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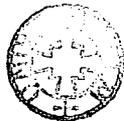
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**Christian Romanticism: T. S. Eliot's Response  
to Percy Bysshe Shelley**

**A thesis submitted by Peter James Lowe in accordance with the  
requirements of the University of Durham for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**



**- 8 NOV 2002**

**Department of English Studies**

**July 2002**

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Peter J. Lowe

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**Abstract of *Christian Romanticism: T. S. Eliot's Response to Percy Bysshe Shelley*, a thesis submitted by Peter J. Lowe for the degree of Ph.D. in English, University of Durham, 2002.**

This thesis presents a reading of T. S. Eliot's response to the work of Percy Bysshe Shelley, focusing on Eliot's Christian faith and the role it played in this response.

Chapter One shows how Shelley was a great influence on Eliot's early work and how, after his Christian conversion, Eliot repudiated his influence. The chapter will show how previous readings of Eliot's relations with Romanticism have tended to centre on a Bloomian poetic 'anxiety of influence'. I will then offer my religious reading of Eliot's thought, and show how the period of initial repudiation gives way to a rapprochement with past poetic influences, as Eliot eventually accommodates past influences into his Christian scheme.

Chapter Two examines the ways in which Shelley and Eliot address the issue of self-consciousness and our inherent sense of isolation. Chapter Three looks at the treatment of human love in the work of both poets. In both cases, Shelley desires, unsuccessfully, some release from selfhood, either in social communion or with an ideal lover. It is only with the adoption of a divine perspective that human relations can be set in context – something that Eliot came to realise in his later work. Chapter Four looks at the way the two poets reacted to the work of Dante, stressing that Eliot's Christian faith enabled him to relate to Dante's work in a way that Shelley, although appropriating Dantean motifs in his own work, could never fully attain. Chapter Five looks at the way both Eliot and Shelley address the fundamental shortcomings of language, showing how Eliot, in the years after his conversion, could be reconciled to linguistic shortfall because he could relate it to a higher, divine reality. Shelley, like Eliot in his early years, was vexed by this problem because he did not have the faith that offered a transcendent view of it.

A concluding section draws together these chapters and sums up my reading of Eliot's faith, and the extent to which it affected his response to the work of Shelley.



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## Abbreviations

All works listed below, with the exception of 'Shelley', are by T. S. Eliot.

- CC            To Criticize the Critic. London: Faber, 1965.
- CP            The Cocktail Party. London: Faber, 1950.
- FR            The Family Reunion. 1939. London: Faber, 1968.
- March Hare   Inventions of the March Hare. Ed. Christopher Ricks. New York: Harcourt, 1996.
- OPP          On Poetry and Poets. London: Faber, 1957.
- SE            Selected Essays. 1932. London: Faber, 1999.
- Shelley      Shelley's Poetry and Prose. Ed. Donald Reiman and Sharon Powers. New York: Norton, 1977.
- SW            The Sacred Wood. 1920. London: Methuen, 1960.
- TWL          The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound. Ed. Valerie Eliot. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971.
- UPUC        The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism. 1933. London: Faber, 1964.
- Varieties    The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry: The Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, 1926 and The Turnball Lectures at the Johns Hopkins University, 1933. Ed. Ronald Schuchard. London: Faber, 1993.

## Chapter One – Eliot and Shelley: Influence, Renunciation, and Accommodation

Shelley drove Eliot to frenzy. His reactions show a kind of schizophrenia, alternately belittling and praising Shelley for the same trait, not just at different periods but within the same anti-romantic phase. [...] These alternations suggest a mind divided against itself, at once enormously susceptible to Shelley and distrustful of that very susceptibility.

– George Bornstein<sup>1</sup>

Some poets, as we know, never recover from the immortal wound of the poetry they first come to love, though they learn to mask their relationship to their own earlier selves. – Harold Bloom<sup>2</sup>

### The Harvard Lecturer – Eliot in 1932

In October 1932 T. S. Eliot arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts to take up the position of Norton Professor at Harvard University. This prestigious academic position represented a triumphant homecoming for him. When he had left Harvard in 1914 to continue his doctoral research at Merton College, Oxford, he had been a promising philosopher who had written some minor poems. The man who returned in 1932 had produced some of the most debated, imitated and innovative verse of his time, and addressed his class as a distinguished man of letters. He was back at his former university to instruct a new generation of students; not in philosophy, for his academic interest in that subject was now past, but in the art and nature of poetry.

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<sup>1</sup> George Bornstein. Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot and Stevens (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976) 124. Bornstein's book remains one of the most useful studies of Eliot's relationship with the Romantic poets, and argues that Eliot felt he had to distance himself from the Romantics because they represented the antithesis of everything his critical program, and later his Christian faith represented. Although I concur with much of Bornstein's argument when considering the early years of Eliot's faith, my intention here is to show that Eliot's Christianity, rather than represent a bulwark against Romanticism, actually enabled him to return to it and answer the questions that many Romantic poets faced without finding any resolution. Bornstein argues that Eliot never willingly accommodated Romanticism in his work, whereas in his later poems I believe we see him bringing his faith to bear on the past Romantic influence, and attaining a degree of transcendent accommodation.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Bloom. "Yeats and the Romantics" in Poetics of Influence (New Haven: Schwab, 1988) 51.

Before examining the lectures themselves, we must look briefly at the man who gave them. Although his criticism advocated a doctrine of impersonality, Eliot, as we shall see, was a figure whose life was strongly present in his work. In his 1919 essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' he had written 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."(SE 21) This would certainly appear to set out a program of impersonal art, but Eliot deftly adds in the next sentence the thought that "only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape these things."(SE 21) If emotions are not expressed, it does not mean that they are not present to a powerful degree. Accordingly, the Norton lectures must be seen as the work of someone at a point of marital and spiritual crisis. In the vehement repudiation of previous poetic models that these lectures represent, Eliot's criticism enacts a process of renunciation visible in his personal life at this time, and nowhere is this repudiation more evident than in his treatment of Romanticism in English poetry.

Eliot had strong personal reasons for wanting to spend a year in America. By 1932, his unhappy marriage to Vivienne was moving inexorably towards separation. As we shall see when considering the treatment of love in Eliot's work, his marriage soon became a source of pain to him and his wife, as both parties realised that they could not make each other happy. Vivienne's mental and physical ill health exacerbated the situation, and those close to the couple could see no resolution to the Eliots' unhappy state. Virginia Woolf, whose diary exhibits her great gift for understanding the lives of those around her, recounts her feelings after a visit from the Eliots in 1930:

Poor Tom is all suspicion, hesitation and reserve. [...] There is a leaden, sinister look about him. But oh – Vivienne! was there ever such a torture since time began! – to bear her on one's shoulders, biting, wriggling, raving, scratching, unwholesome, powdered, insane, yet sane to the point of insanity. [...] worn out with half an hour of it, we gladly see them go. [...] This bag of ferrets is what Tom wears around his neck. (Woolf, *Diary* 331)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> As one who suffered from mental illness, Woolf may have been better attuned than many others to Vivienne's condition. Her husband, Leonard, expressed concerns that Vivienne's presence would undermine Virginia's own unstable state. For more information on this, see Hermione Lee's biography of Virginia Woolf (London: Chatto, 1996)

One of Eliot's reasons for accepting the invitation from his alma mater was to use the year as a period of separation from Vivienne that would open the way for divorce proceedings to follow. The mental and physical health of his wife had been deteriorating steadily since their marriage, and she moved from one sanatorium to the next with no sign of improvement.<sup>4</sup> The resultant strain on Eliot was immense, and he found poetic composition impossible at this time, taking refuge in bouts of increasingly heavy drinking. His mother had died in September 1929, and he felt that in choosing the precarious existence of writing poetry over the relative safety of an academic career, and marrying without her consent or even consulting her, he had gone against everything she had personified. With her death he felt that he had no chance to repent for failing to live up to her expectations. In addition to this, he had become a British citizen in November 1927, thereby publicly affirming that he felt he belonged more to his adopted home than his natural one. He returned to America in 1932 as a visitor, not as a native, and yet he was never truly British, with those who met him often commenting that his manners seemed exaggerated, and slightly too realistic to be natural.<sup>5</sup> He was a man in a state of flux, regretting past actions and trying to redress them by current ones that were only partially successful. His poetry was at a standstill after the outpouring of 'Ash Wednesday', and his critical work of this period showed a marked bias toward themes of sin, judgement and expiation. It is this shift in his critical thinking, along with the content of 'Ash-Wednesday' that points us towards the most significant change in Eliot's life around this time.

Thomas Stearns Eliot was baptized and received into the Church of England at Finstock Church, in the Cotswolds, on 29 June 1927. The next day he was confirmed in the private chapel of the Bishop of Oxford, Thomas Banks Strong. His wife was not present at either ceremony, and news of his adoption of

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<sup>4</sup> Vivienne had been subject to bouts of mental ill health since her marriage to Eliot, but there is evidence to suggest that her condition was particularly bad in the months prior to Eliot's departure in September 1932. Edith Sitwell recounts that when she greeted Vivienne in Oxford Street at this time, she received the reply "No, no, you don't know me. You have mistaken me *again* for that *terrible* woman who is so like me..." (Cited in Ackroyd 193)

<sup>5</sup> Edmund Wilson, writing to John Dos Passos after hearing Eliot read in New York in 1933, remarked that "He (Eliot) gives you the creeps a little at first because he is such a completely artificial, or, rather, self-invented character [...] but he has done such a perfect job with himself that you end up by admiring him." (Cited in Ackroyd 199).

Anglicanism was not made public until the following year, when it surprised many around him who had seen The Waste Land as a refutation of past religious and cultural beliefs.<sup>6</sup> Writing to her sister, Virginia Woolf felt that the newly Christian Eliot “may be called dead to us all from this day forward”, adding, “there’s something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God.” (Woolf, Letters, 233) Brought up in a Unitarian household, he had moved away from the belief of his parents as his education introduced him to a wider spectrum of thought, seeing religion as a failed attempt to answer the questions of the modern age, with their attendant anxieties. With The Waste Land, he had written of a culture in decline at all levels, of people finding in the hollow words of old ritual no trace of personal release or purpose; of the symbols of religious culture falling into decay – the empty chapel, the unregenerate dry bones, the Biblical wilderness waiting in vain for the restorative rains. It was the vision of a man in crisis, sent away from work for three months in a bid to try and recover his mental health, close to collapse as a result of the stifling routine of a bank clerk’s existence, and a marriage that had been unhappy almost from the start. Now, the man who had created what many saw as the modern world’s most despairing vision was admitted to the fellowship that promised eternal rest for those who accepted it and threatened eternal damnation for those who did not adhere to its message.<sup>7</sup>

What must be stressed about Eliot’s brand of Christianity at this point in his life is that it was one based on strong concepts of sin, repentance, and judgement. Writing to William Force Stead after Easter 1928, he expressed his conviction that “nothing could be too ascetic, too violent, for my own needs.” (Cited in Schuchard, Angel, 157) To accept the Christian faith meant acknowledging that one’s life had, up to that point, been one of error, of wrong decisions, and acts committed for the wrong motives. The language of his late work, Four Quartets, is suffused with the sense

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<sup>6</sup>In the years that followed the poem’s publication, as its fame grew, Eliot frequently tried to play down this aspect of The Waste Land. In one of his Norton lectures, ‘The Modern Mind’, he quoted I. A. Richards’s assertion that The Waste Land represented “a complete severance between poetry and all beliefs” and countered that he either thought Richards to be wrong, or “I do not understand his meaning.” (UPUC 130)

<sup>7</sup> Although the central vision of The Waste Land is largely despairing it does, I feel, contain faint traces of the route that Eliot was later to take to faith. As subsequent chapters will show, The Waste Land restates the problems found in Eliot’s early poetry, and at the same gestures towards possible answers to those problems, without itself attaining these answers.

that the religious experience necessitates acknowledgement of past transgressions before spiritual progress is possible. In 'East Coker', he writes that "Every moment is a new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been", and this need to see the folly of past actions en route to forgiveness is given voice by the 'compound ghost' met in 'Little Gidding'.<sup>8</sup>

Only through the recognition of past errors, and the subsequent renunciation of past attachments, could one progress towards the state of grace desired by every believer. It is surely no coincidence that this period of Eliot's life also sees his longest critical essay, on Dante (1929). Dante gave Eliot a model for the purgatorial ascent towards blessedness. The ascent, however, must be one in which earthly things are renounced for the greater end, and once this process is begun, there can be no turning back, and no room for a retrospective glance, as the Porter guarding the Gate of Purgatory proper tells Dante:

Then he pushed the door of the sacred portal,  
saying: "Enter, but I make you ware that  
he who looketh behind returns outside again." (*Purg.* 9.130-32)<sup>9</sup>

The message is clear: the past holds nothing for the repentant sinner but their mistakes. To journey towards God is to keep looking forward, and give no heed, indeed to show contempt, for what is past. This theme figures strongly in Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday':

Because I do not hope to turn again  
Let these words answer  
For what is done, not to be done again  
May the judgement not be too heavy upon us.      (26-33)<sup>10</sup>

In Eliot's poem, references to 'turning' are plentiful. His poetic voice does "not hope to turn again"; he is en route to a higher state, although temporarily in exile on

<sup>8</sup> The meeting with the 'compound ghost' will be examined in more detail in Chapter Four.

<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise stated, quotations from Dante are from the Temple Classics edition, as used by Eliot.

<sup>10</sup> All references to Eliot's poetry in this work, unless otherwise stated, are from the Collected Poems 1909-1962. London: Faber, 1963.

earth. The past is in the past, and although it cannot be denied it can, and must, be renounced.

To embark upon this route, one must acknowledge that one's past actions were sinful, and that one seeks to be absolved from them. This is to willingly accept the fires of purgation, and to rejoice in them, as Arnaut Daniel does in Dante's Purgatorio, knowing that they offer the chance of entry into Paradise, as opposed to remaining in Hell, suffering as a result of never seeking deliverance from one's past deeds.<sup>11</sup> This view of past sin is expressed in Dante's vision of Purgatory, as the sinner simultaneously admits past mistakes and rejoices in the refining flames that will ready him for the ascent into paradise:

I am Arnaut, who weep and sing as I go.  
I see with grief past follies and see,  
Rejoicing, the day I hope for before me.      (Purg. 26. 142-44)<sup>12</sup>

Did Eliot feel that he had 'follies' to renounce? Certainly, his marriage was a source of great pain to both parties, and his poetic career was at an impasse.<sup>13</sup> His past had failed to provide him with the stability and happiness that he had sought. If this was to be found in the future, did it follow that he must break with his past self? Furthermore, if this was the case in his life, was this separation one that would be enacted within Eliot's poetic nature, as he cast off previous influences and attachments?

### **Confronting the Romantics: The Norton Lectures**

In the series of eight lectures, Eliot carried out a process of poetic renunciation that had begun before his religious conversion but which gained new impetus as a result.

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<sup>11</sup> The meeting with Arnaut Daniel in Purgatorio XXVI figures strongly in Eliot's work both before and after his conversion. It was to have provided the epigraph for 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', gave the title for Eliot's 1920 volume of verse, Ara Vos Prec, and is quoted in the final fragments of The Waste Land. Its imagery is echoed in the Dantean terza-rima section of 'Little Gidding' (1942).

<sup>12</sup> Quotation from John D. Sinclair's prose translation of the Commedia, published by the Oxford University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Ackroyd notes that Eliot discussed his plan to leave Vivienne with his spiritual counsellor, Father Underhill, who advised a separation at the start of 1932.

He rounded on some of the most influential poets in the English canon, and systematically distanced himself from their works. The targets of his attacks were the Romantic and nineteenth-century poets, and the attacks were carried out on both aesthetic and moral grounds. Wordsworth, after a promising start, drones “the still sad music of infirmity to the verge of the grave.”(UPUC 69)<sup>14</sup> Arnold’s poetry was “of little technical interest”, though his critical writing had some merit if you could gloss over the fact that “in philosophy and theology he was an undergraduate; in religion a Philistine.”(UPUC 105) Coleridge was an interesting study in the exercise of the Imagination, and some of his work rose “almost to the height of great poetry.”(UPUC 67) However, the most violent attack in these lectures, and one which seems to spill beyond the bounds of academic criticism into a far more vitriolic assault, is Eliot’s judgement on Percy Bysshe Shelley.

In the lecture ‘Shelley and Keats’, given on 17 February 1933, Eliot speaks of Shelley in a fashion that reveals an intense dislike:

The ideas of Shelley seem to me always to be ideas of adolescence [...] for most of us, Shelley has marked an intense period before maturity, but for how many does Shelley remain the companion of age? [...] I find his ideas repellent; and the difficulty of separating Shelley from his ideas and beliefs is still greater than with Wordsworth. And the biographical interest which Shelley has always excited makes it difficult to read the poetry without remembering the man: and the man was humourless, pedantic, self-centred, and sometimes almost a blackguard. (UPUC 89)

The tone of this tirade is more personal abuse than poetic criticism, and its intensity, as Eliot later admits, does not stem wholly from the biographical or philosophical standpoints expressed above. He acknowledges that Wordsworth may well have been an unpleasant character, but notes that “I enjoy his poetry as I cannot enjoy Shelley’s, [...] I can only fumble (abating my prejudices as best I can) for reasons why Shelley’s abuse of poetry does me more violence than Wordsworth’s.”(UPUC 89) The assault on Shelley sounds like one fuelled more by prejudice than rational argument. Why, then, was Eliot, normally the most urbane of critics, driven to such extremes of abuse?

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<sup>14</sup> All quotations from the Norton Lectures are to be found in their published form, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism. Page numbers refer to the 1964 reprint of this work.

Eliot explains that his complaint against Shelley is not so much one of poetic technique, though Shelley is prone to combine fluency with “bad jingling”, but a grievance with the thought that lies behind the verse. Eliot is repelled by the “adolescent” ideas that he finds in Shelley’s work and is unable, or unwilling, to isolate these ideas from the poetry. “Shelley seems to have had to a high degree the unusual faculty of passionate apprehension of abstract ideas”(UPUC 89), and in Eliot’s eyes, his fault was that he allowed them into his poetry. Shelley’s philosophy is muddled, veering between rationalism and Platonism, and “his views remained pretty fixed, though his poetic gift matured.” In this ‘apprehension’ of ideas, and the expression of them within his work, he exemplifies for Eliot the giddy mental rush of adolescent reading. Only in his final unfinished work, ‘The Triumph of Life’, does Eliot detect “evidence not only of better writing than in any previous long poem, but of greater wisdom.”(UPUC 90)<sup>15</sup>

The bulk of Shelley’s output is, for Eliot, contaminated by “views I positively dislike,” or thoughts “so puerile that I cannot enjoy the poems in which they occur.” (UPUC 91) In some respects, this sits strangely alongside Eliot’s 1929 essay on Dante, in which he had explored the possibility that a reader could enjoy the aesthetic qualities of a poem, even if they didn’t share the scheme of thought behind it. He advocated a reader giving ‘poetic assent’ in place of the more demanding ‘philosophical belief’, claiming that “If you can read poetry as poetry, you will [...] suspend both belief and disbelief.”(SE 258)

Eliot’s policy of ‘poetic assent’ seems a good response to verse from which we are somehow ‘removed’, in the sense that we cannot share its scheme of thought. It leaves us able to enjoy poetry for its inherent aesthetic qualities, even if we find the intellectual background does not agree with us. Barely four years later, however, Eliot writes of passages in Shelley that would require the exercise of this policy and notes that “I do not find it possible to skip these passages and satisfy myself with the poetry in which no proposition pushes itself forward to claim assent.”(UPUC 91) Eliot, it would seem, cannot follow the advice of Matthew Arnold, and keep

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<sup>15</sup> Eliot’s response to ‘The Triumph of Life’ will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

“the Shelley who delights” distinct from “the Shelley who, to speak plainly, disgusts.”(Arnold 245)

If Eliot’s problem is with the ideas in Shelley’s poetry, why does he seem unable to apply his own policy to his reading? It would appear that Eliot could not countenance some elements of Shelley’s thought, even contained within the vessel of poetry. Instead, he finds poems “contaminated” by thoughts, and is “affronted by the ideas which Shelley bolted whole and never assimilated.”(UPUC 92) I believe that we need to see this lecture on the Romantic poet as a reaction against a feeling of intense affinity, which Eliot wishes to renounce in the same way that he renounces other elements of his life at this crucial point. To reach a point of accommodation with Shelley would not, at this point, be enough to satisfy Eliot’s perceived need to distance himself from his past attachments. What he finds in Shelley cannot be safely contained within the ‘poetic assent’ he had defined earlier; it is too volatile because it is too close to the ‘former’ beliefs, which he could not put behind him quite as easily as he felt his new faith demanded.

In his study of Eliot’s poetry, Martin Scofield notes that “the most striking and perhaps unexpected quality of Eliot’s early tastes in poetry is their romanticism.” (Scofield 24)<sup>16</sup> In the opening Norton lecture, given on 4 November 1932, Eliot spoke candidly of his own poetic influences as illustrations of what he called ‘The development of taste in poetry’. Starting with his early adolescent reading of Fitzgerald’s *Omar* he recalls the point, aged about fourteen, when he first became captivated by the poetic phrase. This led to a flood of new works to read, all imbibed with enthusiasm. “Thereupon,” he continues, “I took the usual adolescent course with Byron, Shelley, Keats, Rossetti, Swinburne.”(UPUC 33) This was the first stage of poetic development, the rapid assimilation of as much poetry as possible, and Eliot notes that it persisted until his twenty-second year.

The second stage is that at which ‘the intensity of the poetic experience’ – the adolescent stage – becomes ‘the intense experience of poetry’. This development often precipitates some action on the part of the reader, normally taking the form of

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Scofield. *T. S. Eliot: The Poems*. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1988.

poetic imitation. Imitation being the most sincere form of flattery, the greater the feeling of intensity obtained from reading a poet, the more one's own verse will bear traces of the chosen style:

At this period, the poem, or the poetry of a single poet, invades the youthful consciousness and assumes complete possession for a time. [...] The frequent result is an outburst of scribbling which we may call imitation, so long as we are aware of the meaning of the word 'imitation' which we employ. It is not deliberate choice of a poet to mimic, but writing under a kind of daemonic possession by one poet. (UPUC 34)

What is interesting here, in view of Eliot's religious position at the time, is his use of the words "daemonic" and "possession". They seem strong terms in which to speak of something like poetry, even for those given, as Eliot was not, to hyperbole. They carry religious significance, calling to mind people in the Bible possessed by evil spirits. Although the argument here speaks of poetic influence, the language ought to alert us to something being implied beyond the poetic sphere.

The second stage is the age of imitation, but again it is spoken of as though the individual is literally 'taken over' by the poetic influence. In the 1942 essay "The Music of Poetry", Eliot was to re-state this concept with particular reference to Shelley:

It is not from rules, or by cold-blooded imitation of style, that we learn to write: we learn by imitation indeed, but by a deeper imitation than is achieved by analysis of style. When we imitated Shelley, it was not so much from a desire to write as he did, as from an invasion of the adolescent self by Shelley, which made Shelley's way, for the time, the only way in which to write. (OPP 28)

For a man who was to extol the value of order in poetry so much in his critical writings and later verse, this remark is most revealing. In the second stage of his poetic development, Eliot admits that he was "invaded" by Shelley. In Bornstein's words, this remark is one in which "the man who did more to deprecate romantic poetry than any other figure in modern English letters confesses his adolescent love of it." (Bornstein 96) The youthful experience was clearly intense and extreme;

much the same as the subsequent rebuttal delivered in front of a literature class at Harvard.<sup>17</sup>

The poem ‘Song’, published in 1907, shows the extent of Shelley’s influence on the young Eliot. In its tone and imagery it resembles Shelley’s ‘Music, when soft voices die’, a poem that Eliot praises in his 1920 essay on Swinburne on account of “a beauty of music and a beauty of content.” (SE 325) Shelley’s poem runs as follows:

Music, when soft voices die,  
Vibrates in the memory. –  
Odours, when sweet voices sicken,  
Live within the sense they quicken. –

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,  
Are heaped for the beloved’s bed –  
And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,  
Love itself shall slumber on ....<sup>18</sup>

This is Eliot’s poem:

When we came home across the hill  
No leaves were fallen from the trees;  
The gentle fingers of the breeze  
Had torn no quivering cobweb down.

