for humanity. He acknowledges the presence of futility and anarchy to be sure, but what matters finally is the way Eliot has subordinated these negative influences to "intimations of living significance" (p. 20). Consequently, the critical problem which *The Waste Land* presents for Mr Traversi is whether or not the poetic method embodies an "enhanced awareness of life" (p. 22), and we discover in his analysis — despite his avowal, to which I have already referred, that he will avoid philosophical speculation — that he is thoroughly committed to a demonstration of that hypothesis.

After announcing that the poem does not possess a "logical sequence . . . pointing to a foreseen conclusion" (p. 23), Mr Traversi then proceeds firstly to judge "significant" (a word which, with its various mutations, recurs with an irritating and eventually meaningless regularity throughout the book) the "emergence . . . of what we might call a 'musical' conception of poetic exposition" (p. 23) — it is difficult not to resent the suggestion that this is an original idea — and then to isolate a "*crescendo* theme through the whole monologue", "a coherent and resolving vision" (p. 39). So it appears, after all, that there is a "logical sequence" — in artistic terms at least — and this is set in motion for Mr Traversi by the "Marie" section of "The Burial of the Dead" where the formerly settled aristocratic civilization of Europe is portrayed in a state of confusing fragmentation: "*Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch*". Eliot has Marie recall the innocent abandon of her childhood:

And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke's,
My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.

For Mr Traversi, who is not afraid of overstatement, this fleeting image calls to mind nothing less than "the sense of exhilaration which a surrender to life provokes" (p. 25). I suppose this quality is present here, but with the immediacy (in the context) with which faded souvenirs recall passionate moments; and what matters about the inclusion of this episode is the contrast it presents of the glimpse of an exhilarating past with the enervating reality of the present. In the post-War wasteland — a disintegrated Europe — the adult Marie, unable to sleep, reads "much of the night" and migrates annually to avoid the harshness of Winter, now a warm season in the perverse contemporary world while Spring is the cruellest time of all.

Having now committed himself to optimism, however, Mr Traversi confronts the experience in the hyacinth garden, a few lines later, and announces that the purpose of this souvenir is to give "the sense of a possible relationship" (p. 27). How this exquisite epiphany, framed by those magical fragments from *Tristan*, plaintively suggesting the vast hopelessness of lost connexions ("*Mein Irisch Kind/Wo weilest du? . . . Oed' und leer das Meer*"), the disappointment of sense — "I could not/Speak, and my eyes failed" — and the limbo of the partly living ("I was neither/Living nor dead"), anticipating the Dantean references in the ensuing "Unreal City" section, gives the impression of the *possibility* of human relationships quite escapes me. On the contrary, it is in visions of this sort that the persona's *aboulie* is most terrifyingly presented; the hyacinth garden, for all its sensuousness, evokes his impassibility rather than the possibility of love. How does Mr Traversi reconcile his idea of this hyacinth garden with the reference to hyacinths in "Portrait of a

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Lady"? What does he make of "La Figlia Che Piange" and of the statesman's difficulties in "Coriolan"? Does he not believe that Eliot's unfortunate first marriage — a tragedy which haunted the poet throughout his life and about which we now have sufficient plausible information to know that it was going through a most difficult period at the time of *The Waste Land* — needs to be taken into account at this point?

The closing section of "The Burial of the Dead" is interesting, for instance, for its reference to the battle of Mylae and the quotation from Baudelaire. Mr Traversi dismisses the former allusion with the statement that Mylae was an altercation decisive in the "history of Western civilization" (p. 30). I suppose it is not unique in that, and any commentator worth his salt would ponder further on Eliot's reason for singling out Mylae in particular. But as Mr Traversi failed earlier to contrast Marie as she was with Marie as she is and will be — and so draw the obvious conclusion about the reason for her presence in the poem — so he misses the point here that Mylae, which secured the triumph of Rome in the Mediterranean, following the original pyrrhic victory of the Carthaginians at Asculum, is set at once in parallel and contrast with the First German War (as A. L. Rowse accurately describes it) when Britain enjoyed a victory, but at too great a cost to her elect spirits,

so many

I had not thought death had undone so many,
and the further decline of the West — "falling towers" — as opposed to its ascendancy under Rome after Mylae, was abetted.

I am not convinced either that Mr Traversi fully appreciates, on the one hand, the character of the influence of Baudelaire on Eliot at the time of his writing *The Waste Land* or, on the other, that this sympathy for the poet underwent subtle but important changes through the following decade. For Mr Traversi quotes, to support his impression that Baudelaire is invoked in the poem as being one "for whom the possibility of moral choice was the only thing that could save human life from unutterable tedium" (p. 30), a statement from Eliot's essay of 1930 on the Frenchman. There are, however, two essays by Eliot on Baudelaire prior to that final one written in 1930 — and written because he had wanted to qualify his earlier impressions — and the one of these relevant to the Baudelaire of *The Waste Land* is that contributed to Wyndham Lewis's *Tyro* in Spring 1921 — "The Lesson of Baudelaire". It is a quite different view of the poet from that entertained by Eliot nine years later; it evokes spiritual intimations as different from those in the later essay as *The Waste Land* is different from *Ash-Wednesday* in its statements about the human condition. The fact that Mr Traversi can quote from the essay written about Baudelaire at the time Eliot was completing *Ash-Wednesday* to support a reading of *The Waste Land*, and ignore the essay on Baudelaire contemporaneous with the earlier poem is a manifestation of his belief (expressed in this study) that both poems deliver fundamentally the same faith in Life in accordance with Eliot's perennial concern with, "in the last analysis, an attitude of moral realism" (p. 83), "lived experience", "a positive, a life-directed reaction" (p. 134), "continuing to live in any real sense" (p. 136), a "continuing and expanding life" (p. 151), an "affirmation of faith in life" (p. 178), a "life-affirming attitude" (p. 207) and so on. Consequently Mr Traversi finds little of thematic "significance" to choose between this or that poem and this or that essay on "moral" issues in Eliot's mono-

chrome programme of magnanimous Pollyannaism. All this betrays a curious blindness to what is happening in the text. The statement, for instance, that the issue of the possibility of salvation through moral choice is relevant to "The Burial of the Dead" cannot be supported by the poetry. Eliot, at this stage in *The Waste Land*, describes a society bound on the treadmill of death's despair ("each man fixed his eyes before his feet") and instead of the possibilities for moral choice being celebrated, the dispensation is one in which *all* possibilities of a human character are affronted.

