

## PREFACE

### THE TURNING

A century ago, Thomas Sterns Eliot published *The Waste Land* (1922), the poem that shook the staid world of Anglo-Saxon intellectuals. Eliot thought that the hope of the renaissance, after passing through the rationality of the Enlightenment and the utopia of the 19th century, was ending in a desert of “futility and desperation”. He saw the cause as *culture loss*. We have broken with our deepest traditions: literary, philosophical, spiritual; we have lost our humanities, our humanity.

Eliot noticed something one hundred years ago that seems to be playing out:

Who are those hooded hordes swarming  
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth (...)  
What is the city over the mountains  
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air  
Falling towers  
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria  
Vienna London.<sup>2</sup>

Barbarians demolish our cultural capitals: Judeo-Christian (Jerusalem), Greek (Athens), Hellenistic (Alexandria), modern (Vienna), recent (London). In the wake of *The Waste Land*, dystopian novels offered a view of the world to come: war and hate ideology, state or party control of breeding and education, the policing of thoughtcrime, compelled “newspeak” to cancel political incorrectness.<sup>3</sup> “Woke” reformers now mock western civilization and would “reset” our ideas on human life, sex and gender, marriage and family, society.

Eliot never lost his pessimism. But he balanced this realism with the hopefulness obvious in his later works, especially in *Four Quartets*, but hinted at in *The Waste Land*. He spoke of a *turning*; we may always turn away from chaos, turn back to our roots, “fare forward”, even “beyond”. In *Four Quartets* he wished to “retune the delicate relation of the Eternal to the transient”; there he foresaw that

...the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.<sup>4</sup>

### THE BACKGROUND

To understand Eliot’s poetry we must know what the past meant to him. The present work, *The Spirituality of T. S. Eliot*, is a reflection on Eliot’s personal past: literary, philosophical and religious— “spiritual”. Eliot was trained in the Greek and Latin classics and studied comparative literature: English and American, French and Italian. His specialty was philosophy and the thought of India (he studied Sanskrit). His own verse is alive with the Christian Scriptures and liturgy, with spiritual lore: Church Father St. Augustine, the Medieval poet Dante Alighieri, the “English mystics” (Dame Julian of Norwich and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*), the “Mystical Doctor” St. John of the Cross, the Anglican divines (George Herbert and Lancelot Andrewes), as well as the Hindu Upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita and Buddhist writings.

From his youth Eliot felt a tension between *ennui*, the malaise of everyday living, and the possibility of “something different”, timeless.<sup>5</sup> Around the age of forty, like Dante “in the middle of his way”, he came to terms with this tension.<sup>6</sup> To the chagrin of many of his friends, he “turned”: converted to High Anglicanism, with its Catholic traditions of theology, liturgy and spirituality.<sup>7</sup> It may be better to say that he “reverted”, since he was turning back to the religious past. He himself thought of “turning” in a biblical sense: advancing from the fall to redemption, from despair to hope.<sup>8</sup>

### THE POETRY

Eliot’s poetry reflected his turning. His earlier verse, summed up in *The Waste Land*, seems pessimistic, almost despondent.<sup>9</sup> His later poems, beginning with *Ash Wednesday* (1930) but culminating in *Four Quartets* (1935-42),

boldly religious, are full of hope.<sup>10</sup> Even before *The Waste Land* was published as a book, he considered it “a thing of the past”, at least in its “form and style”.<sup>11</sup> Eliot’s most important play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, about the martyrdom of St. Thomas à Becket (1935), has a close affinity with *Four Quartets*.<sup>12</sup> His *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* (1939) became the hit musical *Cats*, staged worldwide from 1981.<sup>13</sup>

Eliot’s poetry deals with few issues and these he pursued during his entire life. His work was quite controversial at first; his unconventional poetic style shocked readers, and some critics later frowned upon the religious content of *Four Quartets*. When *The Waste Land* first appeared, some reviewers took unbelief to be Eliot’s answer to the pain of doubt. But he thought this was the easy way out; if there is a sense of desolation in the poem, he said in reply to these critics, it is not any separation from belief;

it is nothing so pleasant. In fact, doubt, uncertainty, futility, etc., would seem to me to prove anything except this agreeable partition; for doubt and uncertainty are merely a variety of belief.<sup>14</sup>

It may seem surprising that a person marked by a deep concern for religion was a major influence on English-language poetry and literary criticism in an increasingly secularized century.<sup>15</sup> Eliot won the Nobel Prize for his poetry in 1948 after publishing *Four Quartets*.

#### THE SPIRITUALITY

Eliot was formal and reserved (he kept his inner struggles to himself) but kindly and humorous. Eliot had failings and his character has been disparaged; indeed, he caricatured himself:

How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!<sup>16</sup>

He seems nevertheless to have worked through some of his personal problem, his prejudices, and he did come to the gentleness and joy that are evident in his later work. And although he thought that spiritual discovery is made

...by men whom one cannot  
hope to emulate,<sup>17</sup>

he had his own “moments” of spiritual insight.<sup>18</sup>

Eliot saw himself as a poet commenting on mysticism. He was especially concerned with spiritual maturing, the need to reflect on one’s religious experience;

everything is true in a different sense,  
a sense that would have seemed meaningless before.<sup>19</sup>

In *Four Quartets* he sketched out the pattern of

...still moving  
into another intensity,

which he found especially in St. John of the Cross,<sup>20</sup> and he quoted the words of Mother Julian of Norwich, who for twenty years pondered what her “showings” could mean:

and all shall be well and  
all manner of thing shall be well.<sup>21</sup>

Eliot hinted at his intent:

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....  
For us, there is only the trying.<sup>22</sup>

## THE REFLECTION

Eliot’s poetry has never been popular. It is often dense, filled with highly complex, even esoteric, allusions, which, by the way, he expects his reader to understand (he wrote a “crib” to help us make sense of *The Waste Land*). He was bringing his entire experience, intellectual and affective, to bear in composing his poetry. Today, spiritual language is debased, trivialized, co-opted, and Eliot speaks of the poet’s losing battle to make words, especially religious words, do what he wants them to do.<sup>23</sup> He had to make his way through the “obvious” to get at what to him was meaningful.

This book is meant to help the reader understand in some measure Eliot’s major poems, *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, focusing on their “spir-

ity", the context of my reflections. It is best read along with the poems themselves (hearing Eliot's own recordings can convey a feeling for their meaning). Some passages are analogous to others and one may help to clarify another. Earlier poems are reflected in *The Waste Land* and themes in *The Waste Land* appear in later poems. There are many intended parallels among the *Four Quartets*, and I frequently point out them out. Readers who follow them up will see for themselves that Eliot's verse tends to interpret itself.

The book is not meant to be literary criticism. In fact, these notes have just two modest aims:

\* To provide, as simply as possible, a basic grasp of the poems in their spiritual context (even as they have been personally meaningful to me).

\* To indicate or quote from the many sources that Eliot used or are akin to his insights. I have been careful to include background texts for readers unfamiliar with "spirituality" or its traditional interpretations. In general these translations are my own.

Everything will not be clear but the main points will surely come across—even though

...human kind  
Cannot bear very much reality.<sup>24</sup>