The hedgerow bloomed with flowers still,  
No withered petals lay beneath;  
But the wild roses in your wreath  
Were faded, and the leaves were brown.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> George Franklin, in his study of Eliot’s relationship with Shelley (which will be discussed in more detail later) cites an unpublished 1919 letter from Eliot to his mother in which Eliot admits that he got his first copy of Shelley’s poems by ‘stealing’ two dollars from money given by his father for winning a Latin prize. At this early stage, he claims that “Shelley’s work may have constituted for Eliot a disturbing source of guilt and pleasure.” (Franklin 956) The feeling that Shelley’s poetry was an illicit enthusiasm for the young Eliot leads to intriguing speculations about his perceived need to publicly cast aside this youthful influence in later life.

<sup>18</sup> All quotations from Shelley’s poetry in this work, unless otherwise stated, are from Shelley’s Poetry and Prose. Ed. Donald Reiman and Sharon Powers. New York: Norton, 1977.

<sup>19</sup> This poem re-appeared in Poems Written in Early Youth, and can be found in The Complete Poems and Plays (1969), 596. Interestingly, in adopting the stanza form of In Memoriam, it echoes another formative influence on the young Eliot – Alfred, Lord Tennyson. See the appendix to this study for more on Eliot’s debt to Tennyson.

Reading Eliot's poem alongside Shelley's work, we detect a shared concern with transience both in the natural world and in human emotions. In the reference to the faded roses of the wreath we may find a sense of mortality, an image that echoes Shelley's "Rose leaves, [...] heaped for the beloved's bed". In form and imagery Eliot's work is certainly written under the influence of the Romantic poet. Gregory Jay sees Eliot's 'Song' as moving "technically in Shelley's direction", adding that in this poem Eliot has followed the Romantic passion for nature and "internalized the difference between nature and human desire." (Jay 86)<sup>20</sup>

The third stage of Eliot's development of taste marks the return of order to the process:

The third, or mature stage of enjoyment of poetry, comes when we cease to identify ourselves with the poet we happen to be reading; when our critical faculties remain awake; when we are aware of what one poet can be expected to give and what he cannot. The poem has its own existence, apart from us; it was there before us and will be endure after us. It is only at this stage that the reader is prepared to distinguish between degrees of greatness in poetry; before that stage he can only be expected to distinguish between the genuine and the sham – the capacity to make this latter distinction must always be practised first. (UPUC 34)

This is the point at which one has acquired 'Taste'. Youthful infatuation has been subdued. Our critical faculties remain "awake", as opposed to being taken over by the possessive 'other'. 'Pleasure' is a more cerebral effect, the appreciation of subtlety and nuances of style as opposed to the total assimilation of a whole oeuvre and the desire to produce poetry out of imitation. Eliot's theory of 'poetic assent' is important here, too, because it marks our ability to remain sufficiently detached from the poetry we read to acknowledge the thought it contains without necessarily believing in it. Thus, the first flush of infatuation and possession should, if Eliot's model is followed correctly, give way to a more detached appreciation.

In a letter to Stephen Spender, written in 1935, Eliot restates his theory of 'taste' but also hints that the sense of 'possession' is not so easily put aside with the return of the intellectualising tendency:

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<sup>20</sup> Gregory S. Jay. *T. S. Eliot and the Poetics of Literary History*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1983.

You don't really criticize any author to whom you have never surrendered yourself [...] Even just the bewildering minute counts; you have [first] to give yourself up, and then recover yourself, and the third moment is having something to say, before you have wholly forgotten both surrender and recovery. (Cited in Olney 301)<sup>21</sup>

The need to give oneself up to a poetic influence is still a necessary element of the process. The language here also alludes to the sense of being 'possessed' by another, and this sense persists, even if one does eventually regain control and reassert one's own order in the process. Once again, we find Eliot's criticism uneasily acknowledging the presence of a less restrained, less cerebral aspect that is nonetheless vital to its success. Although he asserts the value of order, a troubling hint of surrendered control remains at the core of his thought. As he tells Spender later in the same letter, "the self recovered is never the same as the self before it was given." (Olney 301)

The theory of taste outlined in the Norton lecture breaks down if we apply it to Eliot's response to Shelley. If the mature Eliot has attained 'Taste', why is there such a marked swing in his feelings toward Shelley's verse from fervid imitation to contemptuous disdain? The safe, cerebral pleasure found in the final stage of his theory is missing here. Eliot seems to have been unable to follow his own scheme when it came to Shelley's poetry, and we must ask why this is the case. Eliot's remarks represent an attempt to make a denial sound as strong as possible, so as to conceal the deeper emotion that it would be unwise to show. The sense of 'possession' may still be too strong for the intellectualising tendency. Eliot protested too much in his dismissal of Shelley, and the force of his denunciation can be seen as representative of the intensity of the relationship that it seeks, vainly, to bring to a close. In the essay 'Imperfect Critics', published in 1920, he had stated that "the only cure for Romanticism is to analyse it." (SW 31) In this attack on Shelley, analysis does not, for some reason, appear to be possible, and the perceived need to 'cure' himself of Shelley's influence comes from a deeper source than aesthetic criticism. If we borrow Eliot's demonic imagery, his lecture could be seen as an attempt at exorcism.

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<sup>21</sup> This letter is cited by Alan Weinblatt in his essay "T. S. Eliot: Poet of Adequation." The essay is included in the 1988 collection Essays from the Southern Review.

Given Eliot's standing in the literary world of 1932, his attack on Shelley would not be read as a purely personal matter. Whilst his repeated use of the personal pronoun in the lecture draws attention to its status as an expression of Eliot's views, and not some critical doctrine, his personal comments would inevitably become the opinions of the host of students and readers who hung on his every pronouncement at this time. W. W. Robson is unconvinced that Eliot did not intend to use the Norton lecture to deliver a very public denunciation of Shelley, for all his attempts to qualify it as a personal opinion:

In some ways Eliot's frankness is commendable [...] And he makes it clear that he is reporting his personal reaction to Shelley; he lays no claim to judicial impartiality. But to make these remarks in a context of such solemnity gave them, for many of his followers, the force of a papal edict. And we cannot banish the suspicion – in view of his repeated sniping at Shelley in previous essays – that Eliot uses the occasion for one of those carefully planned and executed literary assassinations which Conrad Aitken recalls from the early days of the *Criterion*. (Molina 152-3)

Certainly, the relative decline in Shelley's reputation that occurred around the middle of the twentieth century cannot be unconnected to his coming under attack at this time from both Eliot and F. R. Leavis – men whose judgements would send a generation of students back to their books with a jaundiced or favourable opinion of a writer's work.<sup>22</sup> Writing in 1931, Edmund Wilson identified the effect on general critical thought that Eliot's work was already having:

With the ascendancy of T. S. Eliot, the Elizabethan dramatists have come back into fashion, and the nineteenth-century poets gone out. [...] It is as much as one's life is worth nowadays, among young people, to say an approving word for Shelley or a dubious one about Donne. (Wilson 98)

If this was the state of affairs before Eliot's term as Norton Professor, we may safely assume that his vehement and very public denunciation of Shelley would have further lowered the Romantic poet's stock amongst the reading public of the time. What we need to ask ourselves is: 'Why did Eliot feel the need for such an assault?'

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<sup>22</sup> Leavis's chapter on Shelley in *Revaluation* appeared in 1936. In the words of Michael O'Neill, he "consigned Shelley to the B-team of literary history, arguing that the poetry's intensity was a cheap thrill." (O'Neill, *Shelley*, 5)

## Possible Reasons for Eliot's Disavowal of Romanticism

Eliot's choice of location for his attack on the Romantics is significant. It was at Harvard that much of his anti-Romantic thought was instilled, as his adolescent love of Romanticism was faced, as he started reading for his Masters in 1909, with the thought of his tutor, Irving Babbitt. In his biography of Eliot, Peter Ackroyd notes that Babbitt was a very traditional scholar, more interested in standards and discipline than growth and success.<sup>23</sup> Eliot took Babbitt's course on French literary criticism that year, and would have heard many of the arguments that Babbitt collected in his 1919 work Rousseau and Romanticism. This book attacked Rousseau's influence in French literature and thought, blaming him for having opened the gates to a flood of confessional literature and being responsible for the decline in traditional values.<sup>24</sup> Apart from attacking Rousseau, and, in Bornstein's words, "conveying the New Humanism's classical tenets of reason, order, law and discipline that Eliot used to slough off his adolescent romanticism"(Bornstein 101), Babbitt also claimed, in terms, that will sound familiar when read alongside his pupil's own lecture, that Shelley was very much a poet of adolescence. "The person who is as much taken by Shelley at forty as he was at twenty," he asserted, "has, one may surmise, failed to grow up."(Cited in Bornstein 101)

There was, however, another important factor behind Eliot's assault on his past influences, and an examination of it requires a return to the subject of his religious conversion.

It has been noted, both by textual critics and also those more concerned with Eliot's spiritual progress, that Eliot's Christian faith was based on a 'negative way'.<sup>25</sup> Rather than perceive God to be at the summit of human sensory experience, a

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<sup>23</sup> See Peter Ackroyd. T. S. Eliot. 36.

<sup>24</sup> For evidence of the effect Babbitt's thought had on his student, we need only study Eliot's lecture program for Oxford in 1916, on French literature. This was to be a study of French critical thought from the Eighteenth century to the present, refuting Rousseau and concluding with the return to order found in the work of the conservative Charles Maurras. This syllabus is reprinted in the second edition (1994) of A. David Moody's Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet. 41-49.

<sup>25</sup> Eloise Knapp Hay's T. S. Eliot's Negative Way (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1982) provides an excellent reading of this aspect of Eliot's thought, linking his theological interest in negation with its expression in his poetry and drama.

perfect being in the Aristotelian mould, Eliot saw the route to God as a 'via negativa' in which one advanced along the religious road by discarding earthly experiences and pleasures. Like the souls met by Dante, he knows that failure to abjure past attachments will entail an eternity in Purgatory, not punished by the torments of Hell, but forever denied the blessing of Divine Presence. Therefore, the new Christian soul must move on in its new life, putting behind it what, in the words of 'The Dry Salvages', "was believed in as the most reliable / And therefore the fittest for renunciation."

Thus, we see Eliot, in the years that follow his entry into the Anglican Church, actively moving away from previously held positions in both life and literature. The most striking example of this in his life is his separation from Vivienne. The marriage was in crisis from its outset, and it would be wrong to attribute its collapse wholly to Eliot's new-found faith. It is, however, symbolic that Eliot, on his return to England in 1933, did not return to their flat at 68 Clarence Gardens, choosing instead to live in rooms at the presbytery of St. Stephen's Church while he tried to reclaim his possessions without seeing his estranged wife.<sup>26</sup> In leaving a marriage that had been so unhappy, we may see Eliot renouncing the sensual path that promised spiritual fulfilment in human love.<sup>27</sup> Giving the Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1926, he had concluded that "whether you seek the Absolute in marriage, adultery or debauchery, it is all one – you are seeking in the wrong place." (Varieties 115) Now he was putting his own thought into practice. Like the characters in The Waste Land that lament the failure of desire, and the reduction of romantic passion to the dry routine of sexual activity, he had not filled the spiritual void with earthly love. Ackroyd remarks that the Eliots' married life had been "full of pain and perplexity; it is not too much to say that [Vivienne's] emotional needs had been fastened on a man whom she never properly understood, and that he in turn was baffled and then enraged by her insistent and neurotic demands upon him." (Ackroyd 284)

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<sup>26</sup> The painful breakdown of the Eliots' marriage is documented in Carole Seymour-Jones's recent biography of Vivienne Eliot (London: Constable, 2001).

<sup>27</sup> The changing status of human love in Eliot's poetry will be discussed in more detail in Chapters Three and Four.

It is, in part, this renunciation of earthly love, fuelled by the break-up of a painful marriage, that contributes to Eliot's poetic renunciation of the Romantic heritage. His rift with the Romantic poets had begun earlier in his poetic career, with his recourse to the doctrines of style and order that he found in the poetry of the seventeenth century and his parallel adoption of the 'ironic' Romanticism found in French Symbolism, most notably in the work of Jules Laforgue. However, the Norton lectures, given after his conversion, represent a more co-ordinated attempt to define a position from which to break with the influence of Romanticism, and this break is itself fuelled by a powerful blend of life and art.

Bornstein is in no doubt that, in his references to 'a poetry of adolescence,' Eliot is linking Romantic verse with sexual puberty, and that, by implication, both are phases, one artistic, one biological, that need to be outgrown in later life. If they are not outgrown, or changed into the more mature sensations of adulthood, they remain potentiality dangerous, liable to result either in painful suppression or unrestrained excess. In this sense, he asserts that Eliot equated Romanticism with sexual activity, and that sexual excess was therefore akin to possession by poetry (something found in Romanticism's frequent celebration of illicit love). Eliot therefore equated Romantic poetry with a loss of control, and his attacks on the Romantic aesthetic, fiercest between the conversion of 1927 and the separation of 1932, are expressions of his "fears of personal and cultural deviation." (Bornstein 97) In marrying Vivienne, he had sacrificed a career in America and gone against the wishes of his family. Having invested the marriage with so much, however, Eliot found an absence of spiritual communion, and was revolted by the sexuality of his wife, as evidenced in the disturbing poem 'Ode', which was originally included in the 1920 volume Poems, and subsequently withdrawn:

When the bridegroom smoothed his hair  
 There was blood upon the bed.  
 Morning was already late.  
 Children singing in the orchard  
 (Io Hymen, Hymenae)  
 Succuba eviscerate.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This poem can be found in Inventions of the March Hare, an edition of Eliot's early poetry, edited by Christopher Ricks (1996). 383.

Having tried to abandon himself in marriage, Eliot had found only pain and confused disgust. The Romantic celebration of 'Love' must therefore have rung very hollow for him.

In rejecting Shelley in such personal terms, however, Eliot may also have been reacting to a life that echoed, in some disturbing respects, his own. Even as he addressed his students at Harvard and berated Shelley for being "a blackguard" in personal matters, Eliot was planning to separate from his wife in England. Although he would have dismissed any direct equation of his state with Shelley's abandonment of Harriet, the similarity was uncomfortably present. If Shelley was self-centred in his actions, Eliot had to convince himself that he was acting in accordance with a higher will, and that his separation was a necessary step on his route towards spiritual redemption. Bornstein reads Eliot's attack on Shelley as one very much conditioned by Eliot's marital state at the time, claiming that the "improbable" description of Shelley as a blackguard arose from "the contrast between Shelley the advocate of free (though not licentious) love and Eliot the resolute husband of an increasingly deranged wife." (Bornstein 125) Eliot clearly made a distinction between the two 'abandonments', seeing his as a spiritual necessity and Shelley's as wilful selfishness. The distinction in this case, however, is very fine, and Eliot may well have appreciated this, as Robert Sencourt notes:

Against [Shelley's] kind of moral laxity Eliot's every instinct revolted. The recoil was all the stronger at that moment because of the effect of loyalty he was still making to a marriage which he felt bound to terminate in separation. The effect Shelley offered was hardly less than Satanic. He must put it behind him with all the force of his unconscious mind.

(Sencourt 125)

Eliot and Shelley's treatment of love will be examined in more detail in Chapter Three. At this point in his life, rather than find fulfilment in love, Eliot must have felt, as his marriage finally foundered, more inclined to agree with the unhappy Maniac in Shelley's poem 'Julian and Maddalo', whose lament that "Love sometimes leads astray to misery" seems a direct contradiction of all the best hopes

of Romantic passion. Eliot had sought the ideal, and found only the pain that results from a failed quest.<sup>29</sup>

In Romanticism, emotional abandonment was also equated with abandonment to the forces of ‘poetic inspiration’, and Eliot reacted against this trait in his criticism. Romanticism extolled the merits of sudden, inspired flashes of poetic insight, to which poets must surrender themselves totally, or risk losing the fleeting vision they were being offered, the “visionary gleam” that Wordsworth wrote about. The Romantic poet stands apart from the common crowd, as Shelley described Keats in ‘Adonais’ when he called him “the loveliest and the last” of his kind. In Eliot’s criticism, the poet was noticeable more by his personal absence from his work. In the 1927 essay ‘Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca’ he affirmed that “every poet starts from [...] his own emotions” but added that it was the role of the poet to rise above personal feelings and create impersonal art. The poet should “transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal.”(SE 137) The Romantic individual genius, waiting for the visitation of inspiration was anathema to Eliot’s own critical thought, which stressed the need for order and tradition in poetry.

Romanticism, in poems such as Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’, espoused abandonment, with thoughts driven “like withered leaves” and words scattered like ashes and sparks “from an unextinguished hearth”. To be subject to such forces is to be ripe for possession, and Eliot, as seen in his comments on the second stage of taste, quoted earlier, could not conceive of such possession without fear. In art, as in life, the Romantics represented loss of control – and to a man trying to reorder his life around the framework of a faith, they were a cautionary example:

To Eliot their careers were parables of the need for control and discipline of the violent forces of poetic composition and affect. Similarly, they showed the necessity of ordered morality in both art and life. (Bornstein 114)

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<sup>29</sup> Again, Babbitt’s teachings on Rousseau provide us with a key influence on Eliot’s thought. Rousseau, for Babbitt, represents “the desire to give free play to the sexual impulse” (cited in Gunner 24) – something that Eliot, in his post-conversion awareness of the sordidness of human relations, could not countenance.

Eliot had expressed his fear that his own age may be heading towards the disorder of Romanticism in a review entitled 'The Romantic Generation, if It Existed', which appeared in the Athenaeum on 18 July 1919. In this piece, he highlights the dangers of "intellectual chaos", and expresses "the suspicion that our own age may be similarly chaotic and ineffectual." (Cited in Jay 116) Throughout the 1920s, while Eliot had been making his own journey towards faith, a fierce critical debate had raged on the nature of the Romantic 'inner voice'. In an article 'On Fear and Romanticism', published in the Adelphi in September 1923, John Middleton-Murry had argued that Romanticism, with its prioritising of intuition and inner morality, was the 'native' British tradition of thought. Classicism, with its restraining tendencies, was an imposition, coming from the Latin, Catholic continent. Eliot responded with the essay 'The Function of Criticism' in which, in Bornstein's words, he attacked Murry's theory with "near hysteria" (Bornstein 116). The 'inner voice', in Eliot's view "breathes the eternal message of vanity, fear, and lust." (SE 27) Criticism must encourage literature to respect authority, both in the guise of the 'tradition' to which the artist should submit, and "something outside of ourselves, which may provisionally be called truth." (SE 34) Eliot is not, at this early stage, expounding a Christian message, but his distrust of Romantic individualism is evident. This debate would continue throughout the decade, conducted in salvos of conflicting essays and articles in various journals, with Eliot arguing his own case through The Criterion, the editorship of which he had assumed in 1922.<sup>30</sup>

There was another reason for the Christian Eliot to distrust the Romantic heritage, and that was its largely anti-religious stance. The history of Romanticism is one of anti-clerical, if not directly anti-Christian thought. Romanticism can often be seen as an attempt to locate a deity outside the religious order, evidenced in Wordsworth's pantheism, or Shelley's belief in perfectible human nature, developed from the ideas of his father-in-law, William Godwin. As the nineteenth century progressed, this line of thought became even more pronounced, culminating in the work of men like Arnold and Pater, who came to perceive Art as something that could fill the void they saw resulting from the decline of religious sensibility. The

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<sup>30</sup>Recalling this time, Stephen Spender remarks that "the twenties seem to have been declared by Eliot, D. H. Lawrence and various other writers as an open season for hunting Murry. You were allowed to do anything but shoot him." (Spender 81)

work of art, embodying as it did all the finer qualities of the age which produced it, could be in its own right a pseudo-religious icon, and the pursuit of beauty a worthy end in itself. Taking the words that Keats gave to the Grecian Urn, “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’ - that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” as their starting point, these thinkers made Art into a secular religion, something Eliot attacked in his 1930 essay, ‘Arnold and Pater’:

The total effect of Arnold’s philosophy is to set up Culture in the place of Religion, and to leave Religion to be laid waste by the anarchy of feeling. And Culture is a term which each man not only may interpret as he pleases, but must indeed interpret as he can. (SE 436)

For Eliot, the key shortcoming of Romanticism lay in that shift by which the individual adopted the right and the ability to make such value judgements for themselves. The process begun by Coleridge and Shelley, and taken up by Arnold and Pater, was one which made the self the arbiter of judgement. Personal insight, when visited by genius, was the key to poetic composition, and personal morality was the only true governing force. The year after his confirmation, Eliot had railed against both of these in his collection of essays For Lancelot Andrewes. The subtitle of this volume, “Essays in Style and Order”, made his stance quite clear. He offered Classicism and Catholicism against Romanticism and Atheism, asserting the former to be the correct codes by which ordered aesthetic creation was best served. In his Norton lecture on Arnold, he warned against “the deplorable moral and religious effects of confusing poetry and morals in the attempt to find a substitute for religious faith.”(UPUC 116)

Eliot, then, used the Norton Lectures to publicly criticise, and distance himself from, the Romantic heritage. He did so on grounds of content, form, and morality. However, in Scofield’s words “Romanticism is not easily disposed of, and remains throughout an energizing and in Eliot’s case often disruptive force.”(Scofield 27) Eliot’s fierce assault may deceive us, because within it there persist revealing traces of a younger intoxication with Romanticism, one which Eliot evidently dismissed with such force in public because it was far from extinct as he stood to address his class of Harvard students.

## Eliot's Uneasy Relationship with the Romantics

Bornstein asserts that the Romantic poets were always crucial to Eliot, but their status changed from influences to counter-examples. They were no longer something to aspire to, but something to avoid. Eliot's theory of 'Taste' was a critical attempt to locate Romanticism in his poetic past and claim that he had moved beyond it, but what comes across in his criticism is a sense that the former passion is still disturbingly alive. Romanticism represented everything that Eliot felt his Christian faith could not tolerate, and as such he set out to renounce it, taking as his main target the poet whose influence on him had been the strongest – Percy Shelley. His assault, however, is only partly convincing, and this is because it is being carried out not in confidence but in fear:

Eliot protests against the romantics too much in his middle period. They came too close to his own concerns and fears, and had already demonically possessed him in his youth. That made them terrifying. (Bornstein 115)

It is in the light of this desire to be distanced from past loves that Eliot's attack on Shelley ought to be read. What is being expressed here is not hatred of Shelley, or of Romanticism in general, but Eliot's inability to reconcile his past attachments with his religious consciousness. The only way in which this intense Romantic affinity could be viewed in relation to his Christianity was as something in opposition, and, of necessity, as something vanquished by his new faith.

However, the nature of Eliot's faith changed as it matured. In subsequent years, he was able to reconcile strongly held religious convictions with a degree of accommodation of past influences. Eliot did not wholly abjure the Romantic tradition, and after the intensity of the initial repudiation was able to accommodate it within his own aesthetic and philosophical creeds. Initially, though, there was an act of fierce repudiation, discarding Romanticism in favour of another set of values. The Norton Lectures mark the end of this period of renunciation, one in which the intensity of the relationship is defined in the inverse sense by its appearance as hatred. In later years, in his drama, his criticism, and finally in the triumphant conclusion of his poetic career marked by Four Quartets, Eliot was able to accommodate Romanticism into his artistic life. He was able, finally, to reconcile

the two seemingly opposing forces that were at war in his mind in the 1932-33 academic year.

Initially, it was through his religious sensibility that Eliot acquired the resolve to reject Romanticism. The two creeds simply could not be reconciled, and in the years that followed his conversion, past poetic attachments were more likely to be displaced in any struggle for influence. This is not to say that his casting off of earlier influences is purely a religious matter, for the question of poetic influence can be seen on several levels within the character of the poet. What I propose here is that, at this early stage of his faith, Eliot felt that his repudiation of Shelley was both justified and necessary. The arch-Atheist and the new convert could have little in common, and even with Eliot's own theory of 'poetic assent' as a guide, the relationship was far too volatile to permit any attempt at accommodation. Shelley was, for Eliot, a dangerous precursor, and the strength of his rejection is commensurate with the extent of his previous influence.