With reference to the various prose utterances about Baudelaire by Eliot, I am inclined to believe that, as with his admiration for the prose style and the theology of Lancelot Andrewes, Eliot was drawn by the poetic brilliance, the craftsmanship of *Les Fleurs du Mal* before he searched further there and in the *Journaux Intimes* for the source of Baudelaire's bitter disillusion. This view is supported by Eliot's reflections on his reading of French poetry while he was at the Sorbonne:

from Baudelaire I learned first, a precedent for the poetic possibilities, never developed by any poet writing in my own language, of the more sordid aspects of the modern metropolis.⁹

But Baudelaire had written that the "théorie de la vraie civilisation" would not find its expression in

le gaz, ni dans la vapeur, ni dans les tables tournantes; rather it should be sought "dans la diminution des traces du péché originel".¹⁰ That Eliot agreed with Baudelaire's reduction, and that he took precisely this repudiation by the French poet of the vapid and dizzy speculations to which the avoidance of the "péché originel" had reduced contemporary literature as a text in his warfare not only against Georgianism (of which *The Waste Land* is the signal victory) but certain elements in various anti-Georgian movements as well is borne out in this splendid *pièce justificatif* in "The Lesson of Baudelaire":

as for the verse of the present time, the lack of curiosity in technical matters, of the academic poets of to-day (Georgian et caetera) is only an indication of their lack of curiosity in moral matters. On the other hand, the poets who consider themselves most opposed to Georgianism, and who know a little French, are mostly such as could imagine the Last Judgment as a lavish display of Bengal lights, Roman candles, catherine-wheels, and inflammable fire balloons. *Vous, hypocrite lecteur . . .*¹¹

One wonders what the vorticist readers of *The Tyro* made of that!

At the time of writing *The Waste Land* Eliot identified wholeheartedly with Baudelaire's vision of the corruption of human nature and the omnipresence of sin. He had yet to embrace fully that Christian spirituality which would encourage him to articulate the diminution of sinfulness in terms of valid moral action — both personal and social. Nine years later, as a champion of Anglo-Catholic orthodoxy, he was bound to modify his allegiance to Baudelaire's almost Manichaean convictions: hence the essay of 1930 — quite inappropriate to a reading of *The Waste Land* — where the servitude of sin unto death is balanced by a new Christian emphasis on the possibility of obedience unto righteousness. Eliot derides Baudelaire

⁹ "What Dante Means to Me", *To Criticize the Critic* (London, 1965), p. 126.

¹⁰ "Mon Coeur Mis à Nu", *Journaux Intimes* (Paris, 1954), p. 1224.

¹¹ *The Tyro* [Spring, 1921], p. [4].

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for his "mulish determination to make the worst of everything"¹² in his preoccupation with damnation, but it was precisely this concern, inextricably linked with an apprehension of Original Sin (so distasteful to the humanist), which was indisputably central to Eliot's interest in the poet in 1922 and which is the only acceptable gloss of the line which is the closing linguistic obsequy for "The Burial of the Dead"

"You! hypocrite lecteur! — mon semblable, — mon frère!"

The application of the same phrase from Baudelaire which Eliot used in the conclusion of his essay as the culmination of this part of the poem is not an accident. (In "The Hollow Men", 1925 — the poetic nadir of Eliot's view of man — the poet is perhaps more fully in accord with *la tradition baudelairienne* than in *The Waste Land*. But as this poem more clearly gives the lie to Mr Traversi's thesis he conveniently ignores it.)

It is clear that Mr Traversi is unequal to the task he has set himself. Not only is his thesis contradictory and misdirected but in his analysis of words and phrases he is repeatedly off-beam. Reading the line from "The Fire Sermon" — "By the waters of Lemman I sat down and wept" — he is prompted to remark:

the substitution of "Lemman" for "Sion" reminds us that Eliot wrote at least part of this poem when recuperating from illness and mental stress in Switzerland (p. 40).

If the Jews (or Eliot) had been set down by the waters of Zion rather than those of the literal (or a metaphorical) Babylon — as was actually the case — they would have had little to weep about. Perhaps Babylon and Zion are interchangeable loci for Mr Traversi, but for Eliot there was more than a world of difference between them: the line "Zion in her anguish with Babylon must cope" (from Neale's hymn "Brief life is here our portion") captivated the poet.¹³ If our critic is capable of confusing Babylon and Zion in his reading of a well known psalm (number 137, "Super flumina") then we must look forward to his analysis of *Ash-Wednesday* — where the poet draws far more extensively on scripture and the liturgy — with decidedly modest expectations.

Again we are told that "violet", in the "violet hour" (from the seduction sequence, also in "The Fire Sermon"), has "about it something unexpected, at once lucid and vaguely synthetic".

Tiresias, the timeless spectator, is involved in this atmosphere, is aware of the faintly unnatural twist given to romance by the "violet" hour (p. 42).

I find the word to be anything but vague, synthetic, *faintly* unnatural. And what has this scene to do with "romance"? Violet is the colour traditionally associated with the Lord's Passion and the irony of its introduction at this point is that it enshrouds the empty passion of licentious sexuality between the typist and her pustular "lover". It is also the liturgical colour of Advent and Lent — the seasons of spiritual preparation and penitence, set, in this context, in sharp contrast to those whose sins are scarlet. Mr Traversi, who is concerned with the "musical" progression of the poem, because he overlooks this obvious association and its inherent irony, fails to connect this reference with the "agony in stony places" (the agony in the Garden) in "What the Thunder said", a more explicit evocation of the true Passion, the consciousness of sin.

¹² "Baudelaire", *Selected Essays*, p. 422.

¹³ Private information.

Cleanh Brooks (in "The Waste Land: An Analysis", a generally admirable account) has said that "violet" in this phrase has associations with Baptism.¹⁴ Certainly a violet stole is worn at that sacrament in the Roman Church, but in the English Church (whose liturgy Eliot was coming to know at this time) the priest vests in a white stole; and in any case it seems to me that the poet (like John Donne in "I am a little world made cunningly") is more concerned in *The Waste Land* with purification by fire than regeneration by water. The quotation from Augustine's *Confessiones* and Buddha's *Fire Sermon* (which gives the title to the section) supports this reading:

To Carthage then I came
 Burning burning burning burning
 O Lord Thou pluckest me out
 O Lord Thou pluckest
 burning

and if any sacramental importance is to be found in the "violet hour", I prefer to think exclusively of the sacrament of penance (when violet is also worn in both the Roman and the English Churches, and which relates at least as closely to the Passion and the Easter liturgy) than of Baptism. Professor Brooks attempts to amplify his point about Baptism by referring to the "baby faces in the violet light" later in *The Waste Land*.¹⁵ But this is too good to be true. Candidates for Baptism are not always babies (Eliot was 39 when he was baptized); the sacramental "accident" of Baptism is water, not "light", and bats do have baby-like faces, after all, but they are not human beings. I am always reminded in these lines,

And bats with baby faces in the violet light
 Whistled, and beat their wings

of Aubrey Beardsley's twilight world and of those fiendish little figures in his drawings for *Under the Hill*.