That is, however, not where Eliot's relationship with Shelley ends. Having cast him out of his list of influences, Eliot could not leave Shelley in the cold. Shelley reappears in some interesting places in Eliot's later work, and we may see this return from two viewpoints. The influence of Shelley may have been too strong for Eliot to wholly abjure, and his reappearance, either in direct citation or the appropriation of certain tropes, was to some extent inevitable. On the other hand, Eliot may have consciously decided to restore Shelley to his poetic pantheon, concluding that his earlier judgement may have gone too far in its vehemence, and that his debt to Shelley, and to the Romantics as a whole, should be acknowledged to some extent.

Eliot's Christian viewpoint is crucial in considering his treatment of Shelley. The initial rejection of past poetic influences takes place against the backdrop of a recent conversion. Far from being assured in the years that followed his conversion, Eliot felt increasingly uncertain as his life did not undergo some sudden change, but rather deteriorated further into marital misery. Rather than a sense of release from past failings, Eliot's brand of Christianity stressed the need to acknowledge those very failings in the attempt to gain remission. His faith initially threw the confusion

in his life into painfully sharp focus rather than offer any resolution to his problems. The feelings of the recent convert are found both in the 'Ariel' poems of this time, and in the uncertainty of 'Ash-Wednesday', where the acceptance of faith brings the fear of judgement more than the blessing of release:<sup>31</sup>

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death  
Pray for us now and at the hour of our death.

Eliot's Christianity never lost its sense of the necessity of judgement and the need to be absolved for past actions, but in later years he did find a degree of assurance that was lacking in his early faith. Christianity was not so much a consolation to him as a means of re-evaluating his life and, with the benefit of a greater, transcendent perspective, coming to see people, actions, and poetic influences and works, in a different light. It is in the light of this changing aspect of his faith that we must view his subsequent dealings with Shelley's poetry.

Eliot's initial repudiation of Shelley stemmed from his recognition that Shelley had confronted the same fundamental problems and issues that Eliot found himself facing in his early poetry. The sense of isolation and self-consciousness; the realisation that love can be a torment even as it promises transcendence; the feeling that language is not always able to adequately relate our perceptions, and that the poet is not always blessed for his insight into life around him – both Shelley and Eliot address these issues in their work. If Eliot believed Shelley to have been an adverse influence on his own poetry, did he also see his own life as having been unfulfilled because he had, erroneously, sought transcendence in the same places as the Romantic poet? And if this is the case, can his later accommodation of some aspects of Shelley's work serve to illustrate an understanding that, although unsuccessful, the frustrated search can acquire meaning when viewed from the transcendent viewpoint?

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<sup>31</sup> The earliest Ariel poems show a man who, having made the step towards faith, has not yet attained the spiritual understanding that he sought. In 'The Journey of the Magi', for example, the speaker concludes that he is "no longer at ease" in his homeland, having seen Christ, but rather than having gained an assured faith he feels only a sense that what was possessed before was inadequate. Spiritual illumination, on the personal level, is not yet present, and this gives 'The Journey of the Magi', 'A Song for Simeon' and parts of 'Ash-Wednesday' their troubling tone.

In 'Little Gidding', the last of the Four Quartets, Eliot wrote that the religious condition, when attained, represents release from the human realm into a transcendent state where we can regard our past attachments in a new, and greater, light. From this viewpoint memory, and past attachments, would not torment us, but set us free:

This is the use of memory:  
For liberation – not less of love but expanding  
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation  
From the future as well as the past.

Seen in the light of Eliot's marital problems, the distinction between spiritual love and carnal desire is important. The human element is burned away in the purgatorial flames, and the pure, divine sentiment remains. The treatment of love will be examined in more detail in Chapters Three and Four, but I cite it here to stress the sense of purification that the Christian viewpoint affords Eliot. This sense of re-arrangement, in which figures from the past are re-valued and re-located, is evoked again later in 'Little Gidding':

See, now they vanish,  
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved  
them,  
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.

What is important here is that the previous affections and attachments are not rejected. The adoption of the divine perspective imbues them with an importance that was not evident when viewed from a purely human standpoint. There is, the poem assures us, nothing inherently wrong with our human attachments, as long as we can come to re-value them in the light of our spiritual awakening. This development in Eliot's thought can be seen in his subsequent dealings with past poetic attachments.

### **Later Rapprochement with Shelley**

Eliot's later poetic rapprochement with Shelley's work manifested itself in more positive references to Shelley in later critical essays, and the appropriation of Shelleyan metaphors and images in his poetry and drama. Perhaps the most striking

instance is the direct quotation from Prometheus Unbound that occurs in Eliot's 1950 play The Cocktail Party. Harcourt- Reilly, when asked to clarify the fate of Celia Coplestone, asks if he may quote poetry and, having received an affirmative answer, goes on to recite the following lines:

Ere Babylon was dust  
The magus Zoroaster, my dead child,  
Met his own image walking in the garden.  
That apparition, sole of men, he saw.  
For know there are two worlds of life and death:  
One that which thou beholdest; but the other  
Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit  
The shadows of all forms that think and live  
Till death unite them and they part no more! (CP 162)

Reilly uses this image to explain how, on first meeting Celia, he had a vision of her future martyrdom. What is important here is the fact that Eliot consciously cites, in a play with an overwhelmingly Christian message, a poet who, seventeen years earlier, he repudiated in terms that spoke of almost demonic influence. Clearly, he now feels that Shelley's work is not as potentially corrupting as once feared.

Another notable instance of citation is the essay 'What Dante Means to Me', given as a talk to the Italian Institute in London on 4 July 1950. In this piece, which traces the all-pervasive influence of the Italian poet on Eliot's work, he refers to the influence of Dante on Shelley, with the latter referred to as "the English poet, more than all others, on whom the influence of Dante was remarkable." (CC 130) The particular instance of influence that Eliot draws attention to is 'The Triumph of Life', "a poem which is Shelley's greatest tribute to Dante," and "the last of his great poems". Eliot adds that in his opinion, Shelley's final poem "was also the greatest" (CC 130), and goes on to quote the passage in which the poetic observer enquires after the origin of the triumph, and is answered by the shade of Rousseau. Eliot admits that this passage "made an indelible impression upon me over forty-five years ago." (CC 130) This recollection ties in with the earlier reference to adolescent 'possession' by Shelley mentioned in the Norton lecture. Having quoted Shelley's lines, Eliot adds :

Well, this is better than I could do. But I quote it, as one of the supreme tributes to Dante in English; for it testifies to what Dante has done, both for the style and for the soul, of a great English poet. (CC 132)

What is interesting in this reference to Shelley is the extent to which, in approaching his work through its Dantean echoes, Eliot is prepared to admit both a sense of formative influence and a lasting admiration for a poet whom he denounced in such strong terms back in 1933. Eliot had expressed the depth of his own debt to Dante in the 'terza-rima' section of 'Little Gidding' some years previously, and this passage of Shelley serves to link all three poets into what George Franklin, in his essay on Shelley and Eliot, calls an "instance of meeting".<sup>32</sup>

### Past Readings of Eliot's Romantic Dilemma

The theory that Eliot's disavowal of his Romantic precursors may be an expression of a deep-seated sense of influence has been common currency in critical circles since the appearance of C. K. Stead's The New Poetic in 1964.<sup>33</sup> Focusing on Eliot's method of composition, and his often contradictory remarks on the relationship between the material used in poetry and the formal work that is produced, Stead presents us with an Eliot who sets out a critical program strangely at odds with his own means of poetic creation. Drawing on three of the early essays that served to make Eliot's reputation as a critic ('Tradition and the Individual Talent', 'Ben Jonson', and 'Hamlet'), Stead finds the language employed in these essays oddly out of tune with the theories Eliot wishes to propose:

These three essays show how obsessively concerned Eliot was at the time with a process of poetry in which the conscious will played only the minor role of sub-editor. His remarks imply a kind of poetic composition at least as dependent on spontaneous 'imagination' and 'inspiration' as that which any of the romantic poets might have affirmed. (Stead 131)

In Stead's view, the very assertion of 'impersonality' draws our attention to Eliot's unsuccessful struggle to attain that condition. The unconscious nature of the poet is

<sup>32</sup> George Franklin. "Instances of Meeting: Shelley and Eliot: A Study in Affinity." ELH 61 (1994) 955-90. I will return to Eliot's essay in more detail when looking at the Dantean echoes in the poetry of both men in Chapter Four.

<sup>33</sup> C. K. Stead. The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot. 1964. London: Hutchinson, 1975.

to the fore in the theory of composition that Eliot outlines in his essay 'The Three Voices of Poetry', and Stead quotes liberally from this to illustrate his point.

In this essay, dating from 1953 and, as with the later citations of Shelley, from a period after Eliot's conversion, when we may consider him to have attained some equilibrium in his faith, we find Eliot speaking of a "creative germ" within the poet, which he struggles to bring to release in the form of a poem. The passage is of sufficient importance to my discussion to quote at length:

In a poem [...] the poet may be concerned solely with expressing in verse – using all his resources of words, with their history, their connotations, their music – this obscure impulse. He does not know what he has to say until he has said it. [...] He is oppressed by a burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief. Or, to change the figure of speech, he is haunted by a demon, a demon against which he feels powerless, because in its first manifestation it has no face, no name, nothing; and the words, the poem he makes, are a kind of form of exorcism of this demon. In other words again, he is going to all that trouble, not in order to communicate with anyone, but to gain relief from acute discomfort; and when the words are finally arranged in the right way – or in what he comes to accept as the best arrangement he can find – he may experience a moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation, which is in itself indescribable. (OPP 98)<sup>34</sup>

This is a most revealing passage, partly because it returns to the imagery of demonic possession found in the reference to Shelley in the first Norton Lecture and partly because it points to a fault-line in Eliot's criticism between the impersonal, classical artwork and the Romantic, subjective, internal point from which this work originates. The vague manner in which Eliot describes the actual poetic act has also been noted by critics, who find in the above passage a theory of composition almost Romantic in its reliance upon unconscious inspiration. Graham Hough has commented that in this essay "the endeavour is a purely private affair between the poet and the dark forces within him." (Molina 60) Eugenia Gunner, in her book on Eliot's relationship with Romanticism, remarks:

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<sup>34</sup> Eliot had anticipated the imagery of this essay in his introduction to Harold Munro's Collected Poems in 1933:

"It is the poet's business to be original, in all that is comprehended by 'technique', only so far as is absolutely necessary for saying what he has to say; only so far as is dictated, not by the idea – for there is no idea – but by the nature of the dark embryo within him which gradually takes on the form and speech of a poem."

(Cited in Stead, 135)

The actual transmutation of the artist's experience into an objective work of art, the instance of creation itself, remains as mysterious and unknowable in Eliot's theory as it was in any deep, romantic, chasm. (Gunner 97)<sup>35</sup>

The possibility that traces of Romanticism can be located in Modernist poetry has been explored by John Bayley and Albert Gelpi among others<sup>36</sup>. In his work The Romantic Survival (1957), Bayley argues that Modernism appropriated several key Romantic concepts; the prioritising of the individual viewpoint, the sense of 'strangeness' in one's relations with the world, and the realisation that poetry is not, and cannot be a 'realistic' medium and is therefore the vehicle for the 'irrational' elements of the self. In these respects, Modernism is not so much a break with Romantic concerns, but a reiteration of them in a contemporary context.<sup>37</sup> Albert Gelpi's book A Coherent Splendor (1987) focuses on American poetry between 1910 and 1950, showing that whilst it tries to set itself apart from the Romantic model, Modernism is still preoccupied with the fundamental Romantic dilemma – the status of the self in view of the decline of religious belief. Whilst they affect a rejection of the Romantic Absolute, Modernist poets still find themselves expressing the same questions and uncertainties as their forbears.

Among his contemporary audience, there was little doubt that Eliot was wholly opposed to the Romantics.<sup>38</sup> Today, however, we may conclude that although his position was hostile, Eliot's judgements alert us to a deeper relationship between modernism and the verse of the early nineteenth century than he would have liked to admit. In place of a clear division between the Romantic and the Modern, we find

<sup>35</sup> Eugenia M. Gunner. T. S. Eliot's Romantic Dilemma: Tradition's Anti-Traditional Elements. New York: Garland, 1985.

<sup>36</sup> John Bayley. The Romantic Survival: A Study in Poetic Evolution. 1957. London: Chatto, 1969. Albert Gelpi. A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetic Renaissance, 1910-1950. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987.

<sup>37</sup> The second half of Bayley's book consists of studies of Auden, Yeats, and Dylan Thomas, reading them as poets indebted to the Romantic movement. He does not, except for some passing references, include Eliot in his discussion.

<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the most famous summary of Eliot's anti-Romantic thought came from W. B. Yeats in a radio broadcast 'Modern Poetry' of 1936. In the wake of Eliot's first book of verse, Yeats recalls that:

"No romantic word or sound, nothing reminiscent [...] could be permitted henceforth. Poetry must resemble prose, and both must accept the vocabulary of their time [...] The past had deceived us; let us accept the worthless present."

(Yeats 245)

instead a fundamental continuity, and Eliot himself evidences this, as David Spurr notes:

The style and imagery of his critical essays reveal the same inner conflict that surfaced in his poems: a rivalry between intellectual order and a purely visionary imagination for the poet's allegiance. [...] Throughout Eliot's career one finds a continual slippage in the style of his essays toward covert identification with the very artistic values that a more conscious critical position opposes. (Spurr 108-9)<sup>39</sup>

In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', Eliot had famously declared that the expression of personality in poetry was something that could only be detrimental to the finished work, and that the act of composition had to be, at base, a conscious activity, not the yielding to impulse:

There is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him 'personal'. (SE 21)

It is hard for us as modern readers, versed as we are in Freudian terminology, to think of the word 'conscious' in anything other than personal terms.<sup>40</sup> If we are to appreciate Eliot's remarks fully, however, I believe we need to consider both the personality of the poet and the means by which the poet's experience finds expression.

Eliot's poetic theory of 'impersonality' was examined in detail by Maud Ellmann in her 1987 book The Poetics of Impersonality: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.<sup>41</sup> Ellmann reads the careful adoption of an impersonal style as an attempt to draw attention away from the poet who is writing. In this very activity, however, the poet cannot fail to draw attention back onto himself, and what often emerges from our reading

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<sup>39</sup> David Spurr. Conflicts in Consciousness: T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Criticism. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1984.

<sup>40</sup> Roger Sharrock, in a 1977 essay, reads the 'Tradition' essay largely in terms of Eliot's life at the time, commenting that "the whole theory of poetic impersonality is, one suspects, fertilized by the strains of personal unhappiness." (Molina 173)

<sup>41</sup> Maud Ellmann. The Poetics of Impersonality: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Brighton: Harvester, 1987.

of these 'impersonal' poems is an image of the deeply insecure and divided self that produced them. In the appeal to some 'higher' reality, our attention as readers is focused on the self that has such a desire for transcendence. For Ellmann, our attention as readers never moves far away from the character of Eliot himself. "The more the poet struggles to suppress subjectivity", she writes, "the more it reappears in other forms and disguises." (Ellmann 128)

The most pervasive model for assessing literary influence remains Harold Bloom's The Anxiety of Influence, which first appeared in 1973.<sup>42</sup> Bloom sets the question of poetic influence in specifically Freudian, often Oedipal, terms. Distinguishing between 'strong' and 'weak' poets, he makes the ability to wrestle with one's own sources of inspiration the measure of poetic achievement. The Bloomian 'strong' poet is one who is aware of their work's indebtedness to a precursor, and who initially denies that formative influence only to reach a point later at which the precursor's work is both absorbed into their own output and re-worked to the point at which the resultant poem represents something intrinsically valid in itself, although its earlier source may still be visible. To have reached this point, for Bloom, is to have proven oneself a strong poet, to have successfully come to terms with one's sense of "belatedness", the realisation that one may not be able to find purely personal expression without employing tropes already used by others.

Bloom's theory is still the stance against which critics protest or with which they agree. I do not propose to take issue with him here, but rather to stress the importance of Eliot's religious faith in determining his poetic sensibilities, an area that Bloom's purely poetic theory does not, I feel, adequately address.<sup>43</sup>

Further critical studies of Eliot's problematic relationship with the Romantic tradition appeared throughout the 1970s, and followed on from the work of Stead,

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<sup>42</sup> Harold Bloom. The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry. 1973. New York: Oxford UP, 1997.

<sup>43</sup> It is worth noting in passing, however, that Eliot is the one writer that Bloom does not really treat in his various explorations of poetic influence, preferring instead Yeats or Stevens as representatives of the twentieth century mind. It may be that this omission should alert us to a possible 'anxiety' on the part of the critic himself.

while coming to regard Eliot in a Bloomian light. Seamus Heaney recalls the importance of Stead's work in re-shaping Eliot's image among the reading public:

Stead [...] rehabilitated Eliot as a Romantic poet, every bit as faithful to the process of dream and as susceptible to gifts of the unconscious as Coleridge was before he received the person from Porlock. (Heaney 92)

In the wake of Stead's work, Eliot increasingly became seen as a poet of profound Romantic leanings, trying with limited success to present a critical program that prioritised structure and order above these feelings. The Freudian nature of his struggle was brought to the fore, and his desire to attack Romantic shortcomings in criticism led to each critical essay being read as an exercise in repression. In his book T. S. Eliot's Impersonal Theory of Poetry (1974), Mowbray Allan notes that:

In Eliot's early criticism [...] it is the signs of revolt against the nineteenth century tradition that first command the attention. But careful analysis of his early critical thought reveals that it shares a common basis with Romantic criticism and aesthetics. (Allan 15)<sup>44</sup>

Eliot thus became one who protested too much against the Romantic forbears to whom his own ideas were so indebted. The need for poetic 'impersonality', and the doctrine of the objective correlative were seen as tactics to reassert the distance between poets and their material. In a 1977 essay on the Norton Lectures, W. W. Robson referred to them as illustrating the uneasy relationship between "the innovating poet and the literary traditionalist" (Molina 150). Edward Lobb, writing in 1981, summed up what had become the prevailing wisdom when he spoke of "the tension between his [Eliot's] public classicism and his deep, often inarticulate, Romanticism." (Lobb, Romantic, 6) By now, Eliot was officially a closet Romantic poet.<sup>45</sup>

George Bornstein, in his 1976 work Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot and Stevens, stressed Eliot's repeated linkage of Romanticism with adolescence and puberty. In a reading that stays close to Freudian theories of repression, he claims that Eliot's repudiation of the Romantics arose from a

<sup>44</sup> Mowbray Allan. T. S. Eliot's Impersonal Theory of Poetry. Lewisburg: Bucknell, 1974.

<sup>45</sup> Edward Lobb. T. S. Eliot and the Romantic Critical Tradition. London: Routledge, 1981.

perceived need on his part to keep the emotional aspect of his nature, to which they had certainly appealed in the past, under the control of his will. "The Romantics remained crucial to Eliot," he writes, "but crucial as counterexamples and as projections of the flaws of his boyhood and fears of his manhood."(Bornstein 95) For Bornstein, Eliot found something inherently dangerous in the Romantic prioritisation of human emotion and, recognising the threat that this could pose to his balance of mind, railed against it in an attempt to neutralise it. Romanticism becomes Eliot's critical bogeyman, something on which he can direct his "fears of personal and cultural deviation."(Bornstein 97)

Gregory S. Jay proposed a more linguistic reading of Eliot's Romantic affiliation in his 1983 book T. S. Eliot and the Poetics of Literary History. Applying structuralist theories to Eliot's work, Jay argues that "we are now in a better position to analyze the complex ambivalence in his polemics and to read the echoing voices of the Romantics in his texts."(Jay 5) For Jay, Eliot's work echoes his past influences, betraying in its language what its author disavowed in his arguments.

In critical circles, then, the tenor of Eliot's relationship with Romanticism was firmly established in terms of deep-seated repression of a potentially disruptive influence. What very few of these readings did, however, was to go beyond the initial repudiation, and the possible reasons for it, and examine the evidence of accommodation that could be seen in Eliot's later poems, plays and essays. In her book T. S. Eliot's Romantic Dilemma (1985), Eugenia Gunner conceded that "the Romantic content of his [Eliot's] poetry perhaps signals some use of Romanticism other than imitation or purgation."(Gunner 9) Bornstein was one of the first to introduce Eliot's religious faith into the debate, but he did so by making Christianity something with which Eliot could combat Romanticism, claiming that it "answered the need for a force without to combat chaos within, providing both social orthodoxy and individual grace."(Bornstein 150) This view of Eliot's faith may well fit with the vehemence of his initial renunciation of past influences, an act carried out with the zeal and anxiety of the recent convert who wants to feel the power of his new belief while at the same time anxious that it may not be as powerful as he has hoped and that a relapse may still occur. I believe, however, that as Eliot grew in his faith it was no longer simply a bulwark against the part of him

that the Romantics represented but a means of returning to those attachments and influences and coming to regard them in a new light, within a transcendent pattern. Romanticism was to become something to be revisited and transcended, not closed off as if it were a hazardous substance that might contaminate Eliot's new life. His Christian faith enabled Eliot to come to terms with an influence that he had never been able to fully repudiate. Nowhere is this sense of influence more pronounced than in the case of Percy Shelley.

George Franklin's article 'Instances of Meeting: Shelley and Eliot: A Study in Affinity', which appeared in 1994, provides an excellent overview of the fluctuating treatment of Shelley in Eliot's work. Franklin opens his article by admitting that, at first reading, the evidence may not support his hypothesis:

To suggest that T. S. Eliot is a modernist heir to Shelley, indeed that substantial affinities exist at all, is an almost heretical view and one that few readers will have ever seriously considered. (Franklin 955)

The bulk of Eliot's critical remarks on Shelley certainly indicate a hostile view, but Franklin is right to encourage us to read behind those remarks, and perhaps to see some less derogatory remarks in those same essays as the expressions of a more tolerant outlook. As he notes:

Even when Eliot criticizes Shelley most harshly, as in the Norton lectures, he always acknowledges Shelley's gifts and potential, singling out 'The Triumph of Life' as evidence of a maturation transcending the earlier poetry. (Franklin 955)

The issue of 'maturation' is indeed interesting. Many of Eliot's judgements on Shelley, like those he expressed about Keats, are qualified by the observation that he died at a young age, and that any judgement passed on his extant work might not have been borne out had he continued to write. In 'The Metaphysical Poets', Eliot credits Shelley and Keats with showing signs of "a struggle toward unification of sensibility"(SE 288), the quality that has been missing in English verse since the passing of Donne and his peers. If this seems faint praise, as Franklin reminds us "it should be remembered that this is more than he will grant to anyone else since the seventeenth century."(Franklin 955) Eliot identifies in the poetry of these two men

the signs of a movement that could take poetry away from purely Romantic subjectivity and back to the discipline of the metaphysicals. Unfortunately (in Eliot's view) for the development of English verse, "Keats and Shelley died, and Tennyson and Browning ruminated." (SE 288)

If Shelley comes in for criticism from Eliot, it may be on the grounds that his verse did not have the opportunity to develop to its full potential. Given Eliot's frequent assertion that Shelley is fundamentally an 'adolescent' poet, the subsequent critical praise for Shelley's final poem 'The Triumph of Life' is based on its displaying traces of a new development that was sadly not to be followed through to completion. The question of Dante's influence is crucial here, for it cannot be coincidental that the poem Eliot singles out for highest praise is the one in which Shelley acknowledges his poetic debt to someone Eliot himself admired. A later section of this study will focus on this relationship in more detail, but it is significant that Eliot employs terza-rima in 'Little Gidding', relating the words of a compound ghost who urges acceptance of one's past life in a style that both echoes the Dantean model and at the same time the exchange between 'Shelley' and Rousseau that had affected him so long ago.

Franklin's article focuses on specific instances of citation and shared imagery within the work of the two poets, and gives much of its focus to their philosophical and epistemological positions. The Hume-influenced Shelley and the Bradleyan Eliot are both seen as inherently sceptical minds seeking a resolution to their philosophical questions. Franklin stresses the importance of Dante in examining these two poets, but does not really bring a religious theme into his discussion.