Then Mr Traversi has difficulties with the "inexplicable splendour" of St Magnus the Martyr. As he cannot countenance Eliot's advocacy of a Life-denying pessimism neither is he able to give himself up to a Life-transcending spirituality; and he explicates this section, extraordinarily, as a celebration of a situation "human in its associations" (p. 44), ameliorating the "faintly unnatural twist given to romance" by the previous section. Another deficiency of scholarship betrays Mr Traversi into the realm of the nonsensical. What matters to Eliot, as the emphasis of the poetry indicates, is not merely the baroque splendour of that famous Anglo-Catholic church, but that it is "inexplicable" to wasteland sensibilities. Its associations are not "human" (*pace* Mr Traversi) but were divine. Eliot was not in love with the beauty of "riverside London" as Mr Traversi so quaintly maintains; if he had read the poet's articles in *The Criterion* on the preservation of the City churches he would know that Eliot positively rejected the notion of preserving those buildings simply because of their aesthetic charm — "we renounce any attempt to appeal to our Shepherds on the argument for Art or the beauty of London" he wrote in 1926, and projected his polemic instead in the direction of "Laud and the *beauty of holiness*" (the emphasis is his).¹⁶ And if Mr Traversi was as familiar

14 In *T. S. Eliot*, ed. B. Rajan (London, 1947), p. 27.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

16 "Commentary", October 1926, pp. 628-9.

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as he should have been with the reasons for Eliot's growing interest in the English Church about the time of the writing of *The Waste Land* he would know that the poet was being drawn into an appreciation of its golden age of Caroline divinity through the knowledge that its artistic and intellectual distinction in the seventeenth century was bound up with a firm grasp of orthodox spirituality. Such an apprehension made him acutely aware, as he wrote in the essay of 1927 on John Bramhall (bishop of Derry under Charles I and the "stoutest inheritor of the tradition of Andrewes and Laud") that

there could hardly be a greater difference than that between the situation during the first half of the seventeenth century and the situation to-day. Yet the differences are such as to make the work of Bramhall the more pertinent to our problems. For they are differences in relation to a fundamental unity of thought between Bramhall, and what he represents, and ourselves.¹⁷

St Magnus "*ad pontem*" remained a sad, though beautiful, symbol, in the twentieth century, set amidst the *messa peccati* (the crowd flowing over London Bridge, oblivious to its existence) of this former "unity", just as Marie and Mylae recalled an integrated past ironically juxtaposed with the disintegrating present. And the fact that the church's splendour was now inexplicable is a judgment against the age and a comment on *les mots de la tribu*, not an expression of awe after a survey of the Thames-side scene, "human in its associations and beautiful in its buildings".

Because Mr Traversi, misreading the tone of this section, finds it to be a hopeful expostulation, he cites this passage as the beginning of the poem's progression towards its optimistic affirmation of Life:

the way is prepared for the concluding section, in which the themes so far developed will be taken up once more and integrated, as far as may be possible, into the artistic reflection of something which resembles a positive sense of life (p. 46).

The fact of the matter, however, is that the concluding section of *The Waste Land* resembles "life" less closely than it resembles death. Mr Traversi does not talk about the poem's name, he does not discuss its epigraph from Petronius, he does not account for the title of the first section (from the Caroline *Book of Common Prayer*), and he does not appreciate that *The Waste Land* is a poetic post-mortem on the West, an anatomy which surveys a purgatorial limbo where damnation is a more arresting concern than salvation. "What the Thunder said" begins deliberately with the Son of man in his last hours — as "The Burial of the Dead" portrayed Him surrounded by a "heap of broken images". This is not my idea of progression — it is a riveting and awesome stasis. "He who was living is now dead/We who were living are now dying" — this is not my idea of a "positive sense of life". The recognition of a spiritual presence on the road to Emmaus ("who is that on the other side of you?"), if it is a positive reference, has its positive quality compromised by the unanswered questions which contain it. And Mr Traversi, oblivious to tone and context, seizes desperately on the persona's remark about setting his lands in order, describing it as a "challenge . . . to humanity" (p. 53). But it is only a question,

Shall I at least set my lands in order?
rendered at once pathetic and absurd by its utterance in a deserted land-

17 *Selected Essays*, p. 362.

scape in which the last vestiges of a decayed dispensation are crumbling to the ground

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down.

The poetry implies, to my mind, that the answer to it is possibly "no" — but, more appropriately, for it is only a rhetorical question, it is met, like Wittgenstein's insoluble problems, by a devastating silence following the subsidence of a brief and nightmarish confusion of tongues. As St Magnus's "splendour" was "inexplicable", so the arcane "shantih" is a peace, Eliot's note tells us, that eludes comprehension.

II

The issue of "progression" is more relevant to *Ash-Wednesday* than to *The Waste Land*. For in the second of the "longer poems" the principle poetic delight arises out of Eliot's exercise of a firm authority over the penitent's experience in a splendidly variegated modulation from an initial recalcitrance

Because I do not hope to turn again . . .

I no longer strive

to his concluding acquiescence

Although I do not hope to turn again . . .

Suffer me not to be separated.

The precise spiritual occasion and emotion anticipated by the poem's title and amplified as its theme, and the intensely personal character of the verse (introduced by the rhythmic emphasis on "I" in the first section) give *Ash-Wednesday* a unique place in Eliot's poetry. Mr Traversi's determination to envisage it as the middle term in a sequence initiated by *The Waste Land* and completed by *Four Quartets* — a "remarkable continuity of theme and technique" (p. 87) — betrays his lack of critical sensitivity both to a thematic impulse which involves a sense of transcendence which *The Waste Land* avoided (a nihilism completed by "The Hollow Men") and which the *Quartets*, on the other hand, present in a more expansive (and less precise) guise, and to the finer points of style which evoke this preoccupation.

The liturgical impulse is especially prominent in *Ash-Wednesday* and is reflected not only in numerous borrowings, but in Eliot's use of incantation ("that which may, in the most nearly literal sense, be called 'the magic of verse'"¹⁸). The iterated concentration on turning, for example, which introduces and closes the poem, is a prominent figure in the Mass for Ash Wednesday — the first day of Lent. "Turn ye unto me with all your heart", begins the epistle,

and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning. And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God. . . . Who knoweth if he will return and repent?

Initially, however, Eliot's penitent appears restive and ill-disposed for the exercise, though his very use of the verb "turn" within a language that turns about the concept even as it denies it nicely compromises his apparent reluctance. Similarly, while he is aloof, he describes his complacency as an aged eagle's refusal to "stretch its wings" — the eagle being a symbol of baptismal regeneration, a bird (so the psalmist foretells) whose youth

18 "From Poe to Valéry", *To Criticize the Critic*, p. 31.

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shall be renewed, and a type of what Mary describes in *The Family Reunion* as the "terrified spirit/Compelled to be reborn"

To rise toward the violent sun
Wet wings into the rain cloud
Harefoot over the moon.

Also, amidst the apparent negativeness of the opening lines of the poem, associations are nevertheless set up with the kingdom (the "usual reign"), the power, and the glory in spite of (or rather because of) unpropitious conditions:

Why should I mourn
The vanished power of the usual reign
— that the reign is "usual", incidentally, suggests that the vanishing of its power is possibly a personal whim and only transitory, thus contributing to the tentatively soaring tendency of the theme at this stage —

Because I do not hope to know again
The infirm glory of the positive hour . . .

and the acknowledgement five lines later that this undesired goal is achieved in a place "where trees flower, and springs flow" invests the spiritual enterprise with a natural desirability which further sustains the positive implications of the persona's negative intimations.

As the true appreciation of bliss depends on an acquaintance with grief, so the sun of righteousness shines more brightly after the penitent emerges from the dark night of the soul. Speculation and hope are stripped away in his progress along the *via negativa* — only a childlike trust (Eliot's penitent asks to be taught to "sit still") abides. The opening section of *Ash-Wednesday* contrives to portray the persona in a paradoxical milieu of this type where the penitent must disconnect himself from the world and from his ideas of God and become nothing in the name of striving after a fullness of being. Eliot subtly locates his persona in this preparatory state at the outset by the adaptation of a line from the epistle for Septuagesima (three weeks *before* Lent) — "I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air" — though stripping away its assertive quality, which in addition to placing the penitent prior to Ash Wednesday and the penitential season, determines his spiritual state at that time in terms of an appropriate ineffectuality, further explicating the eagle's refractoriness:

Because these wings are no longer wings to fly
But merely vans to beat the air . . .
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still.

Then, in the incantatory repetition of a part of the *Ave Maria* (called "the Angelus" by the imprecise Mr Traversi — p. 64) which closes the opening section, both the influence of the sacrament of confession — with its customary provision of recitations of this prayer to the Virgin as a form of penance — and the character of the feminine presence later in the poem are unobtrusively but decisively established. In a sense therefore — because of its preparatory character and the emphasis on confession which closes it, in addition to the liturgical impulse of the poetry — the first section of *Ash-Wednesday* might have been subtitled "Shrove Tuesday".

When Eliot was asked at a poetry reading what he meant by the first line of the second section — "Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree" — he replied, mischievously, "I mean 'Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree'". But the puzzling opening is less daunting

than it seems when we recall the title given to this section on its initial appearance, as a separate entity, in 1927. For a poem entitled "Salutation" (as it was then known), addressing a "Lady" in its opening line, and subsequently incorporated into a sequence immediately after a quotation from the response to the angelic salutation in the liturgy, is hardly unclear in its reference. And this identification with the Virgin, or a figure symbolic of her, is reinforced in the second line in the phrase "the cool of the day" which, as a description of God's sojourn in Paradise in the Book of Genesis, calls to mind Adam and Eve, and therefore the second Adam and Eve — Christ and the Virgin. As the second Adam redeemed the transgression of the first, so the participation of His Mother in the redemptive mystery compensated for the sinfulness of Eve. Similarly, while the reference to a juniper-tree recalls Elijah, as that to dry bones reminds us of Ezekiel (and the talk of bones and solitude in Psalm 102 is probably relevant also), as this Lady "honours the Virgin in meditation", we are apt to interpret these references (as we interpreted the reference to the Garden of Eden) as Old Testament types of the new dispensation. These worthies and their experiences of solitude and wrestling with God prefigure the desert fathers, and their extreme trials of faith, with whom the persona identifies:

And I who am here dissembled
 Proffer my deeds to oblivion, and my love
 To the posterity of the desert. . . .

The "Lady" is a mesmeric, mirage-like figure, a *locus amoenus* in this parched landscape —

The Lady is withdrawn
 In a white gown, to contemplation, in a white gown —
 and the persona would imitate her, attracted by her beauty as an icon of spiritual discipline:

As I am forgotten
 And would be forgotten, so I would forget
 Thus devoted, concentrated in purpose.

The penitent's resolution in these lines is a further stage in the poem's tracing of his transcendence, and in a sharply contrasting sequence (as poetically fertile in its rhythm as the preceding lines were prosaically dry) where Eliot draws on the hymn of St Bernard to the Virgin in the thirtieth canto of the *Paradiso* ("Termine fisso d'eterno consiglio" — "Terminate torment/Of love unsatisfied") the conclusion of the inconclusible transfigures all that is made into a garden of love. A tissue of contradictions continues to celebrate the negative way: the desert, it appears, has blossomed as a rose by the operation of the "Word of no speech" — "the Word without a word" (as Eliot describes Him later in the poem, drawing on Lancelot Andrewes) — and the tangible manifestation of this grace is the Lady, the *rosa mystica*, who is at once, in the Virgin birth, "torn and most whole":

The single Rose
 Is now the Garden
 Where all loves end . . .
 Grace to the Mother
 For the Garden
 Where all love ends.

Eliot then returns briefly to the bones which are now "united/In the quiet of the desert". For, scattered, they "did little good to each other".

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But "forgetting themselves and each other", as the penitent must do and has done, their integrity is restored; and as the chosen of God were assured of their "inheritance" (so Ezekiel recounts) after the vision of the building of the Temple and the healing of the waters, so the bones lay claim to their "land": "we have our inheritance".

With the scheme of ascent thus established in the first two sections of the poem, and having rooted it in the assurance of a spiritual estate, Eliot concentrates in the third and briefest section of *Ash-Wednesday* on detailing his plan of repentance in sympathy with one of the best known commentators on the *via negativa*, the Spanish mystic St John of the Cross. This third section, like the second, was also published separately (in 1929) and with the title "Al Som de l'Escalina". St John of the Cross, indeed, orders his instruction to the penitent in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* in terms of a stairway of perfection. We know that Eliot was admiring and absorbing the Saint's writings about this time, as he wrote in "Lancelot Andrewes" (1927) that the English Church has "no devotional monument equal to that of St John of the Cross"¹⁹ while in "The 'Pensées' of Pascal" (1931) he calls St John one of the "great mystics".²⁰ The epigraph to "Sweeney Agonistes" (1932) is from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*

Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings

— a text, indeed, for the renunciatory theme of *Ash-Wednesday II*— whilst Eliot's reference to "the figure of the ten stairs" in "Burnt Norton" V is further evidence of his attraction to the ordering by St John of the discipline of repentance in terms of a stairway of perfection. And the third section of "East Coker" concludes with almost a verbatim quotation over twelve lines from the first book of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*.

The concept of turning also is agreeably recalled at this stage of *Ash-Wednesday* though now, of course, the penitent is turning, not merely contemplating it — and, what is more, he is turning the "second stair". Various temptations have been at work to distract him (and wordly "distraction" occupies a good deal of St John's attention) — firstly the demon of hope (which at this juncture in the penitential journey would take the form of spiritual pride) and despair (the sin against the Holy Ghost). In the second book of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* St John asserts if, then, the soul conquer the devil upon the first step, it will pass to the second; and if upon the second likewise, it will pass to the third; and so onward.²¹

Eliot, with this passage obviously in mind, speaks of the persona's warfare with the dual threats of hopefulness and hopelessness as "struggling with the devil of the stairs". The language of ascent, despite its persistence, is arduous and *sotto voce*: the poet creates perfectly the plodding character of the penitent's progress:

At the second turning of the second stair . . .