### **'Christian Romanticism': A Different Reading of Eliot's Response to Shelley**

A great deal of critical thought on Eliot's relationship with the Romantic poets has posited a Bloomian 'anxiety of influence' in which the mature Eliot disavows the strong Romantic element that coloured his early verse. This anxiety initially manifests itself in a vehement rejection of past influence, and then resolves into an accommodation of the precursor within the poet's work, evidenced by the usage of common tropes and a shared concern with the same subject matter. Eliot's

relationship to Shelley's work does indeed fit this model, but I contend that another vitally important aspect of his relationship to Shelley is the changing nature of Eliot's religious faith. To ignore a man's faith is to be left with an impoverished image of him, lacking what must have been the single most important element in his life.<sup>46</sup> No poet supports this concept more than Eliot, whose conversion marks a turning point and change of direction that is manifested at the very core of his poetry. As Rudolf Germer has pointed out, "only a close knowledge of Eliot's religious development makes an adequate understanding of his poetry and criticism possible." (Thormählen 93)

I believe that the crucial factor in examining Eliot's response to Shelley's influence is the nature of his Christian faith. From initially vehement repudiation to later accommodation, and even qualified admiration, Eliot's faith enables him to come to terms with those who influenced his own verse as a youth. It also enables him to return to the questions raised in his early verse, where he reiterated essentially Romantic problems in a modern context, and offer solutions. In essence, it is with a Christian viewpoint that Eliot can admit those influences that he once found it necessary to disavow, and he can do this because he now feels in possession of a belief that resolves what had previously been disquieting into something reassuring.

This study, then, will examine several key areas in which Eliot's work can be seen to initially reject, and then gradually accommodate the work of Shelley, and stress that it is through his Christian faith that Eliot's uneasy relationship with Romanticism finds a degree of rapprochement that enriches his poetry as a result. The next chapter will examine the concept of selfhood, the sense of isolation and the struggle to commune with others that is found in Shelley's work, with particular reference to his early poem 'Alastor'. This poem will be read alongside Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', and we will see that Eliot essentially repeats

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<sup>46</sup> I would like to make a distinction here, however, between a reading of Eliot's work that focuses on his conversion as a turning point and one that reads his whole career, and indeed his life, retrospectively as the route to spiritual fulfilment. This approach has been followed by Lyndall Gordon, in her two volumes of biography (now published as *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* – London: Vintage, 1998). Although making many valid points, Gordon sees Eliot's whole life as a search for sainthood and reads pre-conversion poems and all human relationships in his life from a specifically Christian point of view. I feel that Gordon's approach can give us a false image of Eliot, because if we see his conversion as inevitable we may not be reading the early work in the sense that it was written.

many of Shelley's concerns in a modern setting, something that is brought to the fore in The Waste Land. I will then examine the need for sympathy as a means of overcoming selfhood, showing how this is borne out in Shelley's Prometheus Unbound and Eliot's 'Dans le Restaurant' – two poems connected by both imagery and subject matter to a surprising extent. The chapter will conclude with a look at Eliot's post-conversion work, specifically The Cocktail Party and Four Quartets, and show how his Christian belief enabled him to find a way beyond the perceived isolation of the individual found in Shelley's work, and expressed again in his own early output.

Chapter Three will be a comparison of the treatment of love in the work of the two poets. I will show that Eliot, by adopting a divine scheme, can transcend the unhappy sense of distance that is found in so many of Shelley's poetic relationships, preventing the two parties from ever attaining any true union. Using Shelley's essay 'On Love' as a starting point, 'Julian and Maddalo', 'Alastor' and the later 'Epipsychidion' will be read both as attempts to make love an almost divine ideal and as studies in the failure of human relationships to adequately meet our need for this ideal condition. The failure of human relationships to satisfy our need for transcendent love is at the core of Eliot's The Waste Land, and this poem will be examined before we see how Eliot was able, after a period in which human love is renounced altogether, to revive it and locate it within a divine order, both in The Cocktail Party and Four Quartets.

Chapter Four will examine the importance of the work of Dante for both poets. Moving on from the discussion of love in the previous chapter, I will begin by showing how both Shelley and Eliot responded to Dante's divine model for human love. Shelley's work is an attempt to make human love a religious end in itself, by raising it to an almost divine status, but his poetry shows the shortcomings of this approach. Eliot, by following more closely Dante's belief that human love is a reflection of divine love, is able to reconcile the human and the transcendent in a way that Shelley was unable to do. The second half of the chapter will examine the ways in which both men responded to the concept of suffering in the Divine Comedy. By drawing on instances where Dante's imagery is echoed in their work, I will contrast Shelley's preoccupation with infernal suffering with Eliot's post-conversion belief

in a purgatorial framework that turns suffering towards a potentially transcendent end. The chapter will conclude with a reading of Shelley's unfinished poem 'The Triumph of Life', which will posit the idea that Eliot's admiration for this poem may originate in his finding in it evidence that Shelley was himself moving toward a more purgatorial view that comes closer to the Christian thought at the core of Dante's work.

Chapter Five will explore the views of both men with regard to the medium of language itself, drawing attention to the parts of their work in which they address its limitations and possible benefits. Shelley is frustrated by the failure of language to adequately convey his inner vision, something expressed most strikingly in his epic Prometheus Unbound. In Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', 'Preludes', and most notably in The Waste Land there is a similar concern with linguistic shortcomings. With the benefit of his faith, however, Eliot can, in his later work, find the inadequacy of words to be evidence of a higher reality. By the time of Four Quartets, he was no longer aggrieved at the inability of words to do all he wanted of them, and could conclude that, from a divine standpoint, "the poetry does not matter". Indeed, the breakdown of human language, for Eliot, serves to draw our attention to the power of the Word of God.

This study will show that the relationship between Eliot and Shelley is more than a simple case of Bloomian anxiety. Using Eliot's Christian faith in our reading of his relationship with Romanticism will bring to light a complex process of influence, unease, renunciation, rapprochement, accommodation, and finally transcendence that is nowhere clearer than in his dealings with the work of the poet who 'possessed' him as an adolescent. I am aware that a close study of two writers may seek to make comparisons that are hard to apply to a wider frame of reference, but I believe that the paradigm of this study can be applied to Eliot's relations with Romanticism in general. For the purposes of argument, I have chosen to focus on one Romantic figure to support my views – the figure that Eliot so fiercely, and so significantly, denounced in front of his Harvard audience in 1933.

## Chapter Two – The Question of the Self

Are we, after all, abandoned only to ourselves? – Wolfgang Borchert<sup>1</sup>

A healthy normal mind is [...] unaware of itself. The more we act the less we know of ourselves. The less we act, the more we become conscious of that which is normally unconscious. – Piers Gray.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of selfhood is at the core of Shelley and Eliot's work, and the various means by which we try to transcend our isolated state feature in many of their most celebrated poems. Both poets posit our human condition as being one of intrinsic isolation, and their work is an attempt to locate some means by which we may overcome the barriers of self-consciousness and attain communion with others. In the work of Shelley we find only the vaguest prospect of success, most notably contained in Prometheus Unbound, and the overwhelming tone is one of pained awareness of an isolated self. In Eliot's work, we find this reprised in the monologue of J. Alfred Prufrock and the torment of selfhood at the core of 'Dans le Restaurant' and The Waste Land. In Eliot's post-conversion work, however, Christian faith enables us both to face up to past shortcomings in our dealings with others and attain the degree of understanding that enables us to transcend our intrinsic isolation. This is hinted at towards the close of The Waste Land, but only with a Christian perspective is it fully achieved. In The Family Reunion, Eliot tries to locate relief from isolation in a life of ascetic religion, but by The Cocktail Party and Four Quartets, he has come to realise that truly overcoming our isolation entails a revision of our relationships in this world as well as our relationship to God. It is in his faith, then, that Eliot comes to terms with the issue of selfhood in a way that Shelley could not have done, and obtains answers to many of the questions that so perplexed the Romantic poet.

<sup>1</sup> Taken from Borchert's story 'Conversation Over the Roofs' (1946), in The Man Outside. London: Jupiter-Calder and Boyars, 1966. 37.

<sup>2</sup> Piers Gray. T. S. Eliot's Intellectual Development 1909-1922 (Brighton: Harvester, 1982) 71. Gray's book provides an excellent reading of the theme of self-consciousness within Eliot's early poetry, especially in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.'

### **'Life's Unquiet Dream': Shelley's Condition of Selfhood**

Shelley's concept of the self is founded in a state of heightened perception. The individual is acutely, indeed often painfully, aware of their isolated state within the world and seeks understanding in those around them. This search for communion is posited as the necessary response to what is otherwise, in Aldous Huxley's phrase, "a self-consciousness intensified to the pitch of agony." (Huxley 77) The next chapter will examine how this understanding is sought in human love, and the resultant pain that Shelley finds in the failure of that quest. This chapter will show that Shelley's characters, in sensing a higher reality beyond their everyday lives, are actually left with a greater awareness of their own isolation. Driven onwards both by the tormenting knowledge of their own alienation from the world around them, and their fervent desire to believe in some higher end, they find everyday life impossible.

I would like to begin by examining Shelley's prose fragment 'On Life', as I believe it provides a useful insight into the ideas addressed in his poetry. Written late in 1819, it outlines the ideas that he worked with in the Alastor volume and returned to in later works, most notably Prometheus Unbound. Although initially taking delight in the human condition, Shelley outlines reasons why contemplation of this state may also lead to feelings of isolation and self-consciousness as we are aware both of the primacy of our own sensations, and also of some greater reality that we cannot attain.

Shelley's initial reaction to life is one of wonderment. When we contemplate our existence as feeling, thinking beings, all other aspects of the world seem ordinary. Political, religious and scientific truths and systems are as nothing compared to "the wonder of our being." (Shelley 475)<sup>3</sup> Indeed, such is the miracle of life that Shelley is grateful for the "familiarity" that keeps so many of us from actually dwelling on the subject:

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<sup>3</sup> All references to Shelley's prose in this work, unless otherwise stated, are from Shelley's Poetry and Prose, edited by Donald Reiman and Sharon Powers (New York: Norton, 1977).

It is well that we are thus shielded by the familiarity of what is at once so certain and so unfathomable from an astonishment which would otherwise absorb and overawe the functions of that which is [its] object. (Shelley 475)

Although Shelley delights in the wonder of our existence, he is conscious that perhaps we should not ponder it too deeply. He does not fear erosion of the miraculous aspect of life, but the rise of an acute sense of self-consciousness that precludes any action on the part of the thinker. If we were to attempt to understand our existence, or to believe that we had some insight into it, we might cease to function within the material world, and withdraw into solipsism. As we shall see later, the belief that one is distinct from others because one is in receipt of some vision leads Shelley's poet astray in 'Alastor', and can also be seen in the thoughts of Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock.

Another key aspect of life's miracle for Shelley is the relative inadequacy of language to convey what we experience:

What is life? Thoughts and feelings arise, with or without our will, and we employ words to express them. We are born, and our birth is remembered and our infancy remembered but in fragments. We live on, and in living we lose the apprehension of life. How vain is it to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being. (Shelley 475)

Whilst re-iterating the argument of Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' with his belief that we lose in maturity the "visionary gleam" found in childhood, Shelley simultaneously claims that language, which comes with maturity, is itself inadequate to relate what we feel.<sup>4</sup> For one who believed so strongly in the power of poetry this may seem an odd remark. Shelley qualifies it by adding that "rightly used [words] may make evident our ignorance to ourselves, and this is much." (Shelley 475) What we find in Shelley's poetry, however, is a sense of frustration with this revelation of 'ignorance' in our imperfect poetic utterances. Realising that they cannot convey to others the visionary insight they feel they have attained,

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<sup>4</sup> Shelley draws heavily in this passage on Wordsworth's argument that in infancy we are at one with the world around us, but lose this affinity as our intellect develops, eventually reaching the point at which "the Man perceives it die away, / And fade into the light of common day."

Shelley's characters often withdraw into silence, conscious of being distinct from the herd of humanity, and aware that they cannot adequately relate what they feel.<sup>5</sup>

There is, then, in Shelley's essay, a distinct connection between a sense of wonderment and a sense of isolation. Selfhood is both a miracle and a potential torment if we allow ourselves to become preoccupied with it. And yet, how can we not be preoccupied with it if it is as amazing as Shelley would have us believe?

Shelley posits that the self is an essentially strong entity, at the heart of man's very being, and affirming his existence in the face of annihilation. In the act of living, he sees man as making a stand against the void of death, a stand which affirms the individuality of man. As Shelley goes on, "Each is at once the centre and the circumference; the point to which all things are referred, and the line in which all things are contained."<sup>6</sup> (Shelley 476) In philosophical terms, this is also a definition of solipsism. At the end of 'Mont Blanc' he had affirmed the importance of "the human mind's imaginings" in the face of the natural wonder and, in the words of Timothy Webb, suggested that "ultimately, [...] man is the master of his universe." (Webb 139)<sup>7</sup> If we assert our existence through the individuality of our perceptions, however, can we hope to experience any communion with others who exist by virtue of their own equally individual world-view? Given the intensity of individual perception, and the relative inadequacy of language to convey a sense of this, Shelley's essay leaves little room for community in life.

Shelley's thoughts on the nature of life affirm the primacy of individual experience. Perception is everything for him, for it is in the immediate experience, or the concentrated 'reverie' in which we dwell on that experience, that we discern most keenly our own sense of being. In these states, which are most intense in childhood,

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<sup>5</sup> The problems that both Shelley and Eliot encountered in making language adequately relate to experience will be discussed in Chapter Five.

<sup>6</sup> Shelley's language and thought here anticipate that of F. H. Bradley, the subject of Eliot's doctoral research, whose work was cited in the notes to *The Waste Land*, Eliot's most striking study of the isolated consciousness in the modern world.

<sup>7</sup> The manuscript of the fragment 'On Death' contains Shelley's affirmation of the primacy of individual consciousness: "All we behold, we feel that we know; / All we perceive, we know that we feel." (Cited in Wasserman, 8)

but can be enjoyed in later life by those of an adequate sensibility, we do not distinguish “all that we saw and felt from ourselves.”(Shelley 477) We are part of a greater reality, and that same reality is part of us:

Those who are subject to the state called reverie feel as if their nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into their being. (Shelley 477)

In this sense, Shelley holds out the possibility of transcending our ‘selves’ in a union with the governing force in the universe, which he refers to as ‘life’. The problem is that the route to this state is purely personal, for if “nothing exists but as it is perceived”, as he goes on to claim, then we can never be sure that our perceptions tally with those of others. To further complicate the issue, the means of communication at our disposal, language, is itself unreliable and inadequate to capture the essence of what we feel. With only our own perceptions to rely on, we find ourselves doing the very thing that Shelley warns against earlier in the essay – pondering our condition. Thinking about our experiences brings us to “that verge where words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of – how little we know.”(Shelley 478)

Shelley’s essay, then, delights in life as a guiding force in our existence, but also raises the possibility that this delight can veer towards solipsism and isolation. In prioritising individual perception, he offers an intense condition of self-awareness which can be a blessing and a curse. I would now like to apply the thought of ‘On Life’ to an early poem, ‘Alastor’, and show how this intensity of experience drives one Shelleyan protagonist further into solitude while seeming to hold out the prospect of transcendence.

### **‘Alastor’ and ‘Prince Athanese’**

As a key poem of Shelley’s early career, ‘Alastor’ explores the nature of self-awareness and relates an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to overcome this state. The nature of the Shelleyan quest for transcendence is such that every move away from the self draws attention back to the self. Harold Bloom has referred to the poem as “a great and appalling work, at once a dead end, and a prophecy that

Shelley finally could not evade.”(Bloom, Romanticism, 378)<sup>8</sup> In the pursuit of his vision, the young poet is driven to reject human society and seek communion with nature, believing that he will find there a response commensurate with what he feels within. When this proves not to be forthcoming, he is left isolated with nothing save his thoughts, and his decline is both physical and mental, with the gradual extinction of life mirroring the passing of the impossible dream. The poet’s desire for transcendence throws his perceived condition of imprisonment into painfully sharp focus.

In the poetry of both Shelley and Eliot, the sense of selfhood is acute. In order to feel the need for transcendence, the individual must first be aware of their own state in the world. The painful element in this quest for transcendence is that its failure will leave the individual more aware than ever of their condition, as all the energies that have been devoted to overcoming selfhood are turned back onto the individual. It is the crushing weight of this realisation that blights the lives both of Shelley’s protagonists and the characters of Eliot’s early poetry.

In order to make us sympathise with his quest, Shelley makes the young poet the embodiment of elevated ideals. His childhood saw him nurtured “By solemn vision, and bright silver dream”, and our initial impression of him is of one in harmony with all that is best in the world:

Every sight  
And sound from the vast earth and ambient air,  
Sent to his heart its choicest impulses. (68-70)

There is an element of purity in the poet’s development that will, for Shelley, validate his quest and make its failure all the more painful. Having been raised with an inclination towards spiritual and intellectual beauty, his spirit compels him to seek out the source of these ideals, “strange truths in undiscovered lands.”(77)

For Shelley’s poet, the quest is both mental and physical. It takes him away from his home to view “the awful ruins of the days of old” but this journey into exotic

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<sup>8</sup> This view is reiterated elsewhere, in The Visionary Company (1962), where Bloom claims that “the burden of ‘Alastor’ is despair of the human condition.” (278)

cultures is also a journey away from the security of what is known towards what is believed to be awaiting discovery. As if to stress this aspect of the search, Shelley tells us that the poet's "wandering step" is "obedient to high thoughts" – thereby connecting the quest motif on both the physical and spiritual level.<sup>9</sup> The journey manifests a perceived need to move away from what is known in search of what is held to be desirable.

Almost from the outset, however, this search breaks down, as the mental quest does not find its end in the physical world. Shelley uses the figure of the Arab maid to point out the extent to which the poet is already withdrawing from the world he shares with others. This maid, who brings the poet food, keeps a vigil while he sleeps but although "enamoured", dares not speak of her love for him. Significantly, the poet is unaware of her presence: there is no direct communication between them, something evident in the fact that he is asleep when she sits with him.

Shelley contrasts the Arab maiden with the vision that the poet receives while asleep. Whereas we know nothing about the Arab maiden, and must imagine her as one of a generic type, the 'dream maiden' is a much stronger presence in the poem because she appeals not to the poet's physical state but to his mind:

Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme,  
And lofty hopes of divine liberty,  
Thoughts the most dear to him       (158-60)

What the maiden kindles within the poet, or rather fans into flame, is a deep-seated awareness that his yearning for transcendence is not being met in the world. Upon waking from his dream, the poet can no longer find satisfaction in what he sees around him:

Whither have fled  
The hues of heaven that canopied his bower  
Of yesternight? The sounds that soothed his sleep,  
The mystery and the majesty of Earth,  
The joy, the exultation?       (196-200)

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<sup>9</sup> Carlos Baker notes that the quest motif is central to 'Alastor'. See "The Necessity of Love" in Ridenour (1965) 51-68.

The external world has not changed at all, but the poet's perception of it has, and at this point Shelley's poem moves away from relating the external world to pursue the poet's internal vision. If we think back to the essay 'On Life', and its assertion of the primacy of perception, it is inevitable that the poet's changed outlook on the external world will lead to a sense of isolation and disillusionment. The poet craves another meeting with the dream maiden, and comes to regard the waking world as an encumbrance that keeps him apart from the sleep in which he could meet her again. At this point the language of the poem makes the equation between sleep and death, in terms that echo Hamlet's famous musing on the possibility of an after-life, "To sleep, perchance to dream."(III.1.65) In following his fading vision, the young poet "pursues / Beyond the realms of dream that fleeting shade"(205-6) to the point of questioning "Does the dark gate of death / Conduct to thy mysterious paradise"(211-12)? Not only is the material world perceived to be inadequate, but there is no point to be found in the poet's continued existence within that world – quite literally, no *raison d'être*.

The subsequent decline of Shelley's poet sees an increasing awareness of selfhood set alongside the decline of the self as social entity. The poet's façade begins to bear witness to "the brooding care / That ever fed on its decaying flame."(246-7) This attracts the attentions of other maidens who, like the Arab, try in vain to reach the poet, sufficiently sympathetic to "interpret half the woe / That wasted him" (267-8) but ultimately unable to do anything for him.

Set alongside this decline in the social self, however, is an increase in self-awareness within the poet. This is both a sense of the absence of sympathetic souls within the human community and also of the inadequacy of nature to provide an alternative, as the poet's address to the swan illustrates:

"And what am I that I should linger here,  
With voice far sweeter than thy dying notes,  
Spirit more vast than thine, frame more attuned  
To beauty, wasting these surpassing powers  
In the deaf air, to the blind earth, and heaven  
That echoes not my thoughts?" (285-91)

What is significant about this address is the blend of assertion and lament that it encapsulates. The poet feels his state to be elevated after the receipt of his vision, and appreciates that he is, in some capacity, blessed above other creatures. The price to be paid for this, however, is a sense of isolation and the realisation that being blessed may also entail being different and, as such, being lonely. The poet finds that his vision invites transcendence of the self at the same time as it forecloses that possibility, as Michael O'Neill points out:

The speaker evokes a vision of community; it merely intensifies his isolation. He wishes to enter into ghostly dialogue with the natural but hears only his own monologue, or such speech as is the projection of his own imagination. (O'Neill, *Imaginings*, 15)

In the same way that he was unable to unite with the real maiden but felt at one with his dream, the poet now finds ease only in his internalised beliefs, which blur the line between what is experienced and what is thought:

Startled by his own thoughts he looked around.  
There was no fair fiend near him, not a sight  
Or sound of awe but in his own deep mind. (296-8)

In expressing his sense of alienation from the world, the poet has, at some subconscious level, raised the possibility of suicide – pursuing in the sleep of death a union with the dream that he has given up hope of finding in life. The remainder of the poem deals with his retreat from all human society into the bosom of nature – “Her cradle, and his sepulchre” – as the poet’s strength declines and he eventually passes from the world.

Shelley’s poem mourns the poet’s death, seeing it as proof that a sensitive nature cannot find peace in this world. It also highlights the problem of self-consciousness that he addresses in the essay ‘On Life’. The more the individual feels distinct from the world the harder it becomes for them to attain communion, and the more painful the sense of isolation becomes. In the essay Shelley raises the prospect of our awareness of life being both “an astonishing thing” and at the same time a glimpse “into the dark abyss of – how little we know”. In ‘Alastor’, the poet gazes into a fountain and sees a pair of eyes looking back at him – an image of narcissism that

throws emphasis back onto the self that seeks transcendence. Significantly, Shelley's poem is subtitled "The Spirit of Solitude", and shows us that perceiving oneself to be different, and not knowing how to express this, may be the worst torment of all.

Shelley worked many of the ideas found in 'Alastor' into an unfinished poem entitled 'Prince Athanese', which was composed in 1817. In this poem, which employs Dantean terza rima, he recounts the tale of a youth "grown weak and gray before his time", consumed by some sense of vacancy in his life. As with the poet in 'Alastor', this youth represents the embodiment of the Shelleyan ideal in intellectual and emotional terms, yet he is unsatisfied, and his physical wandering mirrors his inner sense of lacking something in the world:

And through his sleep, and o'er each waking hour,  
Thoughts after thoughts, unresting multitudes,

Were driven within him by some secret power,  
Which bade them blaze, and live, and roll afar,  
Like lights and sounds, from haunted tower to tower

O'er castled mountains borne, (66-71)<sup>10</sup>

Like the poet in 'Alastor', Athanese is tormented by an unrealised dream. Whereas 'Alastor' made this dream the realisation of a spiritual idea, 'Prince Athanese' makes it the human need for love, although love, for Shelley, as we shall see in the next chapter, is endued with transcendent qualities of its own.<sup>11</sup> The two poems share a sense of the painful knowledge of one's own incompleteness, and the need for some higher power to overcome this state. Paradoxically, however, these

<sup>10</sup> The use of a tower as an image of isolation finds an echo in *The Waste Land*, with the lines of Part V "I have heard the key / Turn in the door once". In the notes to the poem, Eliot references these lines with Ugolino's imprisonment in *Inferno* XXXIII, (lines 46-7), "and below I heard the outlet of the horrible / tower locked up" – linking physical imprisonment with the pain of self-consciousness. 'Prince Athanese' can be found in Volume III of *The Complete Works of Shelley*, edited by Ingpen and Peck.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Shelley's note on the poem claims that Shelley originally called the poem 'Pandemos and Urania'. He intended Athanese to be one "who seeks through the world the One whom he may love". Finding only disappointment in his liaison with Pandemos, and hurt by her subsequent desertion of him, he pines and dies, being visited on his deathbed by "the lady who can really reply to his soul". Mary notes that the idea "was a good deal modelled on *Alastor*" (*Complete Works* Vol. III 146)

feelings are equated with a sense of one's being different and, sensing this difference, the self retreats from the world, having concluded that its needs cannot be met there. In Shelley's work, we often contribute to our own isolation – something that I wish to consider when looking at Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock – and in doing so foreclose any possibility of expressing the sympathy for others that might alleviate our plight.

### **'Till human voices wake us': The Isolated Self in Eliot's Early Poetry**

In 'Alastor', Shelley's quest for the transcendence of isolated self-consciousness results in an increased awareness of one's own isolation and the extinction, either metaphorical or literal, of the self as a social entity. In this respect, a strong echo of Shelley's work can be found in the poems of Eliot's 1917 volume, and nowhere is this more pronounced than in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'.

J. Alfred Prufrock remains Eliot's most searching examination of selfhood, discoursing at great length to his unnamed audience, yet unable to truly express himself in a world populated by women who "come and go / Talking of Michelangelo".<sup>12</sup> Austin Warren refers to him as "one whose chief suffering comes from his self-awareness"(Olney 291), and Harold Bloom sees him as "the self imprisoned in a horror of boredom and anxiety"(Bloom, *Eliot*, 20). Like Shelley's poet, he is sensitive and thoughtful, and feels he has some insight into life to impart to others. What prevents him from speaking is his sense of isolation, his belief that others will not share his vision, and as such he remains trapped within his reticence. He has an air of world-weariness about him that implies that he expects nothing from the world except further disappointment:

"For I have known them all already, known them all –  
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,  
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;"

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<sup>12</sup> We do not know the identity of Prufrock's audience within the poem. Although talking to us as listeners, he may equally be talking to himself, dividing his consciousness into two opposing halves in order to reason out his (in)action, with the opening suggestion "Let us go..." as an attempt to convince himself to take a course of action. This 'overheard debate' in the poem stresses Prufrock's acute awareness of his own isolated self-consciousness.

Whereas Shelley's poet rejects the world in his idealism, Prufrock rejects it in his resignation. For both of them, however, there is a sense that they will not find any true communion in the world, and that what they hold within themselves will remain ultimately incommunicable. Jewel Spears Brooker sees Prufrock's feelings of individualism and scepticism as locating him within a solipsistic universe:

*Prufrock* is in part a poem about the disease of solipsism. This is a poem in which the landscape has been emptied of all objects beyond the self, a world where every object is an extension of some thinking subject, where everything finally is an extension of the speaker or thinker. [...] Prufrock can believe in nothing. And believing in nothing, radical scepticism, leads inevitably to solipsism. (Brooker, Placing, 19-20)

It is important, when considering Prufrock alongside Shelley's poet, to remember that both possess finely tuned poetic natures. Shelley's poet is tempted by thoughts of "poesy", and his frustration stems from the feeling that his words would not be understood by the unsympathetic world around him. Prufrock himself is rehearsing a 'song' that he never utters, and the language that he employs in his ruminations betrays his poetic sensibility. In Grover Smith's words, his struggle to overcome inhibition "mirrors the plight of the sensitive in the presence of the dull." (Smith, Sources, 15) One such example of this is a proposed line of conversation that Prufrock considers using only to subsequently dismiss:

"Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets  
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes  
Of lonely men in short-sleeves, leaning out of windows?..."

As with all other possibilities in the poem, this is considered but not expressed or enacted. The treatment of the imagery, which echoes that found in 'Preludes', shows Prufrock to be a poet himself. As in the case of Shelley's poet, however, there is both a sense of awareness here that one is in receipt of a vision and, simultaneously, a feeling of doubt that this vision could ever be adequately conveyed to anyone else. David Spurr points out that the change to the poetic tone here marks "a tentative attack on the inarticulate followed by a hasty retreat into the nether regions of the imagination." (Spurr 7) Another example of Prufrock's turn of phrase comes in his self-deprecating comparison with Hamlet. Attempting to prove that he is not like Shakespeare's prince, and rather more akin to "an attendant lord,

one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two," Prufrock's verbal dexterity only serves to convince us, as readers, that he *is* in fact a modern Hamlet, whose indecision on the staircase enacts on a reduced level the more famous musings of someone else.<sup>13</sup>

As readers, we do not know the exact nature of Prufrock's vision, but we may infer that it is significant – so much so that he doesn't know how to introduce it into a conversation. He alludes to its metaphysical importance when he talks of squeezing "the universe into a ball" and sees himself as "Lazarus, come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all". His attempt to unfold this deep truth would, he fears, be curtailed by the lack of interest shown by one "settling a pillow by her head" who would divert the conversation elsewhere. The significant aspect of Prufrock's ruminations, however, is the conditional tenses that he employs. Although he is saying that *this is what would happen*, he has no evidence that such is the case. In Piers Gray's words, "the ironic essence of the temporal is that it allows the mind the freedom to think itself into defeat." (Gray 63) Prufrock expects the woman to behave in this manner, and his behaviour is chosen accordingly.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Prufrock is himself determining the world in which he acts. In the same sense that Shelley's poet chooses the dream maiden, and all that she embodies, over the physical women he meets, Prufrock has decided that he will not find someone to understand him. In both cases, the material world becomes less of an entity in itself and more of a projection of the self's world-view, something that Martin Scofield identifies in Prufrock's ruminations:

It is as if the external, social world were contained within an enveloping subjectivity [...] The social world of Prufrock is perceived as images which inhabit his mind. (Scofield 47)

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<sup>13</sup> Another famously indecisive character that Prufrock echoes in his deliberations on the staircase is Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov, from Crime and Punishment. Eliot recalls that he was reading a French translation of the book while in Paris in 1910-11, the time that many of the 1917 volume's poems started to take shape. For more information on this connection, see John C Pope's "Prufrock and Raskolnikov" in American Literature Vol. 17 (1945-6) 213-30 and Eliot's letter on the subject, printed in the same journal the following year (Vol. 18, 319-21).

<sup>14</sup> To define one's own behaviour based on the treatment one expects from others is evidence of a solipsistic tendency that imposes its own views on the world. Over a period of time, we will believe that the world assumes the attitude that we expect of it, thereby 'proving' our original negative view.

Like Shelley's poet, Prufrock feels that his vision will not find an audience. He has, however, reached this decision on his own and, as such, has silenced himself before meeting the women in the drawing room. His vacillation results in his saying nothing, and the moment passes without action being taken. As he remarks "In a minute there is time / For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse." Rather than hold out possibilities of action, however, this thought entails endless indecision and eventual stasis. His deliberations begin even before he reaches the room, as he ponders on the staircase:

"And indeed there will be time  
To wonder, 'Do I dare?' and, 'Do I dare?'  
Time to turn back and descend the stair,"

The fact that he could ask the same question twice serves to illustrate the uncertainty within Prufrock's mind. We can imagine him constantly moving up and down on the staircase, trying to steel himself to enter the room and face other people. In the words of Gregory Jay, Prufrock provides us with "a soliloquy on procrastination." (Jay 98)

Unlike Shelley's poet, Prufrock is still very much aware of how he is seen by other people. We do not know what he looks like, but we do have some intriguing details that help us to construct an image of him. Before entering the room, he ponders his appearance:

"(They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!')  
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,  
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin –  
(They will say: 'But how his arms and legs are thin!')"

What is interesting here is that Prufrock, unable to express his own thoughts, finds himself giving voice to the thoughts that he foresees other people having about him. This is a state of acute self-awareness, but as with the expected responses to his words, it may not be wholly accurate. Prufrock is identifying the aspects of himself that he would notice if he saw himself – a state of extreme self-consciousness. Like Shelley's poet, then, Prufrock is aware of his individuality and his perceived difference from those around him. This stance has implications for one's behaviour,

for if we think continually of how we will be perceived by others we eventually cease to act altogether. As Elisabeth Schneider notes in her summary of Prufrock's condition, "acute self-consciousness [...] paralyses the will to think and feel." (Schneider 27)<sup>15</sup>

As in Shelley's 'Alastor' Prufrock moves away from human society in search of a point at which he can be reunited with his reverie. Whereas Shelley's poet found this point after following the stream to its source, Prufrock ends the poem wandering along the beach, listening to the songs of the mermaids. He is isolated even in this final activity, for although the mermaids are singing, their songs are "each to each" and the single line "I do not think that they will sing to me", isolated within the body of the poem to stress Prufrock's distance, shows that whilst in their song he has found solace for his condition, he has not transcended it. Even this reverie will be short lived:

"We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown."<sup>16</sup>

Whereas Shelley's poet died physically at the close of his search for communion, Prufrock's 'death' by drowning comes in his moving from the world of reverie back into the everyday world, recalled by the human chatter of the drawing room. For Eliot, Prufrock must face a social 'death', remaining painfully self-conscious in the presence of others. He will not be "a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" as he expressed his hope earlier in the poem, but will be restored to the world of "tea and cakes and ices" and banal small talk which, to him, is a torment of Dantean proportions.<sup>17</sup>

For both Shelley and Eliot, the torment of self-consciousness lies in the combination of our feelings of heightened self-awareness and our sense of distance and isolation

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<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth Schneider. *T. S. Eliot: The Figure in the Carpet*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1975.

<sup>16</sup> Timothy Webb equates the ending of Prufrock's monologue with that of Shelley's 'Ode to Liberty' in the sense that "the return to normal everyday consciousness is a sudden and painful wrench imaged in terms of drowning or physical collapse." (Webb 42)

<sup>17</sup> Prufrock's status as a Dantean character will be examined in Chapter Four.

from our fellow men and women. The more our sense of selfhood develops, the harder it becomes for us to interact on any level with those who do not seem to share our thoughts. The additional burden in this state is that we do not know for certain that others do not share our thoughts and feelings but, trapped as we are within a world defined by our own perceptions, we *assume* that they do not. A vicious circle soon develops, in which every increase in self-awareness is accompanied by a step away from what is perceived to be an uncaring world until no point of contact can be attained. Eliot does not posit actual death as the end result of this process, as Shelley did in 'Alastor', but rather the 'death' in the midst of society that we find Prufrock experiencing. The Dantean epigraph to his 'love song' is most revealing, as it quotes Guido da Montefeltro, a soul in torment. Piers Gray's summary of Prufrock's state captures perfectly his tortured condition:

An isolated, confused, double self; a self able to speak, therefore, only to itself; a self arguing itself into reasons why that self must remain an isolated, confused, double self. A paradoxical self, therefore, because it sustains a logical discussion with itself, arguing itself into what can only be considered, so it feels, by others as madness. That is Prufrock's condition. And such a condition, as the first words of the poem, the words of Dante, suggest, is hellish. Prufrock is in hell. (Gray 73)<sup>18</sup>

This is, for Eliot, a mental state of infernal torment. I will now examine his most celebrated poem of isolation and self-consciousness, The Waste Land, and show how the bleakest of indictments of the human condition contains in its concluding section the faintest trace of a solution to its own crisis. I will then turn to Shelley's Prometheus Unbound, another study in selfhood, and show how, along with Eliot's most famous work, it offers a solution to the crisis of isolation that Eliot was able to

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<sup>18</sup> The epigraph to 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' is from the Inferno, Canto XXVII, 61-6:

"If I thought my answer were to one who ever  
could return to the world, this flame should  
shake no more;

But since none ever did return alive from this  
depth, if what I hear be true, without fear of  
infamy I answer thee."

These words of the shade of Guido da Montefeltro are those of an inhabitant of Hell who speaks to Dante because he does not believe him to be alive, and therefore able to report back to the living what is said. This echo of our hearing, as readers, the voice of a damned man casts a powerful light on what Prufrock goes on to say.

develop in his later, Christian work. The key element in both poems, lacking in 'Alastor' and Eliot's earlier work, is sympathy. The self perceives itself to be different, and laments this fact, withdrawing from human society in the process. Attempting to understand the lives of others, rather than merely asserting that they do not understand us, will enable us to overcome this condition. If we can turn our sympathy outwards, and avoid the pitfalls of self-pity, we may escape our own sense of isolation in the process. This liberates Shelley's Prometheus, but in his own life Shelley found it to be a largely unrealised hope; for Eliot, it was the result of applied faith in God. It can, however, be glimpsed in both poets' most searching studies of selfhood, and it is to these that I now turn.

### **'I never know what you are thinking': The Isolated Self in *The Waste Land***

The Waste Land is a poem of many voices, but no conversations. As readers, we meet or overhear a wide spectrum of people, from a dispossessed Austro-Hungarian countess to the drinkers in a London pub, but their words all unite to tell of loneliness, failed love, missed opportunities and boredom. As Scofield comments, "it soon becomes clear that the voices all speak with variations of the same accent of despair." (Scofield 110) A sense of staleness pervades their world-view, as though like Tiresias they have "foresuffered all" and have no hope of anything ever being any different. Life is an empty routine, lacking genuine human contact in the same way that the dry land waits in vain for the life-giving rains.

Like Prufrock, the inhabitants of this land possess a highly developed sense of their own consciousness. We are not simply given their words, but also their thoughts, and as such we can see that they think much more than they say to others. Beneath the arid exterior lie deep emotions, moments of pain or pleasure in which life was temporarily transfigured, and these moments are either recalled with pain or suppressed in an attempt to cope with the here and now. The past, however, does not stay buried, any more than the 'corpse' in Stetson's garden, and with the revival of the natural world in the spring comes the return of the painful forces of "memory and desire".

In memory, events gain an intensity that they lacked in life, and the countess Marie's recollection of a sled ride with her cousin contrasts with the vacancy of her current existence. The construction of the lines "He said, Marie, / Marie, hold on tight. And down we went" shows the momentum of the sled, racing across the line break and gathering speed in the repeated use of her name. By contrast, her next remark, "In the mountains, there you feel free" sounds like the reiteration of a truism she doesn't really believe, and the closing "I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter" gestures towards a life of empty routine and no pleasure. Reading most of the night carries an implication of insomnia, and routine migration seems more of an escape *from* something than a journey *to* any better end.<sup>19</sup>

The 'hyacinth garden' episode will be examined in detail in the next chapter, but it contains something vital to the poem, the recollection of some past moment of potential happiness that was not seized and which is now a source of pain in the present. As David Moody notes in his study of Eliot's poetry, we are told of the experience a year after the event, when "the complications of consciousness have already set in." (Moody, Poet, 81)<sup>20</sup> The girl's use of retrospective verbs, "gave" and "called" show that "the event has faded to a fact no longer directly felt." (Moody, Poet, 81) Time, however, has not brought understanding of this condition, and the memory of the initial scene draws attention to the relative failure of anything that has happened since then either to evoke a similar emotion or reveal the meaning in the original. In Moody's words, "ecstasy annihilates ordinary sense, and afterwards it is the desolation which persists." (Moody, Tracing, 118)<sup>21</sup>

Although the poem is filled with images of dead bodies, drowned sailors and dry bones, Eliot does not present the waste land solely as a place of physical death. Indeed, he locates it in the heart of the crowded city of London. In the same way

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<sup>19</sup> In The Family Reunion, a play that has many echoes of The Waste Land, heading south for the winter is proposed as a possible remedy for Amy's distress. It is, however, not a remedy at all but merely a continuation of the life she would have led at home in a different setting:

"Go south! to the English circulating libraries,  
To the military widows and the English chaplains,  
To the chilly deck-chair and the strong cold tea." (FR 12)

<sup>20</sup> A. David Moody. Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet. 1979. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.

<sup>21</sup> A. David Moody. Tracing T. S. Eliot's Spirit: Essays on his Poetry. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.

that Prufrock is 'drowned' back into the everyday world, the inhabitants of Eliot's spiritual desert live isolated in the midst of a crowd. Their fate is an awareness of their isolation, and a lack of genuine communion with another soul. They are vaguely aware that there is something missing in their lives, but often try and ignore this rather than attempt to resolve it. As a result, everyday life slides into a state of 'unreality' in which the individual is barely interacting with anyone else, locked into their own consciousness to such an extent that the 'external' world is scarcely recognised. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the Dantean image of the crowd on London Bridge:

I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (63-5)<sup>22</sup>

Although the imagery compares the living throng with the dead, these people are painfully alive. The greatest torment for them is the intensity with which they feel their own pain and, being oblivious to, or believing themselves to be unable to understand the pain of others, they remain trapped within themselves, focusing on their feet in the midst of the crowd. In this image, Eliot shows that while it may be a cliché to speak of being 'alone in a crowd', that is the actual condition of these people, for the worst aspect of their torment is its personal nature. His reading of F. H. Bradley impressed upon him the problem of individual perception:

What do we mean when we say that two people see 'the same' object? We think loosely that the identity consists in the fact that when one looks at the object from the same angle as the other, the two images before the two minds are the same. [...] But there is evidently a difference between the two cases (a difference which is ultimately, however, one of degree) in that the difference between the two points of view is a difference, if we choose to consider it so, of two worlds; the identity is of two realities which cannot possibly be set side by side and compared. (Eliot, Knowledge 143)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The Dantean echoes in this image will be examined in detail in Chapter Four.

<sup>23</sup> The Cartesian question of perception, with its attendant prioritising of the thinking mind, was seen by Eliot to contribute directly to the Romantic concept of the self as centre of the world, thereby strengthening the feeling of individuality that isolates us within our own consciousness:

Instead of ideas as meanings, as references to an outside world, you have suddenly a new world coming into existence, inside your own mind and therefore by the usual implication inside your own head. Mankind suddenly retires inside its several skulls, until you hear Nietzsche – pretty well tormented in *his* cranial lodging – declaring that “nothing is inside, nothing is outside”. (Eliot, Varieties 80)

In Part II of the poem we encounter a couple whose relationship has descended to such a point that they share nothing. The frantic questions that the woman directs towards her partner leave him no time for reply, and indeed, the only replies that we have from him are internal, responding to his own mind rather than to his partner.<sup>24</sup> It is clear that communications have irretrievably broken down between this pair:

‘My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.  
 Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.  
 What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?  
 I never know what you are thinking.’ (111-14)

Without the man’s replies, the words hang in the air, expressing the isolation and disappointment at the heart of the couple’s relationship, and making the request “Stay with me” sound particularly plaintive. The man is, in one sense, *staying* with the woman, hunched together as they are over the chessboard, but in another sense the two are far apart, and with no hope of being any closer. Being in the same place as someone is not to be confused with actually sharing anything with them.

As in Prufrock’s ruminations, the inability of the social self to communicate is made all the more painful by the intensity of feeling within the inner consciousness. As A. Walton Litz remarks, there is a recurring theme in Eliot’s poetry that links Prufrock to the people of The Waste Land. It lies in “the tragedy of one who can perceive but cannot act, who can understand and remember but cannot communicate.”(Litz 21) In Part III the division between perception and communication is brought to the fore as we are led along the banks of the Thames to witness the sexual congress of the typist and the “young man carbuncular”. At this point in the poem, the unnamed observer is revealed as Tiresias – the Greek seer who has “foresuffered all” and who walks through Eliot’s waste land regarding with resigned disdain the missed opportunities for union that he sees around him.

It is not that Eliot’s characters do not feel, but that they regard feelings as painful, and therefore try to avoid them whenever possible. By giving us their thoughts alongside their actions, Eliot highlights the breakdown between the inner and outer

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<sup>24</sup> George Wright notes that “We infer that [the man’s words] are unspoken because, unlike the woman’s words, they are printed without quotation marks. They are thought, they are ordered, but they are not voiced.” (Brooker, Placing, 155)

self. We know that the typist finds her tryst unfulfilling, but we also see her trying *not* to think why this could be the case:

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,  
 Hardly aware of her departed lover;  
 Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:  
 'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over.' (249-52)

These lines show a brief intrusion of self-awareness into the 'unreal' routine that normally shields the individual from the painful knowledge of their state. Significantly, the point of origin for this is seeing oneself in the mirror – the visual expression of self-awareness. The image of regarding oneself, either in a mirror or from an assumed 'outside' viewpoint has been used before in Eliot's poetry. We find these lines anticipated in the narrator of 'Portrait of a Lady' whose waning self-confidence is shown when he feels "like one who smiles, and turning shall remark / Suddenly, his expression in a glass", or in the case of Prufrock, who visualises himself from the outside and imagines the women commenting on the aspects of his appearance that he himself notices. It is also found in Shelley's 'Alastor', when the poet gazes into the pool and sees his own eyes staring back at him in an image that captures his self-consciousness. This woman's brain, which normally regulates actions and emotions, allows a thought to pass "half-formed", without censure and therefore dangerously honest. The woman's expression of resigned boredom in the aftermath of the sexual act betrays a deep-seated feeling of absence that remains unsatisfied. She knows, at some level, that her life is missing something, but it is only in unguarded moments like this that she dares to admit it herself. For the rest of the time she, like the other inhabitants of the "unreal city", lives a life of anaesthetising routine, trying not to think of her pain.

What, then, is the solution to The Waste Land's crisis of selfhood? In the concluding part of the poem, Eliot posits a means of escape from the prison of the self in the commands given by the Thunder. The injunctions to 'Give', 'Sympathise' and 'Control' hold the possibility of some degree of union with others. In the first instance, this must take the form of action, not mental process:

The awful daring of a moment's surrender  
 Which an age of prudence can never retract  
 By this, and this only, we have existed (403-5)

We must attempt, for the briefest of moments, to act without thought of the consequences. This may seem at first to be a selfish course of action, but Eliot suggests here that our actions may be more beneficial to others if we do not spend so much time pondering them ourselves. To surrender to the moment is to go against the prevaricating tendency of Prufrock or the imposed restraint of the young man in 'Portrait of a Lady'. It is to allow ourselves to be led by what we actually feel, rather than what we think – acting on the “half-formed” thoughts experienced by the typist before the constraining consciousness takes hold. To do this is, for the briefest of moments, to escape the limits of selfhood, and the effects of this action cannot, as Eliot points out, be retracted, even if they are not immediately evident:

[...] not to be found in our obituaries  
 Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider  
 Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor  
 In our empty rooms (406-9)

The state of selfhood in the work of both Eliot and Shelley is defined as a heightened sense of self-consciousness, which eventually leads to inaction and withdrawal from the wider world into solitude. In this first command, Eliot asserts the need for action freed from thought, evading what David Spurr has referred to as “the calculating faculty”.<sup>25</sup>

The second command, to ‘sympathise’, also asks us to step outside of the self for a moment, and consider the condition of those around us. This is hard to do, for as Eliot’s philosophical studies had led him to believe by the time of The Waste Land’s composition, we have nothing more than our own perceptions of the world, in the final analysis, and our understanding of others can only ever be partial. What is important, however, is that we are prepared to make some effort, to contemplate someone else’s state and not our own. Prufrock is preoccupied with how the world

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<sup>25</sup> Spurr applies the Romantic notion of the “calculating faculty” to Prufrock, seeing in his “insistent if self-doubting references to daring and presumption” (Spurr 5) traces of a mind aware that it is trapped in a cycle of thought and foreclosed towards action. This trait is much in evidence in The Waste Land.

sees him and he has no thought for anyone else in the world, seeing only the generic 'women' awaiting him as opposed to a room full of individuals. Concern with our own condition, and feelings of imprisonment divert our sympathy onto ourselves and away from others:

We think of the key, each in his prison  
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison (413-14)

The syntax here is complex, and lends itself to a variety of readings. One view, however, would be that, in thinking of the key to our individual 'prisons' of selfhood, we only serve to confirm them by ignoring the needs of others. We can never solve our own state of self-consciousness by dwelling on it still further. If we are prepared to channel our thoughts towards the 'keys' that may unlock other people's prisons, by seeking to communicate with them at some level, we may simultaneously gain some release for ourselves.<sup>26</sup>

The final injunction of the Thunder is to 'control', or rather, in the context of the poem, to admit to control from outside the self. Eliot writes that, in the same sense that the boat responds "to the hand expert with sail and oar", so the heart responds best when "obedient / To controlling hands". To admit to outside influence is, of course, another means of reducing the power of the conscious self in one's behaviour. What Eliot suggests, however, is that there is a degree of freedom to be gained in relinquishing control to another. There is a sense of missed opportunity in the reversion to the conditional tense here which is itself an echo of Prufrock's carefully worded justifications for *inaction*, but we may conclude that, if this knowledge is taken to heart, another moment of potential transcendence, were it to arise, would not pass without response.