At the first turning of the third stair . . .

Climbing the third stair

which is bedevilled in its monotony by those vivid recollections intruding upon him of the order he would renounce. Yet, he leaves them "twisting, turning below" (an image from *Purgatorio IX*), and while the stairs are

19 *Selected Essays*, p. 342.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 416.

21 Chapter 11, section 9.

"damp, jagged" and "beyond repair" and are likened to an "old man's mouth drivelling" (the "old man" being a Pauline emblem of the unregenerate soul), yet as they facilitate this recollection — paradoxically — they animate his ascent so long as he treads them beneath his feet and ultimately overcomes them. Moreover, as their condition is so frail we have the impression in these lines that *descent* has now been rendered impossible — all that remains, as Eliot noted in "Burnt Norton" II, is *Erhebung*, ascent, "strength beyond hope and despair".

However the consummation of his enterprise is not embodied in this part of the poem — neither is it realized in the later sections. *Ash-Wednesday*, as its title insists, is about Lent, not Easter; it is concerned with spiritual preparation for resurrection, not resurrection itself. (In this way it demonstrates usefully the character of Eliot's practice of his faith which was focused at least as intensely on the confessional as on the altar.) We leave the penitent at this point, having observed his conquest of the grievous sins of despair and pride, and that of lust (so memorably discerned through a "slotted window bellied like the fig's fruit") as he expresses at once his earnest trust and his profound humility in terms of the celebrant's confession at Mass before he consumes the Body of Christ — before, that is to say, his soul is healed:

Lord, I am not worthy
 Lord, I am not worthy
 but speak the word only.

(The imprecise Mr Traversi, incidentally, misquoting the liturgical sentence which Eliot chose to conclude this section of *Ash-Wednesday* — p. 222 n.8 — makes it appear as if the poet has introduced some variation on the original words from the canon, which, of course, is not the case.)

Mr Traversi is never more ill at ease with his material than in his discussion of *Ash-Wednesday* III. The stairs, he maintains, "represent 'states' or conditions of moral being, rather than clearly defined or objective 'sins' dealt with in the schematic treatises" (p. 71). I have already noted Eliot's indulgence of his sympathy with the writings of St John of the Cross, not only in this poem but elsewhere, so we may discard the suggestion that "schematic treatises" were unimportant in this sequence. It is difficult to imagine a manual of spiritual discipline more "schematic" in its disposition than *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, and Eliot was attracted by this exacting complexity, as his review of *The Mystical Doctrine of St John of the Cross* in 1934 indicates:

while very few persons ever reach a stage so advanced that they can adopt St John of the Cross as their guide, and must be content to use more elementary manuals of meditation, there is great advantage in acquiring some notion of what are the higher stages of the contemplative life.²²

But what is intriguing about Mr Traversi's statement is the distinction he draws (which Eliot himself had discerned in humanist polemic and had judged fantastic) between "conditions of moral being" and "clearly defined or objective 'sins'".

He describes the reference to the "slotted window", and the vision which the penitent glimpses through its fig-like shape as he ascends, as embodying "a sense of life which is in itself positive"; there is something

22 *The Criterion*, July 1934, p. 710.

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“romantic” about it all, and — as if this was the ultimate guarantee of its “significance” — the pasture scene has “literary” associations (p. 72). Mr Traversi thus collapses the tension which Eliot has worked to build up from the opening lines of *Ash-Wednesday* between the temporal and the spiritual. Of course the vision is “in itself” alluring, but in the context it is of a distracting pagan scene: as the “broadbacked figure” enchants “the maytime with an antique flute”, so he casts a fleeting spell over the contemplative. “Distraction”, the poet wrote in “Burnt Norton” II, filled one “with fancies” (which are at least superficially appealing), but this diversion, viewed through an aperture which symbolizes lustfulness, is to be doubly qualified by its further enclosing in the poetry between “the first turning of the third stair” and “Climbing the third stair” indicating that it has been overcome, the urge has been sublimated. Also, the word “bellied” — on which the principal emphasis falls in that line — is neither “romantic” in its sound nor in the image it calls up. And, furthermore, we see in *Ash-Wednesday* IV that the penitent’s transcendence of this temptation has, at least for him, robbed the pagan order of its life — the flute of the garden god there is “breathless” and the “silent sister” is the dominant influence in that *hortus conclusus*. (Mr Traversi judges the sister’s bending her head and signing herself “ambiguous, deliberately unclear” — p. 76. On the contrary, one could hardly imagine, in poetry, a less ambiguous description. It is a token of the sister’s absorption in prayer and contemplation — she bends her head and crosses herself: “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost” — and Eliot’s conclusion of this sequence with a phrase from the *Salve Regina*, “and after this our exile”, explicitly evokes the persona’s desire that he should be included in her prayer: “and after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus”.)

And Eliot is praised by Mr Traversi for eschewing, in *Ash-Wednesday* III, horrid, clearly-defined “sins” from darkly “schematic treatises”, and is approved for seeking “refuge in the confusion” which his avoidance of spiritual schemata and objectivity in moral matters has created (p. 72). But it is not Eliot who is confused. Rather, the poet maintained that it was the confusion of humanists, and the final discredit of their philosophy, that they proposed the determination of moral values without reference to an objective ethical scheme based on metaphysical philosophy — without reference, in other words, to a meta-morality. Of the humanist Irving Babbitt — to whom I have referred before — Eliot wrote in 1933: “of philosophical technique he had none; and in his writings you will find no coherent system”.²³ “Moral being” could not be measured, in the poet’s opinion, by the individual conscience or encouraged by some rhetorical gesture to the Eternal-not-ourselves that makes for righteousness. One’s moral being had to be measured instead against one’s obedience to the strictures of orthodox instruction about sin. In “The Search for Moral Sanction” of 1932 Eliot made it clear that his “low appetites” and “vulgar tastes” could only be seen to be undesirable in an absolute sense (in the only sense, for him, which made their diminution ultimately worthwhile) in terms of Christian doctrine, and could only be overcome by a faith in the inspiration of that doctrine. The moral choice which men had to make was between Christianity and obedience unto righteousness, or

23 “Commentary”, *The Criterion*, October 1933, p. 118.

psychology and self-justification:

if you have not the Christian faith, if you are not prepared to live by it to the best of your ability and to study it throughout your life, and if you are serious enough minded to want something to live by, then you must pin your hopes on psychology. . . . Without the love of God there is no love at all.²⁴