The Waste Land ends with these commands being spoken and meditated upon, but with the self still largely imprisoned and seeking the peace promised in the thrice-repeated Sanskrit "shantih". In Scofield's words, "the sickness of the waste land, is

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<sup>26</sup> The image of the prison fits alongside other 'closed rooms' in Eliot's early poetry; something identified by Edward Lobb in his essay 'Limitation and Transcendence in 'East Coker'.' Lobb identifies a connection between the closed room motif and the condition of self-consciousness in Eliot's work, adding that these rooms "suggest more than loneliness and melancholy; they function also as images of limited or solipsistic consciousness." (Lobb, Words, 21)

diagnosed and pronounced upon, though not finally cured.”(Scofield 121) However, the inclusion of a quote from the Pervigilium Veneris amongst the ‘fragments’ of the closing lines, expressing the desire to ‘be as a swallow’ gestures towards an awareness of freedom that stands as an alternative to the imprisoned self at the heart of the poem. Although that change remains only a possibility, the end of the poem, in Schneider’s words, “does clearly suggest possible hope.”(Schneider 60) We may, however, find an instance of liberation through sympathy if we return to Shelley, one which is itself echoed in Eliot’s ‘Dans le Restaurant’, the poem from which The Waste Land originated.

### **‘Thou pitiest them?’: Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* and Eliot’s ‘Dans le Restaurant’**

The possibility of escaping our isolation by expressing sympathy with others is raised at the end of The Waste Land but there is no sign in the poem that it is anything more than a desire not yet acted upon. In Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound, we can see the same feelings put into action in the release of Prometheus from his torment. Furthermore, by reading Shelley’s poem alongside Eliot’s ‘Dans le Restaurant’, we can see a clear connection to The Waste Land, and the possibility of attaining some communion with others.

Shelley’s poem opens with Prometheus bound to the mountain side, visited daily by “Heaven’s winged hound” and locked in a cycle of ceaseless torment as the bird gnaws at his organs, which grow back in the night only to be devoured again the next day. This is his punishment for giving man the knowledge to make fire. He is unrepentant, seeing his actions as a necessary stand against the tyranny of Jupiter. He does, however, take a sense of pride in his rebellion, defining his being in that act of revolt, as he tells the Furies:

“Yet I am king over myself, and rule  
The torturing and conflicting throngs within  
As Jove rules you when Hell grows mutinous.” (l. 492-4)

This is a strange assertion of selfhood. Prometheus has rebelled against Jove’s tyranny only to claim a similar rule over himself. A curious sense of individualism

arises here: does Prometheus suffer because he is being punished by Jove, or because he wishes to suffer? When the phantasm of Jupiter is summoned, and refers to him as a “proud sufferer”(I. 245) the responsibility for Prometheus’ pain shifts onto the Titan’s shoulders. In this sense his repeated “Ah me, alas, pain, pain ever, forever!”(I. 23 and 30) with its exclamation mark may be more assertion than lament. Shelley raises the possibility that, rather than suffer at the will of Jove, Prometheus may suffer partly at his own volition. When he says “No chance, no pause, no hope! – Yet I endure”(I. 25) the stress on his endurance calls the burden of responsibility for his pain into question.

Although punished by Jove, Prometheus is also chained to the rock by his sense of selfhood. He sees his revolt as the moment at which he came into being in his own right. As Mercury tells him, he can end his own torment if he will “let the will kneel within thy haughty heart”(I. 378). This receives a stern riposte, “Submission, thou dost know, I cannot try”(I. 395), as Prometheus again asserts his need for individuality. When he tells the Furies to “Pour forth the cup of pain”(I. 474) he invites punishment upon himself, thereby stressing that, to some degree, he wants to feel the pain that confirms his state. Reconciliation to Jove’s order would entail submission. Individuality and revolt are the essence of his existence. His true torment is that he cannot accept that submission need not represent the total extinction of individuality.

Prometheus’ existence, asserted in the face of suffering, is a solipsistic torment. “Pain is my element”, as he tells the Furies, and he can envisage no other. It is significant that he locates himself within a state of feeling rather than a physical location, for in doing so he exemplifies the solipsistic outlook, constructing a world-view out of what is within, as Earl Wasserman notes:

If nothing exists but as it is perceived and if thought is the measure of the universe, the state of the ‘external’ world is a function of the condition of the mind. (Wasserman 261)<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Earl R. Wasserman. *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. 1971. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1975.

Prometheus' initial act of rebellion may have been conducted with beneficent intentions towards man but, as the Chorus reminds him, it has not only condemned him to individual torment, but had detrimental effects for humanity:

“Dost thou boast the clear knowledge thou waken’dst for man?  
Then was kindled within him a thirst which outran  
Those perishing waters; a thirst of fierce fever,  
Hope, love, doubt, desire – which consume him forever.” (I. 542-5)

Man, in receipt of a small degree of knowledge, now seeks more. The awareness of something greater, which is unfulfilled, becomes a torment in itself. Significantly, the quest for transcendent meaning is described as self-consuming, and thereby directly linked to the Promethean torment.

There are, then, clear links between Prometheus and the poet in ‘Alastor’. In both there is a desire to improve the lot of man, and an attempt to convey some transcendent vision or knowledge. This is, at best, only partially successful and the failure to attain complete transcendence acts in a negative fashion upon both men, leaving them increasingly aware of their distance from the world, and the pain that such self-knowledge brings about. The self will, eventually, come to glory in its isolation, to the point where we must question whether it actually *wants* its state to change or not.

Although tormented by the vulture, the true source of Prometheus' pain is his memory. This is evident when he summons the phantasm of Jupiter and asks him to repeat the curse with which Prometheus first defied the god. What we must be aware of here is the dual nature of the verb ‘recall’ – in terms of remembrance, bringing back to our notice a past action, and in the sense of retracting or taking back a past word or action. Prometheus' recollection is a blend of both of these, for hearing his past words fills him with a sense of remorse, as he tells his mother, the Earth:

“It doth repent me: words are quick and vain;  
Grief for awhile is blind, and so was mine.  
I wish no living thing to suffer pain.”(I. 303-5)

To be confronted with one's past words or deeds is a painful experience, and there is an element of self-consciousness in our learning of our actions and their consequences. Always reminded of our mistakes, we are at risk of falling into the state of self-pity that will exacerbate our problems. On the other hand, if the act of recollection is carried out in the right frame of mind, there is also the hope of release. Stuart Sperry identifies this in his study of the poem:

The impulse or the power to recall the curse operates like the final stage of a long psychological healing process, culminating with a realization the patient is at last superinduced to effect for himself. (Sperry 81)<sup>28</sup>

At this point, we must return to The Waste Land, and to the link between memory and pain in that poem. This is spelt out in the opening lines, with the equation of the 'cruel' revival of memories in April and the preference for the "forgetful snow" of winter. It is not death that stalks Eliot's waste land, but life – the deeds either not done or wrongly done that haunt our memories, and our subsequent inability to move on from those recollections. Memory keeps the past in the present, and in doing so stifles any hope of our moving away from acts committed in the past. Left to ponder past actions (or failures to act) the emotionally stunted people seek in vain a transcendent meaning in their memories:

Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,  
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not  
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,           (37-40)

As the chorus tells Prometheus, man's quest for knowledge can become a torment. He will always seek meanings in his memories, faintly aware of some transcendent essence that eludes his grasp. Because no two sets of memories are the same, everyone finds themselves trapped in a personal Hell, tantalised with the prospect of enlightenment they cannot obtain.

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<sup>28</sup> Stuart Sperry. Shelley's Major Verse: The Narrative and Dramatic Poetry. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988.

The 'hyacinth garden' episode of The Waste Land is prefigured in Eliot's 'Dans le Restaurant', included in the 1920 volume Poems. In this poem, written in French, a waiter recounts an early erotic experience to a diner:

'I was seven, she was littler.  
 She got soaked, I picked primroses for her.' [...]
 'I tickled her, to make her laugh.  
 I felt such power for a moment, such rapture.'

At that age? Come off it, you dirty old man ...  
 'What happened was tough, sir.  
 A big dog came up and pawed at us,  
 And I was frightened – I left her half-way.  
 It was such a pity.'<sup>29</sup>

This childhood hint of sexuality remains, for the waiter, a source of confused pain in his adult life. Broken off in its prime and never recovered, the moment hinted at a transcendent state he has not experienced again. He remains emotionally stifled, vainly recounting his tale in the hope that one such recitation will yield meaning, trapped in a state of what Gareth Reeves calls "gnawing, solipsistic agony" (Reeves 55), a state that brings together the Promethean torment and the internal pain arising from memory. William Arrowsmith refers to him as one "whose memory, vulture-like, still consumes him in middle-age, making him display his 'wounds' even to casual strangers." (Arrowsmith 7-8)

The reaction of Eliot's diner is fascinating. While expressing disgust at having such memories foisted upon him, he adds "What, you have your vulture as well!" In this line we can see the influence of Shelley's Promethean vision in Eliot's own verse. The reference to a vulture invokes the fate of Prometheus on the visual level and also stresses the link between memory and pain within the poem. Memories feed on people as the vulture does on the Titan's organs, and there is similarly no hope of release, only the repetition of suffering. The addition of "as well" to the comment alludes to the fact that Eliot's diner also has such a 'vulture' of his own. In Arrowsmith's words, "beneath their outward differences, waiter and diner obviously have something in common; and it is this resemblance which the diner finds so

<sup>29</sup> I have quoted from the translation of 'Dans le Restaurant' included in A. David Moody's Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet. (Moody 77)

humiliating.”(Arrowsmith 8)<sup>30</sup> The diner offers the seedy waiter money “for the public baths”, but his show of disgust contains recognition of a shared trait. It is, however, part of our torment that we do not admit anyone else’s memories to be the same as our own.<sup>31</sup> Always believing that our state is much worse, or more worthy of attention than that of anyone else, we will not seek any degree of release in sharing the burden of someone else. We all have our vultures, but no two are the same, and the lack of community in this torment is what The Waste Land brings to the fore. Like Prometheus, we are all bound to our respective rocks, gnawed on by the vultures of memory.

Nowhere is this torment better illustrated in The Waste Land than in the couple playing chess in Part II. The man never speaks to the woman, who peppers him with frantic queries, trying to elicit a response. All of his responses are internal, and are expressed in the poem but not to the woman, as in his ‘response’ to her question “What shall we ever do?” which anticipates a life of stifling emptiness:

And we shall play a game of chess,  
Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door. (137-8)

Eliot’s use of “lidless eyes” here offers a striking verbal echo of Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound. Before tormenting the Titan, the Second Fury asks him “Dost imagine / We will but laugh into thy lidless eyes?”(l. 478-9) The concept of eyes without lids, unable to be closed when facing painful visions further adds to the atmosphere of torment in The Waste Land, as the inhabitants are once again reminded of what they would like to be able to forget. In this poem, as in Shelley’s,

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<sup>30</sup> Arrowsmith’s article “Daedal Harmonies: A Dialogue on Eliot and the Classics” (Southern Review XIII, Jan 1977, 1-47) provides an excellent gloss on this poem, pointing out that the waiter represents, on a more seedy, physical level the mental, intellectual torment of the diner. The fact that both men have such a ‘vulture’ in common, but do not sympathise with each other, serves to increase their sense of torment.

<sup>31</sup> Carole Seymour-Jones cites a draft, in English, of ‘Dans le Restaurant’, given by Eliot to Ezra Pound, and now in the Pound papers at Yale, in which the diner’s sense of recognition is more strongly expressed:

You crapulous vapulous relic . . . to have had an experience  
So nearly parallel, with . . .  
Go away,  
I was about to say mine. (Cited in Seymour-Jones 35)

a sense of painful reality persists. The question in both works is, 'how can we successfully confront this reality?'

For Eliot, our memories can 'feed' upon us – leaving each of us trapped inside a solipsistic torment from which we find no release in human relations. Each of us suffers alone, and we are so preoccupied in vainly trying to make sense of our pain that we do not attempt to sympathise with others, which is the one act that holds out the possibility of alleviating our state. Returning to Shelley's poem, we must identify the means by which the Titan can release himself from his chains, and see how this can be carried across into Eliot's work.

When chained to the rock, Prometheus is visited by the Furies, who show him visions of human misery. Man is not liberated by the Titan's revolt, but prey to tyranny and despair as his dreams are misled:

"See how kindred murder kin!  
 'Tis the vintage-time for Death and Sin:  
 Blood, like new wine, bubbles within  
 Till Despair smothers  
 The struggling World, which slaves and tyrants win." (l. 573-7)

This bleak vision ought to spell the end of the Titan's revolt, as it shows his rebellion to have achieved nothing. What it elicits from Prometheus, however, is the very thing that will free him. "Thy words are like a cloud of winged snakes", he tells the Fury, "And yet, I pity those they torture not"(l. 632-3). This is a crucial shift as it finds Prometheus thinking of others. His pity is no longer focused solely on himself, but projected into the world and onto humanity. This has an immediate effect on the Fury. "Thou pitiest them?" she says, "I speak no more!"(l. 634) and vanishes.

What Prometheus has lacked in the poem up to this point is an awareness of any suffering other than his own and this, as much as the wrath of Jove, has kept him chained to the rock. At the start of the poem he has a sense of pride in his punishment as he sees himself as the deliverer of men. In the above lines his feelings change focus. He no longer opposes tyranny with defiance but with

empathy and love. "Earth can console," he says at the close of the act, "Heaven can torment no more." (I. 820) These words would not have come from the "proud sufferer" seen earlier in Act One, but it is in their utterance that his freedom is secured.

When we next see Prometheus he is being unchained by Hercules after Jupiter's fall from power. On his release he now seeks "A simple dwelling" in which to sit with Asia and the nymphs and "talk of time and change / As the world ebbs and flows" (III. 3. 22-4). Prometheus has recognised here that, although the Titans can remain unchanged, nothing can "hide man from Mutability". Prometheus recognises and accepts this essential aspect of human nature. As with his earlier expression of pity, he is starting to understand the people on whose behalf he rebelled. The focus of his actions is no longer so self-centred, and the true liberation gained by his revolt is revealed by the Spirit of the Hour. Man's freedom, won by Prometheus, is not so much a political liberty, which the Spirit seeks but does not really find, as an emotional liberation:

"None with firm sneer trod out in his own heart  
The sparks of love and hope, till there remained  
Those bitter ashes, a soul self-consumed, [...]  
None talked that common, false, cold, hollow talk  
Which makes the heart deny the *yes* it breathes" (III. 4. 144-6, 149-50)

The freedom won by Prometheus is in the hearts of men. In the exercise of pity, directing feeling away from the self and onto others, there is liberation. Emotions no longer gnaw away at those who feel them, and in expression of feelings there is a release from solipsism. The effect of this change is to make mankind almost divine in nature:

"Speaking the wisdom once they could not think,  
Looking emotions once they feared to feel  
And changed to all which once they dared not be,  
Yet being now, made Earth like Heaven" (III. 4. 157-60)

For Shelley, the revolt of Prometheus is about overcoming the burden of selfhood. Our emotions are our most powerful forces, yet they can torment us or elevate us depending on whether we keep them within or express them. We will not be free

from pain, but we will be better at dealing with it because we will have an awareness of a greater state. As the Spirit tells Prometheus, his rebellion has broken the chains of emotional constraint within men:

“Passionless? no –yet free from guilt or pain  
Which were, for his will made, or suffered them,  
Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,  
From chance and death and mutability” (III. 4. 198-201)

The real triumph of Prometheus is in reconciling man to his state. The tyranny from which his actions have delivered men is not, as he believes at the start of the poem, that of political repression, but that of emotional stasis. In his expression of pity and attempt at understanding he paves the way for an unbinding of those emotional chains which have been tormenting men as much as the vulture has consumed his own organs.

There is one more intriguing textual echo that draws together ‘Dans le Restaurant’, The Waste Land and Prometheus Unbound, and makes the Promethean torment a stage en route to transcendence of the self. Shelley’s Prometheus has his organs ‘picked’ by the vulture in a constant round of pain that ends only with his expression of pity, the emotion that shows a concern with something other than his own condition and, as such, frees him from solipsistic suffering. In Part IV of The Waste Land, ‘Death by Water’, we find a reference to Phlebas the Phoenician, whose death by drowning, anticipated in the tarot cards of Part I, has seen him drawn beneath the waves. It is fascinating that Eliot should present this death as transformative:

A current under sea  
Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell  
He passed the stages of his age and youth  
Entering the whirlpool. (315-18)

Here the water enacts the role of the vulture, ‘picking’ at Phlebas. The action, however, is not one that punishes, so much as one that purifies, taking the drowned sailor beyond the limitations of his own life, into another dimension, in which the self is subsumed into a wider scheme of things. A fortnight dead, Phlebas has forgotten “the cry of gulls”, which may be yet another trace of Shelley’s vulture in

Eliot's poem, and found a degree of spiritual rebirth as his earthly body decays. He has, in a sense, transcended his selfhood by his being relocated into a higher order. This, as we have seen, is the state sought without success throughout The Waste Land, an alternative to the painful condition of unremitting self-consciousness.

The lines on Phlebas in The Waste Land are themselves a re-working of the closing section of 'Dans le Restaurant'. The "cry of gulls" is present in this poem, but here the current does not 'pick' at Phlebas's bones. Rather, it "carried him down / Through all the stages of his former life." Although the Promethean imagery is not as strong in the conclusion to the earlier poem, the sense of a release from one's own life and one's past is evident. Phlebas stands in contrast to the waiter of 'Dans le Restaurant' as one who is not tormented by his past but who is undergoing a 'sea-change' that will offer a route beyond his self-conscious agony. Phlebas and the waiter represent the two sides of Shelley's Promethean torment in Eliot's own Promethean poem.

As Prometheus finds release in the expression of pity so the inhabitants of The Waste Land receive an intimation of release in the poem's closing lines. The instructions of the thunder – to give, sympathise and control – offer a route out of the solipsistic agony at the heart of the poem. In "the awful daring of a moment's surrender", where we look beyond ourselves to consider the state of others, there is the possibility of release. In The Waste Land the possibility remains just that, and only in the Christian scheme of the Four Quartets, as we shall see later, does the liberation occur. What I will examine first, however, is the way in which awareness of selfhood is treated in two of Eliot's plays, The Family Reunion (1939) and The Cocktail Party (1950) and the possible routes beyond isolation and alienation that are offered in these plays.

### ***The Family Reunion and The Cocktail Party: Two Responses to Selfhood***

As we have seen, part of the torment of selfhood lies in the belief that the self is somehow unique, and that feelings of isolation, although painful, confer a degree of importance on the individual. Shelley's figures, and the characters of Eliot's early poetry, cling to a belief that the lack of communion they find is due to the absence

of an adequate audience for them, and they consider the loss to be on the part of others, rather than themselves. In believing this, of course, they further strengthen the bonds of selfhood, by not engaging in the simple act of empathy that would lead to communion with another. Like the inhabitants of The Waste Land, they may perceive that something is wrong, but are so wrapped in their own pain that an understanding of others, which can be the means of release from self-consciousness, remains beyond them.

In The Family Reunion Eliot treats in dramatic form the spiritual awakening of one man who has come to understand his isolation. The route that he chooses is that of ascetic religion, transcending individuality in the pursuit of a divine end. Whilst this is a valid spiritual option, it is only a partial response to the individual's isolation, since there is no sign of the sympathy for others that enables us to overcome our self-preoccupation. Although he is right to pursue a religious goal, Harry is still a self-centred character, as his dealings with other family members show. There is still a trace of the egotistical self in him, the self seen in 'Alastor' or 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', the self that derives its sense of status from its very isolation.

As an alternative to Harry's course of action, the characters in The Cocktail Party overcome their sense of loneliness by feeling sympathy for others. The reconciliation of Edward and Lavinia, and Celia's decision to go as a missionary are both examples of a concern for someone other than oneself. It is Harcourt-Reilly's purpose to draw these people out of their isolated states, and into communion with others. Whereas The Family Reunion demonstrates pure religious faith, with which there is certainly nothing wrong, but which ignores the human dimension of life, The Cocktail Party demonstrates applied faith, acting in this world to free others from isolation. I wish to briefly consider both plays, to illustrate the ways in which their expressions of religious faith show Eliot's response to the problem of selfhood.

In The Family Reunion (1939), Harry Monchensey is returning to his childhood home, Wishwood, for a family party.<sup>32</sup> His wife, with whom he shared an unhappy marriage, is dead, having drowned after falling overboard from a liner. Harry believes that he was actually responsible for pushing her over, but this is never clarified in the play. The other guests at the party are themselves unhappy, for various reasons. His mother, Amy, is growing increasingly aware of impending death with her advancing years, and his childhood love, Mary, remains unmarried, still ruing a lost understanding with him when they were younger.<sup>33</sup> Amy believes that returning to his past home will help Harry recover, giving him some stability in a once-familiar setting, surrounded by close family members. His Aunt Agatha, on the other hand, intimates that this return to past haunts is perhaps a source of pain more than reassurance:

The man who returns will have to meet  
 The boy who left [...]  
 And it will not be a very *jolly* corner.  
 When the loop in time comes – and it does not come for  
           everybody –  
 the hidden is revealed, and the spectres show themselves. (FR 17)<sup>34</sup>

Agatha foresees Harry feeling isolated from himself more than from other people. His return will bring home to him how much he has changed, and what has been done in his life that cannot be altered. In this sense, we return to the feeling of ‘uniqueness’ identified earlier, which comes with awareness of one’s isolation. Here, however, it is a source of pain for the individual rather than a sign of some

<sup>32</sup> After his baptism at Finstock, Eliot, William Force Stead, and Eliot’s two sponsors went for a walk through Wychwood, an ancient wood near the church. Eliot’s decision to name the house after a site with obvious spiritual associations for him points to the spiritual material at the heart of the play.

<sup>33</sup> Echoes of The Waste Land abound in the play. We may see in Amy’s being advised to “go south in the winter” in order to avoid being alone at Wishwood, an allusion to the Countess of Part I. Mary, the young girl left behind at Wishwood by Harry, has an insight into the link between rebirth and painful memory when she remarks that “The cold spring now is the time / For the ache in the moving root”. These lines strongly echo the famous opening to the earlier poem, in which the season of rebirth is also a time for painful, though necessary, remembrance of past feelings. We may also see Mary as the play’s ‘hyacinth girl’, representing a possible romantic attachment that Harry remembers because he did not bring about any resolution in their relationship.

<sup>34</sup> This reference invokes Henry James’s short story “The Jolly Corner” (1908), in which a middle-aged man is confronted with a vision of himself, representing an alternative course in life which he could have followed. The importance of encountering an alternate self, and being led to re-assess one’s own life in the light of such a meeting, is at the heart of the encounter with the “compound ghost” of ‘Little Gidding’.

superiority. The instance of meeting another projection of oneself will further strengthen the sense of self-consciousness – being confronted with our own deeds or missed opportunities, and unable to evade contemplation of them. Once again, we find here a trace of the ‘mirror’ imagery that both Eliot and Shelley employ as a means of drawing attention to the condition of self-consciousness.

Harry’s arrival is followed immediately by signs that he is ill at ease, seeing ‘eyes’ staring at him through the window. Clearly he feels pursued by something. Significantly Harry, although isolated, feels set apart from the others because he believes himself *not* to be alone. He finds the manner in which nobody mentions his wife’s death harder to deal with than a show of interest, but then goes on to intimate that they couldn’t understand what he feels even if he were to tell them:

You have gone through life in sleep,  
Never woken to the nightmare. I tell you, life would be  
unendurable  
If you were wide awake. (FR 27)<sup>35</sup>

Harry, like the poet of ‘Alastor’, like Prufrock, like the man in the hyacinth garden, has had some vision beyond ordinary reality. In Milan Kundera’s words, he has seen the “unintelligible truth” behind the “intelligible lie” of life.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, he feels set apart and convinced that no one else could understand him. He wishes to withdraw from human contact, to be left alone to work through his own process of anguish. In the midst of the family group, he cuts an isolated figure.

The sense of individual isolation in the play is strongly evidenced in the meeting of Harry and Mary in Part One, Scene II. The two of them share their memories of childhood, a time, as Shelley notes in the essay ‘On Life’ when our perceptions

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<sup>35</sup> Eliot had employed this imagery to illustrate man’s spiritual condition in an essay in the collection Revelation (1937), written around the same time he was working on The Family Reunion:

The human mind is perpetually driven between two desires, between two dreams each of which may be either a vision or a nightmare: the vision and nightmare of the material world, and the vision and nightmare of the immaterial. Each may be in turn, or for different minds, a refuge to which to fly, or a horror from which to escape. 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. (Baillie and Martin 31-2)

<sup>36</sup> See Kundera. The Unbearable Lightness of Being. 63.

function with greater clarity than subsequent years.<sup>37</sup> What emerges from their conversation is the sense that neither of them was ever truly happy at the house, finding that its atmosphere stifled their sense of fun. This is seen in their recollection that a tree by the river, once the centre of their games, was pulled down to make room for a summer house, “to please the children”. They have not found happiness in their later lives either, and it soon becomes clear that their conversation is not a conversation at all, but two people talking past each other, expressing their own pain without understanding that of anyone else. Although echoing on a superficial level the conversation of Romeo and Juliet, they are, as Moody notes, “not so much speaking to each other as caught up into a shared consciousness of romantic memories and desires.”(Moody, *Poet* 176) I would add that their consciousness is not really a ‘shared’ one, as they cannot settle on common points of reference. Harry remains convinced of his isolation, telling Mary that she “cannot understand” his fears:

**Mary**

I think I could understand, but you would have to be patient  
With me, and with people who have not had your experience.

**Harry**

If I tried to explain, you could never understand:  
Explaining would only make a worse misunderstanding;  
Explaining would only set me farther away from you. (FR 53)

We can see here that Harry shares something with the poet of ‘Alastor’, and J. Alfred Prufrock. He remains convinced that others will not understand him and, as such, does not attempt to understand them. He does not recognise that Mary is offering to help him. She, at least, embodies the sympathy that seeks a way out of its own isolation by attempting to understand someone else’s concerns. His preoccupation is wholly self-orientated.

The fact that the Furies are visible only to Harry serves to set him apart from those around him. Like a figure in Greek tragedy, he is pursued by his fate, and will find no peace until he confronts his past deeds. Only when he faces his past can any future course of action be considered. Harry comes to realise that he must leave

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<sup>37</sup> “Let us recollect our sensations as children. What a distinct and intense apprehension had we of the world and of ourselves. [...] As men grow up, this power commonly decays, and they become mechanical and habitual agents.” (Shelley 477)

Wishwood; there are too many memories there for him to ever feel at peace. The unhappy marriage of his parents hangs over the place, and the stifling attentions of his mother will, if he submits to them, lead to a repetition of those errors in another generation. In talking with Agatha, Harry appreciates that he must seek not to escape from the world in once-familiar surroundings, but re-enter it, this time led by “the bright angels” (as the no longer threatening Furies are called) to become a missionary.<sup>38</sup>

Harry finds release from his personal torment in his decision to leave his past behind and begin life anew. In this, he has followed the religious route to transcend the self. He has, on the one hand, realised that his previous life has been one of error, and that he must distance himself from past actions. In another respect, however, he remains very much within the Shelleyan mould. Like Prometheus, he has derived a sense of uniqueness from his condition, painful though it may be, and although he has transcended his isolation, he has not really followed the guidelines found in The Waste Land or Prometheus Unbound, and shared the pain of someone else. Eliot was later to refer to Harry as “an insufferable prig.”(OPP 84) Harry’s remedy for self-consciousness does, however, fit within the initially strong emphasis on renunciation that we find in Eliot’s faith after his conversion. This can be contrasted with the later play The Cocktail Party which, as a product of Eliot’s more mature faith, can admit that rather than complete renunciation *of* the world, an enlightened return *to* the world may be required of us.

Whereas Harry seeks relief from selfhood in distancing himself, in both emotional and (as a missionary) geographical terms from his family, Edward Chamberlayne finds an answer to his isolation by being led to re-assess his own state and his treatment of those around him. Like Harry, we first see him without his wife, although there is a mistress, Celia, waiting in the wings. The treatment of love in this play will be examined in more detail in the following chapter, but I wish to

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<sup>38</sup> Harry’s departure from Wishwood at the close of The Family Reunion contains an interesting echo of Prometheus Unbound. As Harry leaves for his new life, the other characters add their own comments on the events of the play, all of them closing in the repeated “Follow follow”. These injunctions mirror those given by the spirits that guide Asia and Panthea to Demogorgon’s cave in Act II of Shelley’s work. The cave is a place where some degree of understanding may be attained. Eliot’s reiteration of the spirits’ refrain draws attention to Harry’s quest for a new sense of self in his life as a missionary.

briefly consider here how Harcourt-Reilly draws Edward's attention to his selfhood and then offers him a route beyond it.<sup>39</sup>

Alone in his flat, believing his wife to have left him, Edward talks to Reilly, grateful for a sympathetic audience. Reilly's questioning brings into the open the fact that Edward and Lavinia have been drifting apart. Although he had only seen her that morning at breakfast, Edward is forced to admit "I no longer remember what my wife is like." (CP 28) He is an isolated consciousness, perceiving those around him only when they impinge on his world. He may not consider himself to be selfish, but he comes to realise that, in human relations, he has been seeking the fulfilment of his own needs with no concern for others. Not finding total satisfaction in marriage, he has sought it in adultery. Edward is aware of some inner absence, and in the later conversation with Celia, which marks the ending of their affair, he confesses that he has been seeking something in their love to fill a void in himself. His despairing remark, "But you cannot understand. / How could *you* understand what it is to feel old?" (CP 57) highlights the lack of understanding in their relationship, and the sense of isolation on the part of both parties. Edward's assertion that Celia would not understand him is also a renewed assertion of the primacy of his own selfhood. How could *she* understand what *he* is feeling? In the act of identifying the failure of their relations, he retreats, like Prufrock, into the belief that, even in his pain, he is still somehow superior in isolation.

The break-up of their relationship sends both Edward and Celia to Reilly's office, where they talk through their problems. The solution offered to Celia for her own sense of isolation is a life of missionary work, which she accepts and carries out to the point of martyrdom.<sup>40</sup> This is not the solution to Edward's problems, however,

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<sup>39</sup> Early reviews of the play focused on Reilly's role in making the characters, and possibly the audience, confront their own painful shortcomings. Writing in *The Spectator* in April 1950, Bonamy Dobrée commented that anyone reading or seeing the play would feel that "some barb has pierced beneath the skin. If he does not feel that, he had better begin looking into himself: or perhaps, on reflection, he had better not." (Grant 615)

<sup>40</sup> In giving Celia the same vocation as Harry, I believe we can see Eliot, in this later play, affirming that Harry's life as a missionary is not necessarily one of selfish retreat from Wishwood, but genuinely motivated compassion for others. Harry is, in spiritual terms, en route to God, but at the expense of human relations. In setting Celia's adoption of this life alongside Edward and Lavinia's restored marriage, I believe that Eliot offers a parallel belief that divine love can also be worked out *in* human relations.

for he needs to reach out to someone closer to home, as Reilly reminds both him and Lavinia when they meet. Reilly tells the Chamberlaynes that both of them have been suffering from nervous stress, that both of them have sought solace in adultery (Lavinia having been in an unsatisfactory liaison with Peter Quilpe) and therefore, that both of them “are exceptionally well-suited to each other”(CP 109) if they would but acknowledge the fact. Edward and Lavinia leave Reilly’s office to return home together, aiming to restore their marriage. When we see them again at the end of the play they are happy together, having rediscovered in each other the sympathy that they sought unsuccessfully elsewhere.

In conclusion, I will examine the question of selfhood in Four Quartets, and show how a mature faith enabled Eliot to see that transcending the self need not entail total repudiation of the social world. In fact, true transcendence of the self would bear fruit in the everyday world that we share with others.

#### **‘A deeper communion’: *Four Quartets***

In Four Quartets, Eliot transcends the limitations of the self by means of communion with God and, through this state, achieves both greater understanding of our fellow men and women and reconciliation with those feelings of isolation that may persist. In the words of Edward Lobb, each poem involves “transcendence of the limitations of the self and individual perception.”(Lobb, Romantic, 52) Each of the poems is an intensely personal meditation upon experience and memory, but they do not stress the sense of isolation that we find in Eliot’s earlier work. Rather, they show him coming to terms with the concept of selfhood and, employing the sympathy that is suggested at the end of The Waste Land, understanding others as he comes to see his own relationship with God.

As with Shelley’s poet, or his own J. Alfred Prufrock, Eliot is in receipt of some deep personal vision in ‘Burnt Norton’, the briefest of glimpses of some transcendent reality. This could lead to his pondering his own isolation, dwelling on missed opportunities, “the door we never opened / Into the rose garden” and feeling increasingly isolated within his memories. The difference with this moment of illumination, however, is that in being conscious of it he is not conscious of

himself. Whereas the earlier poetry made a personal vision the grounds for a further withdrawal from the world, believing that no one could possibly share our outlook, Eliot suggests here that it is only by continued participation *in* the world that we can make sense of our vision. Although our moment of “consciousness” is not located in time, our understanding of it needs to be reached through daily life:

But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden  
 The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,  
 The moment in the draughty church at smokefall  
 Be remembered; involved with past and future.  
 Only through time time is conquered.

We will not transcend our isolation by withdrawing further into the self. If we are to understand our experience it will be because we meditate upon it in the midst of everyday life, and in our relations to those with whom we share that life. As Patrick Grant writes, “insight or revelation does not cancel what we know, but makes us see in a new way.” (Bagchee 120)

It is in the final Quartet, ‘Little Gidding’ that Eliot finally resolves the issue of selfhood and attains both the union with God and the reconciliation with others that he has been seeking. What makes the poem so remarkable is that true transcendence reconciles both aspects of selfhood – there is no longer the rejection of humanity that we saw in Harry’s actions in The Family Reunion. To be at one with God is to feel oneself both ‘above’ the everyday world, and at the same time attuned with our fellow men and women, and thus able to feel the ‘sympathy’ that was proposed as the solution both to The Waste Land’s crisis of isolation, and Prometheus’ torment.

The route to transcendence of the self begins with the realisation that there is something greater than the self. Whereas earlier poems have seen the individual as being in receipt of some higher vision, and thereby feeling themselves to be set apart from the general mass of humanity, Eliot now reminds us that if we have any vision it should make us contemplate our relative insignificance with regard to a higher power. Whatever reasons we might have had for visiting this chapel, we should set them aside on arrival. We are there “to kneel / Where prayer has been

valid” – the posture being itself a sign of our reduced status. It is, however, in coming to realise our reduced role that we receive the means to transcend it:

And prayer is more  
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation  
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.

Rather than dwell on our problems of expression, thinking our own vision to be superior because we feel that others do not understand us, we must avoid consciously dwelling on what we perceive ourselves, and give ourselves up to influence from without. In not thinking of the words, or the thoughts in our prayers, we will be able to express what we truly feel, and this is crucially distinct from what we *think* we feel. We see here Eliot drawing away from the self-conscious preoccupation found in Prufrock’s thoughts to find a point at which the self can be surpassed. To locate this point would be to find ourselves at “the intersection of the timeless moment” – the point at which we are released from selfhood.

The journey is not complete, however, without our making peace with our past. In the same sense that Prometheus must recall his curse on Jupiter before he can be released, Eliot points out that if we would be released from our isolated perception of the world and enter into community with others we must first acknowledge the results of our selfishness. Before turning our sympathy outwards, we need to be shown what has resulted from our preoccupation with our own state. This is set out in the meeting with the “compound ghost” – a study in self-consciousness that highlights the painful effects of selfishness and points out the alternative course towards peace.

The key element in the meeting is that of recognition. Eliot finds the ghost “both intimate and unidentifiable”, seeing in him some element of himself. The speech that follows is, then, very much Eliot being brought to face his own actions, and seeing the consequences to which his self-preoccupation has led. The “gifts reserved for age”, far from being rewards, are painful indeed. Alongside the decay of the senses and the painful impotence of the intellect, there stands the final realisation that our past actions have hurt those around us:

“And last, the rending pain of re-enactment  
 Of all that you have done, and been; the shame  
 Of motives late revealed, and the awareness  
 Of things ill done and done to others’ harm  
 Which once you took for exercise of virtue.”

Only at the last do we attain this awareness, and what it shows us is that our lack of genuine sympathy has hurt others. Mistakenly believing ourselves to be virtuous, we have acted without consideration, and our selfishness now confronts us with its consequences. One such consequence is that we are fated to repeat our actions indefinitely, in a form of Promethean torment, as our exasperated spirits move “from wrong to wrong”. The eventual outcome of self-consciousness is painful knowledge of our shortcomings without the hope of change.

There is, however, one means of avoiding this open to Eliot. We can be released from the round of repetition if we enter the “refining fire” within which our impurities are burnt off. The particular Dantean elements of this image will be examined in Chapter Four, but the significance here is that our participation in this fire must mark a move away from isolation into community. To be prepared to “move in measure, like a dancer” is to be subject to a pace not necessarily one’s own, to admit the existence of others. There is an echo here of the need to recognise ‘control’ from outside that was proposed in the final section of The Waste Land.

The refining flame is the process by which we can move beyond self-concern towards concern for others. Eliot carefully defines the required state as being “detachment / From self and from things and from persons”. This is not, as he is at pains to point out, indifference, but a redirection of affection towards a higher goal. Our thoughts must be turned towards divine matters, not centred on earthly attachments. It is significant that the first ‘attachment’ Eliot advises withdrawal from is attachment to the self. Only in not being preoccupied with our own state can we hope to attain divine union. To achieve this is to be liberated into a greater reality, and from this new state we can re-value and come to understand our past feelings:

See, now they vanish,  
 The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved  
 them,

To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.

It is not a question of renouncing previous attachments, as Harry felt impelled to do in The Family Reunion, but rather coming to see them in a new framework, where they are not regarded as the be all and end all in our lives. Moving beyond a self-centred model for relationships, in which other people are seen primarily in our relations with them, to understand them as individuals distinct from ourselves is, in some degree, a means of expressing the sympathy that is called for at the close of The Waste Land.

In the acceptance of grace selfhood is overcome. Adopting a divine viewpoint enables us both to come to terms with our selves and understand others. As David Perkins notes, the community of faith in 'Little Gidding' helps Eliot "to find through faith a means of attachment to the lives of other people and a reconciliation to life in time." (Bergonzi 259) Ceasing to regard ourselves as being any better than others, we no longer feel isolated within the world, no longer so acutely self-conscious that we cannot interact with our fellow men and women. With the impediments to sympathy removed, we can express concern for others and share in their lives, coming to appreciate their, and our, location within a transcendent, divine reality. In ceasing to regard ourselves as unique, we lose the burden of self-consciousness and isolation, and take our place in the wider communion of souls before God, as Eliot concluded in his 1935 essay 'Literature and the Modern World':

There are moments, perhaps not known to everyone, when a man may be nearly crushed by the terrible awareness of his isolation from every other human being; and I pity him if he finds himself alone with himself and his meanness and futility, alone without God. It is after these moments, alone *with* God and aware of our worthiness, but for Grace, of nothing but damnation, that we turn with most thankfulness and appreciation to the awareness of our membership: for we appreciate and are thankful for nothing fully until we see where it begins and where it ends.

(Cited in Olney 192)<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ronald Schuchard cites these lines in his essay "Eliot and the Horrific Moment", included in T. S. Eliot: Essays from the Southern Review (1988).

### Chapter Three – Human Love and the Search for Transcendence

‘How’s one going to get through it all? How can you live if you can’t love? And how can you live if you do?’ – James Baldwin<sup>1</sup>

I think one is always in love with something or other; the error, and I confess it is not easy for spirits cased in flesh and blood to avoid it, consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal. – Shelley, letter to John Gisborne, 18/6/22.<sup>2</sup>

Moving on from the discussion of selfhood of the previous chapter, this chapter will examine the way in which Shelley and Eliot treat human love in their poetry. In Shelley’s thought, we are forever engaged in the search for our ‘antitype’ in the world, the embodiment of all the qualities that we hold dear. Without the adoption of a divine perspective, however, this quest can only end in disappointment and a renewed sense of isolation. Eliot’s pre-conversion poetry reiterates this view in a more modern setting, finding its most forceful expression in the unhappiness that permeates The Waste Land. With the adoption of a Christian viewpoint, Eliot is able to elevate the love of men and women onto a higher plane. In Bornstein’s words “he imputes the sadness of romantic poetry to the inadequacy of human relationships in satisfying human desires, and to the lack of any further object for desire”(Bornstein 119), and subsumes the Shelleyan torment of unsatisfied longing into a love that reconciles men and women under the love of God.

#### Shelley’s search for the Antitype

Shelley’s view of love, like his conception of selfhood, centres on a theory of transcendence. In the same sense that the self, conscious of its isolation, aspires to be subsumed into union with a higher ideal or community with others, the human need for love can be met in union with one who represents our own best qualities. The search for love is, therefore, the search in the external world for something correlative to what we hold within us. In Shelley’s view, to succeed in this search would be to find true happiness. Sadly, Shelley’s poetry evidences the painful gulf

<sup>1</sup> From Another Country 333.

<sup>2</sup> Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Eds. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck. Volume X – Letters 1818-1822. 401.

between this ideal and reality. Driven on by his need to find a true partner in the world, the Shelleyan figure is brought face to face with the pain of disappointment, and his unsuccessful search leads to a heightened sense of isolation.

Before looking at the treatment of love in Shelley's poetry, we must begin with the clearest expression of his beliefs on the subject, the short prose piece 'On Love', which was written in 1818. Significantly, the essay opens with Shelley acknowledging the inherent isolation of humanity, remarking that previous attempts to communicate with his audience have not been successful, and realising that no-one can know with any certainty the mind of another:

The more opportunities they have afforded me for experience, the wider has appeared the interval between us, and to a greater distance have the points of sympathy been withdrawn. (Shelley 473)

In the language employed here we can see how Shelley's theory of love connects with his theory of selfhood, and how important these "points of sympathy" will be in any matrix of human relations. We can also see, as Chapter Five of this study will show, how his theories of love and self-consciousness are also intrinsically connected with his theory of language.

The search for love is the search for somebody who is perfectly attuned to our own state, and with whom we will be able to enjoy the bliss of communion. In place of individual consciousness, we seek union with another. As Marianne Thormählen notes, "the effacement of the individual personality is very much a facet of perfect love." (Thormählen 128) Love is defined by Shelley as:

That powerful attraction towards all that we conceive or fear or hope beyond ourselves when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void and seek to awaken in all things that are, a community with what we experience within ourselves. If we reason, we would be understood; if we imagine, we would that the airy children of our brain were born anew within another's; if we feel, we would that another's nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own. [...] This is Love. (Shelley 473)

The state of love is, therefore, one that frees the self from its isolation and joins it with another in a bond of sympathy and shared understanding.

Earl Wasserman, in his reading of 'On Love', writes that "for Shelley the perfect object of love is a visionary mirror-image of one's inmost soul, an idealized reflection that would complete the self by fulfilling its desire." (Wasserman 22) Shelley moves on to connect this intense personal relationship to a greater, transcendent ideal. In doing this he imbues human relations with a divine element. To find satisfaction in human love is to experience "the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with every thing which exists." (473) In Shelley's thought, love can raise the barriers of selfhood which frequently intervene in our relations with the world. As Bertrand Russell put it:

I have sought [love] because it relieves loneliness – that terrible loneliness in which one shivering consciousness looks over the rim of the world into the cold, unfathomable, lifeless abyss. (Cited in Sencourt 56)<sup>3</sup>

The implied danger here, however, is that to experience disappointment in love is to find our whole relationship with the world altered, and to feel our isolation even more acutely than before. As we shall see when looking at 'Julian and Maddalo', the breakdown of Shelleyan love manifests itself in more than a broken heart; it entails a broken life.

In the summer of 1818, Shelley had relieved a spell of poetic inactivity by translating Plato's *Symposium*, and the Platonic concept of the ideal other is at the heart of his thought.<sup>4</sup> What we seek in our potential partner is the embodiment of our own deepest desires:

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<sup>3</sup> As we shall see later in this chapter, Russell had a considerable part to play in the break-up of Eliot's marriage to Vivienne, so we may see his own search for love as having brought only pain to those around him.

<sup>4</sup> The dating of 'On Love' is itself the subject of critical debate, given Shelley's habit of re-using notebooks from previous years for new compositions. The original draft can be found in a notebook that Shelley was known to be using in the summer of 1818, but this is not a conclusive sign of the piece's date. Donald Reiman believes that the essay was written at this time, "after Shelley finished his translation of Plato's *Symposium* and before he began 'Discourse of the Manners of the Antient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love'." (Shelley 473) Richard Holmes, on the other hand, argues for an earlier date, possibly before the writing of 'Alastor', while Shelley was living in Bishopsgate. He believes that "style, tone and sophistication of argument are important factors in assigning them to the summer of 1815, while the similarity of the material to that discussed in the 'Preface to Alastor' can be regarded as decisive." (Holmes, *Pursuit*, 299) Shelley, of course, had been familiar with Plato since his childhood, when his tutor at Eton, Dr Lind, read the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* with him, so the Platonic thought in the essay would be present whenever it was actually written.

We are born into the world and there is something within us which from the instant that we live and move thirsts after its likeness.[...] We dimly see within our intellectual nature a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all that we condemn or despise, the ideal prototype of every thing excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man. (Shelley 473-4)

The language employed here draws our attention to the intensity with which Shelleyan love is to be experienced. This is nothing less than the fulfilment of all our emotional, spiritual and philosophical needs. To experience this condition would be to be raised to a level of transcendent ecstasy. Conversely, to fail to attain this state of love is to be denied any degree of satisfaction, as our ideals have been aroused to such a level by the quest that they will not admit any compensating features in our failure. Love, for Shelley, is an all or nothing experience, and the price of returning with nothing is high indeed.

Shelley outlines a theory in which human love is the highest state that we can hope to attain. True union of souls raises us above the world and onto a spiritual plane. The search, however, remains one in which success is far from guaranteed:

With a spirit ill fitted to sustain such proof, trembling and feeble through its tenderness, I have every where sought, and have found only repulse and disappointment. (Shelley 473)

Although Shelley idealises love in his essay, the suspicion remains that his experience runs counter to his hopes. He cannot, however, admit defeat in his search without invalidating his belief in something truly transcendent:

So soon as this want or power is dead, man becomes the living sepulchre of himself, and what yet survives is the mere husk of what once he was.  
(Shelley 474)

This intriguing line, which seems to imply that failure in love can leave us 'dead' within the world although still physically alive, anticipates Eliot's The Waste Land. In Eliot's poem, failure to attain emotional transcendence leaves the inhabitants of the 'unreal city' going through their daily routines in a state suspended between life and death, lacking the animating force of genuine love.

In Shelley's view, love of another person is love of the qualities that they embody. He does aspire to something greater than human interaction but, lacking a divine framework within which to locate this desire, falls back into human terms whenever he tries to pursue the search in this world. As Stuart Sperry points out, Shelleyan love is not simply a human quest:

Shelley writes of the natural tendency to reify, through an act of Imaginative introspection, an image of what is admirable or beautiful – an ideal archetype that thereafter provides, through our search for its earthly counterpart, the vital stimulus for human desire and exertion. (Sperry 23)

The problem with Shelley's pursuit of this ideal is that, if we hold only to this world and deny anything higher, we cannot avoid seeing human relations as the end of our quest. The sadness at the heart of Shelley's poetry is that he cannot forge the connection between humanity and spiritual purity that his thought urges him to make.