For Eliot, if morality was to be protected from an insipid relativism, then its existence in the vacuum created for it by humanism had to be repudiated. He maintained in "Second Thoughts on Humanism" in 1929 (the year of "Al Som de l'Escalina", *Ash-Wednesday* III) that

either everything in man can be traced as a development from below, or something must come from above. There is no avoiding that dilemma: you must be either a naturalist or a supernaturalist . . . 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 hope of a higher degree. It is to the immense credit of [T. E.] 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".²⁵

But Mr Traversi, in perfect sympathy with the view that Eliot could not accept, reads *Ash-Wednesday* III as an embodiment of the poet's desire to celebrate "the perpetually renovating challenge of the present" (p. 59); the poem is "a call to sincerity" (p. 83). (Regrettably, but characteristically — like Dr Bronowski who neglects to tell us in what perfection his "ascent of man" will issue — Mr Traversi does not detail with any precision the mode of renovation, neither does he delineate the features of the finished product.) Eliot, on the other hand, was more inclined to find our temporal existence threatening than "renovating"; what Mr Traversi describes as the "neutral state of daily reality" (p. 102) was a negative condition for the poet:

we desire and fear both sleep and waking; the day brings relief from the night, and the night brings relief from the day; we go to sleep as to death, and we wake as to damnation;²⁶

and the poem *Ash-Wednesday*, like the day it recalls, addresses itself to an experience more harrowing than any "call to sincerity" is likely to provoke. Moreover, Eliot rejected the Unitarian inclination to erect a "theology" of a vaguely Christian character for the sake of the morality of the Beatitudes, or whatever. Rather, he believed that Christian morality had to be accepted for the sake of the theology: "religion is not", he wrote in *Revelation*, "and can never survive as, simply a code of morals".²⁷

The path of perfection which Eliot attempted to pursue through nearly forty years as an Anglo-Catholic is described in miniature in *Ash-Wednesday* III, where the development of "moral being" is traced with precise reference to "objective 'sins'" (pride, despair, lust) in terms of a symbolism borrowed from the "schematic treatises" on repentance of St John of the Cross, and where the poet's conviction that moral being, the hungering and thirsting after righteousness, was a means of grace, and not its end, is demonstrated in the dramatizing of the penitent's expectancy, not fulfil-

24 *The Listener*, 30 March, pp. [445]-6, 480.

25 *Selected Essays*, pp. 485, 490.

26 *Revelation*, eds. J. Baillie, H. Martin (London, 1937), p. 31.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

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ment, once the stairs have been climbed but "the word only" remains unheard—a profoundly ironic close in its apparent minimizing of this unsatisfied, necessary condition of salvation. Whereas the path Mr Traversi describes is decidedly horizontal in projection, crossing chessboard meadows and leaping brooks in a cloud-cuckoo-land of indefinable boundaries where he imagines Eliot's persona to abide as the Flesh made word at the perpetually self-renovating point of an anthropocentric universe (with the Inner Voice as his confessor, the determination of his own good and evil as his pastime and with Respectability and Sincerity guaranteed by good schools, hygiene and the police force), not in a renunciation of Life, of course, but in "a more completely fulfilled existence", a "state of complete consciousness" which, in this looking-glass land of our critic's creation, is of nothing more than himself as the apotheosis of Man.

III

T. S. Eliot: The Longer Poems, indeed, is a fine example of the principle that any truth pushed to an extreme becomes a falsehood. No one would quarrel with Mr Traversi's statement which introduces his discussion of *Four Quartets*: "We are not dealing with poetry which attempts to induce specifically 'Christian' feelings in readers who may be assumed to share the poet's own supposed way of thinking" (p. 88). But his thesis proceeds to argue that because the poet's "way of thinking" is only "supposed" (which is more of a comment on Mr Traversi's dislike of homework than on the special elusiveness of Eliot's thought and the obtuseness of his expression) and that the poet was not writing exclusively for a coterie of like-minded individuals, then the insistence that readers should come to it with some basic knowledge of, if not sympathy towards, Anglo-Catholic theology and an appreciation that the later poems at least depend for their inspiration on "specifically 'Christian' feelings" is an irrelevant demand.

At the other end of the critical spectrum from Mr Traversi is Rossell Hope Robbins, who, in his decidedly hostile analysis in *The T. S. Eliot Myth*, so manipulates Eliot's social and theological thought and its influence on the verse as to read the poems solely in terms of polemic, and concludes his demythologizing process with the revelation of Eliot as sentimentally reactionary in literature, fascist in politics, and ultramontane in religion:

I have sought to disentangle the actual Eliot, a poet of minor achievement, emotionally sterile and with a mind coarsened by snobbery and constricted by bigotry, from the myth which has exalted him into a great poet and an advanced cultural leader.²⁸

Nonetheless Mr Robbins scores two points over Mr Traversi. First, he makes no pretence of objectivity, and second, it is possible to send a novice in Eliot studies to *The T. S. Eliot Myth* with the confidence that he will return at worst with an exaggerated version of the implications for his poetry of Eliot's professed allegiance to classicism in literature, royalism in politics and anglo-catholicism in religion.²⁹ For it is plain that Mr Robbins (who makes no bones about it) dislikes Eliot because he dislikes classicism, royalism, and anglo-catholicism. What is more, Mr Robbins has some justification for putting this statement into the mouths of certain

²⁸ *The T. S. Eliot Myth* (New York, 1951), p. 169.

²⁹ "Preface", *For Lancelot Andrewes* (London, 1970), p. 7.

critics who have contributed to the creation of the Eliot "myth":

"The political and social aspects of Eliot's interpretation of Anglo-Catholicism satisfy me; therefore his poetry improves under their influence."³⁰

But Mr Traversi wilfully disconnects Eliot's poetry from its writer's convictions about society and mankind — obviously finding them cranky and idiosyncratic (as his use of inverted commas around "sins", "Christian", "God" and so on demonstrates as clearly as anything else) — in the name of objectivity, but in reality in order to pass Eliot off as the humanist he never was.

So, with reference, finally, to the *Quartets*, I want to draw attention first to an example, in his discussion of the last of the longer poems, of the perverse influence of Mr Traversi's humanist anxiety to insist that there is nothing "specifically 'Christian'" about the poetry but that it is Eliot's intention, in the final analysis, to present "life as lived" (p. 96).

We know that for the fourth and briefest section of each quartet, as part of his overall design, the poet provided a concise, highly-wrought poetical interpretation of certain received Christian notions in terms of a traditional symbolism (just as the second section in each quartet is, in contrast, personal and introspective in its tenor, providing — particularly in "East Coker" II and "Little Gidding" II — comment on the actual process of composition). The best known of these is probably "East Coker" IV where Eliot is concerned with Original Sin, Grace, Redemption, and Atonement, and draws, in a metaphysical vein, on the metaphor of Adam as the "ruined millionaire", of this world as "our hospital" (probably echoing Sir Thomas Browne³¹), of Christ as the "wounded surgeon" and the Church as the "dying nurse". In "Burnt Norton" IV the meditation is briefer and concentrates on the Passion:

Time and bell have buried the day,
The black cloud carries the sun away.
Will the sunflower turn to us, will the clematis
Stray down, bend to us . . .

Mr Traversi correctly describes these lines as a "beautiful piece of evocative writing" (p. 118). But, he continues, "this is not poetry which makes its effect by complex imagery", "this is, put simply, the poetry of the right word in the right place" (p. 119). If Eliot is under any influence it is that of "E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf"; there is nothing "explicit or didactic" about the tone at this stage, "there is no need for an explicit pointing of the symbolic significance" (p. 120).

It is my contention, however, that if we are to appreciate that Eliot *does* have the right word in the right place then we have to understand, with reference to traditional Christian symbolism, why the sunflower and the clematis, for instance, are brought in at this point and why they are yoked together. I see nothing poetically inevitable here, for example, about the clematis — either the flower or the word — unless we appreciate its associations with the vine-branch and, more appositely, as Christ is already present in the sunflower, with the Virgin. When the Lord was crucified "there was darkness over all the land" and a cloud carried away the Son at the Ascension: it is these ideas — which I would describe as

³⁰ *Op.cit.*, p. 195.

³¹ "For the world, I count it not an Inne, but an Hospitall, and a place, not to live, but to die in." (*Religio Medici*, sect. 11.)

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specifically Christian — which inform the second line (otherwise what “significance” does the line have?) and prepare us for the sunflower and the clematis in the third (just as the reference to the clematis in “Difficulties of a Statesman” defines the haunting supplication to the “Mother” there in terms of a prayer to the Virgin punctuating that quietly desperate poem).

The “chill” which stands in icy isolation at the centre of “Burnt Norton” IV looks forward to “East Coker” IV where “the chill ascends from feet to knees”. In the later poem the coldness is of the surgeon’s (Christ’s) fingers questioning the “distempered part” (the Christian’s sins). In “Burnt Norton” IV the horticultural metaphor is extended to endow the yew-tree, the graveyard tree, the tree of death and, therefore, of life (as Eliot indicates also in *Ash-Wednesday* IV and VI, and again in “The Dry Salvages” V) with fingers too which the poet hopes will curl “down on us” as he prays that the “tendril and spray” of the clematis will gather him up. But the chill of death is balanced in the concluding lines of the section —

After the kingfisher’s wing
Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still
At the still point of the turning world —

by the confident assertion that the kingfisher, the halcyon (another traditional symbol of Christ) will, like the Holy Ghost descending as a dove in “Little Gidding” IV, bring light and peace (silence and stillness) into the world. (Eliot refers to a “halcyon day” at sea in “The Dry Salvages” II when the “ragged rock in the restless waters” is seen as a type, “merely a monument”, of the still point; whereas, on less inspired days, one is grateful for it as a token, “a seamark/To lay a course by”). The phrase “light to light” echoes the Nicene Creed (“Light of light”) and the Order for the Burial of the Dead, “dust to dust” — appropriately so, as “Burnt Norton” I had already enunciated the verbal counterpoint of dust and light which, in this fourth section, is accorded a precise theological exposition. Once these explicit Christian references to the black cloud, the sunflower and the clematis, the yew-tree, the kingfisher and light itself are set forth, the rightness of each word in “Burnt Norton” IV is evident. The “complete consort” dances together as a result of the perfect matching of image with image, which, I would argue, needs to be understood before a full appreciation of the poetry is possible. Even Mr Traversi is forced to concede, when confronted with “East Coker” IV, that there is something “‘Christian’” going on; but as those lines resist his rampant iconoclasm they “fail to come to real life”, they are “at best conceptually, rather than poetically valid” (p. 144).

Secondly, with regard to the *Quartets*, we should note Mr Traversi’s repeated references to the guiding light of the community at Little Gidding as Nicholas “Farrar” (e.g. pp. 93, 182, 201), described as an “Anglican priest” (p. 93). Mr Traversi is never about to allow any issue to be clouded by facts, but if he was prepared to be so loosely acquainted with the biography of Ferrar as to be unaware of the important fact that he never proceeded to the priesthood, he might at least have checked the spelling of his name. While the distinction between the diaconate (into which Ferrar was ordained by Archbishop Laud in 1625) and the office of a priest might appear inconsequential to the modern mind, it was not a trivial matter for Ferrar and it is a key to an understanding of the

spiritual characteristics of that man and the community he gathered about him which Eliot found sufficiently worthy to serve as a locus for his crowning achievement, the fourth quartet.

For Ferrar declined priest's orders because of an intense consciousness of his unworthiness to be a steward of the mysteries of God—a sense of humility, in other words, which was coupled with a mildness in resignation from the vanities of the world to that remote Huntingdonshire upland which contemporaries such as George Herbert and Richard Crashaw found distinctly inspiring in an age of bitter allegiances. The humanist, of course, is not likely to find mildness and humility particularly appealing—do they not compromise the dignity of Man? As Jesus Christ reminded Middleton Murry of D. H. Lawrence, so when the humanist thinks of humility he remembers the awful spectacle of Uriah Heep. But for Eliot, humility was “the greatest, the most difficult, of the Christian virtues”;³² in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), he remarked that “only in humility, charity and purity—and most of all perhaps humility—can we be prepared to receive the grace of God without which human operations are vain”.³³ And in the *Quartets* themselves, in the second section of “East Coker” (1940), he reflects

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire

Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.

The humility of the Ferrars was demonstrated and sustained by their application to a life of discipline and asceticism. An endless stream of visitors journeyed to their community to participate in the *vie intérieure*. One of these, as Helen Gardner remembers, was the martyr-king: “King Charles visited the community in 1633, and again during the troubled year of 1642, and legend says he came there for shelter by night, ‘a broken king’, after the final defeat of Naseby.”³⁴ Indeed, in England in 1975, I came across an unpublished manuscript of a play which indicated to me that Eliot's interest in Little Gidding was inspired in general by the disposition of its Anglican spirituality but in particular by Charles's visit there, in resignation from the tumult of defeat, for spiritual nourishment. This draft had been given to Eliot in 1935 by a lay brother of the Anglican Society of the Sacred Mission for the purposes of correction and comment. Entitled *Stalemate: The King at Little Gidding*, it is a drama in verse concerning the last visit of Charles to the Ferrars. When he appears, Charles's poignant aspect as “a broken king” is nicely complemented by the holiness of his intention:

I came not only for rest, though longing for rest.

There is no rest for me in this world of ours.

I came for something else. . . .

What I need is counsel, spiritual counsel.

The dramatic interest of *Stalemate* is not confined to this single incident. A dream sequence, for instance, introduces William Laud (who had died some years before), and John Ferrar (brother of Nicholas) reminds Crashaw that when the lights were still burning on the altars he had preached “from Andrewes”. Regarding the play, Eliot wrote to his friend on 13 March 1936 (in an unpublished letter I have seen) saying he had given it detailed consideration, and proceeded to offer a number of

³² “Baudelaire In Our Time”, *For Lancelot Andrewes*, p. 78.

³³ London, 1939, p. 96.

³⁴ “Four Quartets: A Commentary” in Rajan, *Op.cit.*, pp. 72-3.

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suggestions and changes in order to enhance its dramatic impact. He was of the opinion, for instance, that the characters, like those in his own plays, talked too much and did too little.

Dame Helen Gardner has told me that two months afterwards in 1936 — in May, like Charles — Eliot undertook a visit of his own to Little Gidding, and we may surmise that had it not been for his study of this play about that community and Charles's recourse there in his blackest days the visit might never have been undertaken, the poem never written:

If you came this way in may time, you would find the hedges
White again, in May, with voluptuary sweetness.
It would be the same at the end of the journey,
If you came at night like a broken king,
If you came by day not knowing what you came for,
It would be the same. . . .
You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.

If Mr Traversi had been more careful in his investigations into Ferrar and Little Gidding he would not have so roundly asserted that it was the purpose of the fourth quartet to give a poetic embodiment of a "positive . . . life-affirming attitude" (p. 207). Most readers of the *Quartets*, on the contrary, are struck by the fact that the poet "never affirmeth", or — if he does — it is to affirm the impossibility of affirmation. Some have complained that, in Christian poetry, this is a deficiency, but I am inclined to interpret it as an inevitability which Eliot turns into a virtue. For, in *Four Quartets*, he articulates splendidly the elusiveness of Christian affirmation in modern poetic speech in terms of the vacillation of modern words in the presence of the Word:

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.

("Burnt Norton" V)

And Eliot's quest for humility in his spiritual life, which attracted him to such figures as Pascal, Baudelaire, Simone Weil — and, as we have seen, Nicholas Ferrar — was undoubtedly a factor in his restraining of the poetry on the verge of a personal statement of faith, choosing instead the frequent modulation of his theme into a beautiful language of "hints and guesses, / Hints followed by guesses" ("The Dry Salvages" V), evasive metaphors of a condition which, as in *Ash-Wednesday*, is only anticipated:

Whisper of running streams, and winter lightning.
The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,
The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy
Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony
Of death and birth.

("East Coker" III)

Four Quartets, in other words, is a poem of doubt, not of doubt concerning the truth of Christian revelation, or of Eliot's experience of it, but of doubt concerning the audibility of Christian utterance in a world whose ears have become increasingly deaf to that dialect. The extraordinary affection that *Four Quartets* has inspired over the last thirty years is not to be accounted for (in spite of its many distinguished Christian apologists) in terms of the appeal of Eliot's religious affirmation — for where the poet is most affirmative as an Anglo-Catholic, for instance in the plays,

he is least read and praised — but rather in terms of Eliot's self-dramatization of the contemporary Christian poet, struggling to communicate his knowledge of the Divine *logos* amidst the pandemonium of abuse to which words have succumbed in the modern Babel:

Shrieking voices
 Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,
 Always assail them. The Word in the desert
 Is most attacked by voices of temptation,
 The crying shadow in the funeral dance,
 The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera.

("Burnt Norton" V)

And so each venture
 Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
 With shabby equipment always deteriorating
 In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
 Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to conquer
 By strength and submission, has already been discovered
 Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
 To emulate — but there is no competition —
 There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
 And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
 That seem unpropitious.

("East Coker" V)

If Eliot comes closest to Christian affirmation in the fourth section of each quartet where he draws on traditional Christian symbolism in meditation on central truths of that faith we need to remember, if we are about to talk (as Mr Traversi never ceases to do) about Eliot's attitude towards "life as lived", that his theology — nourished on the spirituality of such world-renouncing individuals as those devoted to prayer and mortification at Little Gidding — emphasized a movement upwards out of life rather than a concentration downwards upon it. The disposition of Eliot's Christianity was determined by the notion of a resignation from life, a transcendence of it. He was intensely concerned from the time of his Baptism and Confirmation in 1927 until his death in 1965 to fortify his beliefs against the swelling tide of modern secularism with a disciplined round of traditional Catholic observance (for many years he went to daily Mass and went to extraordinary lengths to keep days of obligation and his own rules for Lent) and the regular practice of private prayer.³⁵ Indeed, his writings reveal that as one persistently conscious of "the evil which is present in human nature at all times and in all circumstances",³⁶ who interpreted the pursuit of temporal existence in the *civitas terrana* as a "keeping up of appearances", "the making the best of a bad job",³⁷ he discovered, in frequent retirement (for instance to the Cowley Fathers at Oxford) from the noisome deluge of secularism to the cenobitic life, the peace of mind, hidden with Christ in God, which he seldom experienced elsewhere:

O hidden under the dove's wing, hidden in the turtle's breast,
 Under the palmtree at noon, under the running water
 At the still point of the turning world. O hidden.

("Triumphal March")

³⁵ Information from research into the unpublished letters of Eliot to Miss Mary Trevelyan, a fellow-worshipper at St Stephen's, Gloucester Road where the poet was vicar's warden.

³⁶ *The Idea of a Christian Society*, p. 32.

³⁷ *The Family Reunion*, Part II, scene I, concluding chorus.

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O hidden under the . . . Hidden under the . . . Where the dove's foot
 rested and locked for a moment,
A still moment, repose of noon . . .
Mother
May we not be some time, almost now, together,
If the mactations, immolations, oblations, impenetrations,
Are now observed
May we not be
O hidden
Hidden in the stillness of noon.

(“Difficulties of a Statesman”)

There can be little doubt that Eliot would have pursued his intention³⁸ of eventually retiring permanently to Nashdom Abbey (the monastic house of the Anglican Benedictines) had it not been for his marriage to Valerie Fletcher in 1957 when the pattern, in terms of the poet's personal history, of a Catholicism which had begun in the final difficult period of his first marriage and had matured through a quarter-century of single life (seven years of which, from 1933 to 1940, were spent in the clergy-house of St Stephen's, Gloucester Road) and the friendships of many Anglo-Catholics, was fulfilled in a mutual affection based upon shared religious convictions.

Eliot was the first to admit his repeated failure to satisfy what he believed to be the obligations of his faith—Christianity was, for him, neither a light choice nor an easy task—but there can be no question about the profound and enduring sincerity of his commitment. Herbert Read, who describes himself as a “romanticist in literature, an anarchist in politics, and an agnostic in religion” (in a memoir published soon after Eliot's death), remarks that his friend, the poet, could “respect such a statement of differences”; “what he could not tolerate was any false interpretation of the position he himself held”.³⁹ Mr Traversi, in this study, has perpetrated an interpretation of the poet's beliefs so intolerably false as to misrepresent both the man and the poetry.

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³⁸ Information from the poet's friend the Rev. W. T. Levy.

³⁹ *T. S. E.*—*A Memoir*, Monday Evening Papers no. 5, Center for Advanced Studies, Wesleyan University, 26 April 1965, p. 19.