'On Love', therefore, sets out the terms of the search for our particular 'antitype' in the world and, whilst admitting that we may experience some setbacks in this search, retains a belief in the possibility of attaining transcendence in love. The poetic evidence, however, does not support this, as we find in Shelley's poetry protagonists crushed by their unsuccessful pursuit of love and feeling only a heightened sense of isolation. This sense of disappointment is also found in Eliot's early poetry, and reaches its most forceful expression in The Waste Land, which will be examined later. To begin with, I propose to read Shelley's 'Alastor' in the light of his theory, and show how the ideals expressed in 'On Love' are not borne out in human relations.

### **The Quest for Love in 'Alastor'**

Shelley sought in his own life the state of communion outlined in his essay, but he never attained it to his satisfaction. His first marriage, to Harriet Westbrook, ended in disillusionment and escape, leaving the unhappy woman "a victim of that restless pursuit of an ideal which made Shelley dissatisfied with many of his relationships."

(O'Neill, Literary, 31) Similar signs of stress were evident in his relationship with Mary during their residence in Italy. A letter from 1822 includes these lines:

I only feel the want of those who can feel and understand me. Whether from proximity and the continuity of domestic intercourse, Mary does not. The necessity of concealing from her thoughts that which would pain her, necessitates this, perhaps. It is the curse of Tantalus, that a person possessing such excellent powers and so pure a mind as she should not excite the sympathy indispensable to their application to domestic life.

(Cited in O'Neill, Literary, 126)

Frustrated in his pursuit of an ideal that would bring his life into line with his poetry and beliefs, Shelley felt himself to be living out the torment of one of his poetic characters. Love, which promises all we could desire in this world, can result in pain when the feelings on either side are not perfectly aligned.<sup>5</sup>

Shelley strongly identified with some of the personae of his poetry, and nowhere is this more evident than in those poems that deal with questions of emotional and spiritual fulfilment. Eloping with Mary, he had deserted his first wife, Harriet, and the sense of disappointment that his first marriage had fostered is woven into 'Alastor'.

Written after the break with Harriet, and at the beginning of his relationship with Mary, 'Alastor' is Shelley's attempt to address his inability to find, within human relationships, the required level of spiritual fulfilment. Writing to Harriet after the separation, Shelley told her that theirs had been a relationship in which "sympathy in the great questions of human happiness [was] wanting." (Cited in O'Neill, Literary, 31) Sperry places the poem within a biographical context that makes the search of the poet very much a mirror image of Shelley's life at this time:

In leaving Harriet he had abandoned an ideal of himself he had invested in her, which he was unable to relinquish. [...] He needed to come to terms with the origin and magnitude of the failure and in some way account for it,

<sup>5</sup> Michael O'Neill argues that the breakdown of Shelley's relationship with Mary may well be symptomatic of his wider sense of alienation from the reading public as a whole. Her often qualified support of his work, coupled with its negative reception, may well have led to a process of distancing in which "one may well have served to exaggerate the other." (O'Neill, Literary, 126) For more information on Shelley's need for a positive audience, see my reading of Prometheus Unbound in Chapter Five.

if only as a necessary consequence of the somber density he had come to feel as man and poet. The problem, in all its complexity, weighed upon his spirit and was impossible to ignore. About to settle down with Mary to a more fixed existence, was he fated to resume the familiar pattern of alternating attraction and repulsion, of commitment and loss? Such preoccupations provide the emotional background of 'Alastor' and explain its extraordinary psychological complexity and ambivalence. (Sperry 22)

The subject of 'Alastor' is a young poet who, having experienced a vision of his spiritual ideal, withdraws from the human world in his attempt to be united with it. His search ends in death, although Shelley remains ambivalent as to whether any success has been achieved. What the poem does illustrate, at an early point in Shelley's poetic career, is the need for communion with another, and the attendant pain of failure in this quest.

The young man is perfectly attuned to all life's finer aspects. He is nurtured by the "solemn vision and bright silver dream"(67) of the natural world, and his education has been of a similar degree, leaving him one who feels and knows "all of great / Or good, or lovely, which the sacred past / In truth or fable consecrates"(72-4). While asleep, he receives a vision that hints at fulfilment of his desires:

A vision on his sleep

There came, a dream of hopes that never yet  
Had flushed his cheek. He dreamed a veiled maid  
Sate near him, talking in low solemn tones.  
Her voice was like the voice of his own soul  
Heard in the calm of thought. [...]  
Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme,  
And lofty hopes of divine liberty,  
Thoughts the most dear to him, and poesy. (149-54, 158-60)

This vision is the fulfilment of all the poet seeks, and in response he is "sickened with excess / Of love"(181-2). He has encountered his 'antitype' – the one with whom he is in perfect harmony. The contrast here with the earlier, physical Arab maiden, whose attentions the poet has largely ignored, is marked. Sperry points out that in ignoring the 'real' maiden the poet demonstrates "how far removed he is, in his unconscious commitment to the as yet unrealised goal of his wanderings, from the consolations of the simple human love she offers him."(Sperry 28) Ignoring one

degree of love, he responds to what he perceives to be a higher level. As Carlos Baker remarks:

The real driving force in the poem is love, which obtains a complete hold over the intellect, imagination, and senses of the protagonist. [...] When that image appears in the form of a maiden, the poet responds on all levels.  
(Ridenour 56)

The problem, of course, is that the dream maiden is not real. With his thoughts dominated by her, the poet can no longer delight in the earthly joys that gestured towards the divine. Only the dream-like vision that has conquered him affords sufficient interest:

His wan eyes  
Gaze on the empty scene as vacantly  
As ocean's moon looks on the moon in heaven.  
[...] He eagerly pursues  
Beyond the realms of dream that fleeting shade. (200-2, 205-6)

What started as a search for knowledge has now become the conscious pursuit of an ideal unattainable in life. The poet now wanders distractedly through the world, seeing in the wonders around him only an inadequate substitute for his lost 'maiden' and all that she carries with her. In Wasserman's words, "the solitary mind is driven to project itself as its own narcissistic object." (Wasserman 9) Real, tangible maidens try to alleviate "the woe / That wasted him" (267-8), but their efforts are to no avail. The poet retreats from human society into the natural world, where death, seen by him as the desired return to the 'sleep' in which he first met the maiden, awaits him.

This young man, unlike other Shelleyan personae who will be examined later, has been overcome wholly from within, something that is alluded to in his seeing eyes 'in' a fountain – an image hinting at Narcissus' self-absorption.<sup>6</sup> The vision leads him

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<sup>6</sup> Shelley's image may be compared with that in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

Spellbound he saw himself, and motionless  
Lay like a marble statue staring down.  
He gazes at his eyes, twin constellation,  
His hair worthy of Bacchus or Apollo, (Ovid III. 419-22)

The Narcissistic tendency is present in Shelley's poet, with the distinction that whereas Ovid's Narcissus was the embodiment of physical perfection, Shelley's poet is wasting away on the physical level as a result of the intensity of his spiritual quest.

further into the dell, and he reaches what will become his last resting-place “Obedient to the light / That shone within his soul”(492-3). As Baker writes “his every effort is directed toward reunion with the dream-maiden, failing which he wastes away to death.”(Ridenour 56)

‘Alastor’ posits a theory of love removed from the physical realm, but it does crucially establish the Shelleyan quest motif, and draw attention to the painful consequences of not finding one’s ideal in this world, whether in spiritual or human terms. I will examine ‘Julian and Maddalo’ later, and show how the same sense of disappointment that permeates ‘Alastor’ and leads to the poet’s physical death leads another Shelleyan figure to a living death of madness. Before doing that, however, I would like to illustrate the tendency in Eliot’s early poetry to follow the trajectory of ‘Alastor’ and posit an ideal condition detached from physical love which, with the slightest of exceptions, is also perceived as being largely absent in human relationships.

### **Love and Isolation in Eliot’s Early Poetry**

There is very little love to be found in Eliot’s first volume, Prufrock and Other Observations (1917). As seen in the previous chapter, the figures of Eliot’s early work are isolated to the point at which almost any human relationship is out of the question. For the men who narrate these poems, women are seen as threatening, holding the potential to unbalance their carefully ordered world.<sup>7</sup> Prufrock’s monologue is briefly disrupted by the thought of one such female:

Arms that are braceleted and white and bare  
 (But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)  
 Is it perfume from a dress  
 That makes me so digress?

<sup>7</sup> Moody has written that Eliot’s early protagonists fear women because they believe that a relationship may entail the extinction of their ordered self. The male intellect, as we shall see when looking at ‘Hysteria’ and ‘La Figlia Che Piange’, is always trying to assert some form of control over the potentially disruptive sensuality found in the woman. At its extreme, this may be seen as a fear “of losing identity and becoming a non-person” in the presence of the female. (Moody, Tracing 184) Calvin Bedient also notes this in his study of The Waste Land, seeing Eliot’s women as “whirlpools of vanity, Ophelias on their way down in their own nothingness.” (Bedient 22)

Prufrock frequently foresees himself reduced to ineffectual mumbling in the presence of the women of the drawing room. It is not the women's intellect that overwhelms him, however, but their physicality. The women in Prufrock's poem are never directly described, but exist in these brief glimpses of flesh or traces of perfume that retain the power to derail his train of thought.

This feeling of helplessness in the presence of women can also be seen in the prose poem 'Hysteria', which recounts a man's sense of panic as a woman's laughter seems to take over everything around her. As in Prufrock's thoughts, the elemental power of the woman leaves the man at a loss as to how to act, almost literally losing control:

I was drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary recovery, lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat, bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles.

The amused laughter of the woman has now become not just socially embarrassing but, in the mind of her partner, potentially threatening to his sense of self. Rather than anticipate a condition of union, this situation threatens the annihilation of the man. He feels himself being swallowed by his partner, and realises that his only hope of evading this fate lies not in giving in to the physical nature that she embodies but in trying to reassert mental order:

I decided that if the shaking of her breasts could be stopped, some of the fragments of the afternoon might be collected, and I concentrated my attention with careful subtlety to this end.

'Hysteria' is an unusual piece, but one that helps to set up the distinction between mind and body that Eliot will develop in other poems. The woman represents the unpredictable power of the body, while the man endeavours to maintain the stability of the mind in the face of the sensual side of his nature that wishes to respond to the woman. Eliot's narrators are seeking transcendence in their relationships, but in the early poems there is an awareness that physical relations will not wholly fulfil the need they feel. With the attendant problems of expression that Eliot finds in human relations, however, it is increasingly hard for either party to voice their true feelings,

and therefore the more physical side of human relations comes to assume the dominant aspect.

The closing poem of the 1917 volume, 'La Figlia Che Piange' deals with the gap between the reality of love and the perception of it that we wish to hold. The poem is written from the man's perspective after the parting of two lovers, but it does not contain a memory of that parting. Rather, it is an attempt to create a stylised tableau that will enable the man to 'recall' their separation in the future. A crucial distinction is drawn here between the experience of love in the body and the perception of it in the mind. In this respect, 'La Figlia Che Piange' expresses the same need to assert the primacy of the intellect that we saw in 'Hysteria'. In this poem there is a sense that something has evaded the man, and his attempts to order the experience do not wholly suppress the sense of intensity that continues to trouble him. We can read the poem as an attempt, like that undertaken by Shelley's poet in 'Alastor', to relate some brief glimpse of an ideal that elevates his consciousness for a moment and yet confuses for "many days and many hours".

In stanza one, the woman is given a series of instructions, like stage directions, telling her where to stand, what to do, and what expression to display. There is tension in these lines, however, because the language asks the impossible; she cannot clasp the flowers to her "with a pained surprise" if the whole scene is being staged, for surprise can only truly arise in the absence of artificiality. What the man seems to desire is that she recreates a past scene that he remembers, or one that he has imagined, and that, in doing so, he can bring his intellect to bear on the potentially dangerous rush of emotion that the original scene prompted. In the words of Denis Donoghue, "the imperatives have a distancing effect, showing how much the feeling in the scene has to be controlled." (Donoghue 69)

The image of the woman with her arms full of flowers is a central one in Eliot's poetry. It can be found in 'Dans le Restaurant' ("je lui ai donné des primevères") and, as we shall see, at the heart of The Waste Land ("You gave me Hyacinths first a year ago"). In both of these cases, it represents a moment that held the possibility of transcendence in love, but a moment that passed without the longed-for release

that it promised. It is clearly on the mind of the narrator here, and he is trying to impose some order on the experience to limit its emotional power over him, to find:

Some way incomparably light and deft,  
Some way we both should understand,  
Simple and faithless as a smile and shake of the hand.

To re-stage the original parting in these terms is to render it safe within the memory. The desire to find a “way we both should understand” is, significantly, on the man’s side, and in saying it he reveals that he actually lacks that ‘understanding’. He does not fully comprehend what has passed between him and the woman, and the poem is his attempt to frame a moment of dangerous intensity within a crafted “gesture and a pose”.

In ‘La Figlia Che Piange’ we find a desire for transcendence in love and the realisation that, for some reason, that transcendence has not been fully realised. What remains is a moment, or an image, of troubling intensity, enough to “compel my imagination many days” without resolution. Bound as they are within the coil of selfhood, Eliot’s men and women experience momentary flashes of something ‘higher’ in their relations, but do not know what they experience, or how to retain that experience. Subsequent attempts to assert a mental framework within which these experiences could be understood will not be successful because they cannot have the brief feeling of abandonment promised in the original moment. Conversely, there is a distrust of the purely physical, which offers a feeling of momentary intensity but which ultimately lacks the sense of transcendence sought; hence the need to retain an intellectual / spiritual dimension to balance it. Thus, the stylised parting of ‘La Figlia Che Piange’ gives way to cogitations which “still amaze” because they contain the trace of something vital that has been missed. This feeling of missed transcendence is something that can trouble us without respite. At this point I will return to Shelley, and examine a poem that addresses the failure of human love and the subsequent painful remembrance that allows the lover no escape from his memories.

### **'Alas, what drove him mad?': Destructive Love in 'Julian and Maddalo'**

Shelley visited Byron in Venice in 1818, and 'Julian and Maddalo' owes its origins to the conversations between the two men. Shelley appears in the poem as the idealistic Julian and Byron as Maddalo, the world-weary genius whose gloomy outlook makes him the ideal foil to Julian's optimism. In his introduction to the poem Shelley describes the characters of the two men, and mentions a Maniac whom they will meet in the course of the work:

Of the Maniac I can give no information. He seems by his own account to have been disappointed in love. He was evidently a very cultivated and amiable person when in his right senses. His story, told at length, might be like many other stories of the same kind: the unconnected exclamations of his agony will perhaps be found a sufficient comment for the text of every heart. (Shelley 113)

The poem opens with the pair discussing human nature as they travel through Venice at sunset, discoursing on man's state within the universe. As the sun sets over the city in a blaze of colour reminiscent of Turner's Venetian works, the setting seems to echo Julian's positive view of the world. At this point, however, Maddalo draws his friend's attention to the tolling bell of the madhouse, and counters Julian's positive view with his own darker vision of mankind:

"And like that black and dreary bell, the soul,  
Hung in a heaven-illumined tower, must toll  
Our thoughts and our desires to meet below  
Round the rent heart and pray – as madmen do  
For what? [...]  
We sought and yet were baffled!" (123-7, 130)

Maddalo's mankind is vainly groping in the darkness of its isolation, seeking a trace of purpose or design in its state. Julian may counter this with his idealism, but is without any religious ground in his argument. If Maddalo's views owe much to Byron, Julian's thought is derived to a great extent from Shelley's own, and draws on the innate perfectibility of man, as found in the work of Shelley's father-in-law, William Godwin.

The following day, Maddalo suggests a visit to the madhouse, where the two men will meet an acquaintance of his, “Who to this city came some months ago / [...] and he / Is now gone mad.”(196-8) While admitting that he does not know all the man’s ‘sad history’, Maddalo recalls that he came “To Venice a dejected man, and fame / Said he was wealthy, or he had been so”(233-4), rather like Byron himself around this time.<sup>8</sup> The cause of his torment seems to be a failed relationship:

A Lady came with him from France, and when  
She left him and returned, he wandered then  
About yon lonely isles of desert sand  
Till he grew wild. (246-9)

Maddalo has taken an interest in the Maniac and fitted out his rooms within the madhouse. On coming into the presence of the man, the two visitors listen in on his monologue, for his speech is only with himself and those within his memory. Recalling how he met “pale Pain” in the course of his relationship, he speaks to the absent Lady, seeking a degree of sympathy, or compassion, feeling keenly his separation from her and the loss of communication between them. Then, addressing any that may be listening, he offers a warning:

“There is one road  
To peace and that is truth, which follow ye!  
Love sometimes leads astray to misery.” (347-9)

The very highest feeling, when unreturned or returned with lesser intensity, can destroy the peace of mind of those who foster it. The Maniac has known a degree of happiness, and has hoped for even greater levels of bliss, only to find misunderstanding in place of communion:

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<sup>8</sup> Byron’s life in Venice was a cause of concern for Shelley, who felt that he was slipping into a life of indolent debauchery, seeing in his poetry around this time (particularly the Third canto of “Childe Harold”) proof of a moral malaise:

L.B. is familiar with the lowest sort of [Italian] women, the people his gondolieri pick up in the streets. [...] He says he disapproves, but he endures. He is not yet an Italian and is heartily and deeply discontented with himself; and contemplating in the distorted mirror of his own thoughts the nature and the destiny of man, what can he behold but objects of contempt and despair?

- Letter to Thomas Peacock, 22/12/18 (*Complete Works Volume X*, 12).

For more information on Byron’s life in Venice, see Benita Eisler’s biography *Byron: Child of Passion, Fool of Fame* (1999).

“Didst thou not seek me for thine own content?  
 Did not thy love awaken mine? I thought  
 That thou wert she who said, ‘You kiss me not  
 Ever, I fear you do not love me now’ –  
 In truth I loved even to my overthrow.” (401-5)

The man and the woman did not find in their relationship the union of feeling they both sought. Their failure to fully understand one another drove them apart, as Charles Ryder recalls in Brideshead Revisited, thinking of his relationship with Julia:

Perhaps you and I are types and this sadness which sometimes falls between us springs from disappointment in our search, each straining through and beyond the other, snatching a glimpse now and then of the shadow which turns the corner always a pace or two ahead of us. (Waugh 346)

The torment that afflicts the Maniac stems from failure in this ‘search’. He has invested the relationship with far more emotional currency than the woman. The pain of their separation has affected him on a scale proportionate to the degree of feeling with which he loved his lady. The force of his love becomes the severity of his despair:

“It were  
 A cruel punishment for one most cruel,  
 If such can love, to make that love the fuel  
 Of the mind’s hell; hate, scorn, remorse, despair:  
 But *me* – whose heart a stranger’s tear might wear  
 As water-drops the sandy fountain stone,  
 Who loved and pitied all things, and could moan  
 For woes which others hear not, [...]  
*Me* – who am as a nerve o’er which do creep  
 The else unfelt oppressions of this earth.” (438-45, 449-50)

There is an echo here of the young poet in ‘Alastor’, whose excessive emotional susceptibility leaves him open to the crushing weight of disappointment when his feelings find an inadequate response within the world. The Maniac asks his absent lady to recall “how horrible / It was to meet my love when thine grew less”(460-1), alluding to the emotional shortfall on one side of their relationship which so destroyed his happiness. His emotional fate is one which Maddalo gloomily foresees for all men who seek to overcome the void in which they are suspended, calling to mind his earlier “We sought and yet were baffled.”(130)

The effect that the Maniac's speech has upon the two listeners is evident in Julian's account of their response to it:

He ceased, and overcome leant back awhile,  
 Then rising, with a melancholy smile  
 Went to a sofa, and lay down, and slept  
 A heavy sleep, and in his dreams he wept  
 And muttered some familiar name, and we  
 Wept without shame in his society.  
 I think I never was impressed so much;  
 The man who were not, must have lacked a touch  
 Of human nature... (511-19)

Whereas the two men have debated human issues in theoretical terms, the Maniac has lived through the despair of having his highest ideals betrayed. He has been unable to direct his emotions onto the world around him and find any solace there. His world has shrunk, not so much to the confines of his room in the madhouse, but to the inner world of his memory – a fact evidenced by the way that he is actually speaking to himself and his vanished lady, and is only *overheard* by the two men. He is crushed by the disappointment of his unsuccessful relationship, tormented all the more by memories of the brief period when he did enjoy happiness. We will see, when looking at The Waste Land, that the true source of pain for its inhabitants is not so much desire as memory which, like the corpse in Stetson's garden, is always returning, breaking through our attempts to suppress it. It is the act of looking back on past moments when happiness seemed possible, and their inability to move beyond these reveries, that keeps the inhabitants of Eliot's 'unreal city' locked in a personal state of torment.

The sentiments of 'Julian and Maddalo' must have been hurtful to Shelley's wife, Mary, from whom he seems, at this time, to have been an increasingly remote figure. We find in the poem evidence that both supports and contradicts the essay 'On Love'. The search for the antitype is indeed the 'end' of our emotional and spiritual quest, but in imbuing that quest with such spiritual intensity, we leave ourselves open to crushing disappointment if our search is not successful. The poem paints a bleak vision (albeit mitigated by the trace of a happy ending) in



which the search for satisfaction in human relations is one that ends in pain, for all its promise of transcendence.<sup>9</sup>

'Julian and Maddalo' may appear to differ from 'Alastor' in its treatment of love, but it does portray, in a different fashion, the destructive nature of our quest for empathy. What the young poet seeks in his internal 'dream maiden', the Maniac sought in his Lady. The promise of union with all that we hold dear, whether embodied in a vision or projected onto a loved one, overrides all other thoughts within us and we pursue this hoped-for state with such fervour that the resultant disappointment inverts our love and makes it a torment of equal measure to our initial hope. For the young poet, the journey ends in death, removed from any human society and for the Maniac it entails a similar withdrawal from the world, where no solace can be found to ease the pain of unfulfilled love.

Donald Reiman has identified in these poems "the inefficacy of human relations to provide Shelley with his *raison d'être*" (cited in O'Neill, *Literary*, 79), but while Shelley writes of the pain that can result from failure in the quest for love, he does not seem able to offer an alternative course of action. As the essay 'On Love' makes clear, in our human relationships we are seeking a trace of all that we hold dear. To abandon our search for the antitype is, by implication, to tell ourselves that our ideals are irreconcilable with reality and to confront a human condition every bit as bleak as the Maniac's disappointment. Shelley, hurt by the failure of his relationship with Harriet, works through, in 'Alastor', a process of transfiguring emotions into a higher, almost religious, state that strives to push human love into the spiritual realm. The atheist seeks, in a human relationship, something reserved for the divine, but this quest will ultimately be unsuccessful, as Shelley was to discover. Before looking at 'Epipsychidion', his attempt to make human love a divine entity, I will trace the failure of the Shelleyan search for love in The Waste

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Holmes points out that Mary was becoming increasingly distant from Shelley around this time. Their journey towards Venice during the hottest period of the year had been broken by the death of their daughter Clara, an event "to which Shelley's carelessness and unconcern had distinctly contributed." (Holmes, *Pursuit* 447) Although there is no mention of a dead child within the poem, Holmes notes that "What makes the Madman's guilt so unbearable is the revulsion and blame which his mysterious lady companion now feels for him, in place of love." (Holmes, *Love* 161)

Land. Although at the core of the Modernist canon, I believe that Eliot's most famous poem restates the fundamental Shelleyan problem of love.

### Love and Lust in *The Waste Land*

Shelley's words from the essay 'On Love', "I have everywhere sought, and have found only repulse and disappointment"(Shelley 473) could serve as an epigraph for The Waste Land. Eliot's poem deals with the pain that comes from being aware that there is a transcendent reality, but that in human relations we only ever gain the briefest glimpse of it, if at all. The poem is peopled with men and women, but even among those who have experienced what counts for love in Eliot's world, there is only either the pain that arises from feeling that something fundamental is missing or, as is more common, resigned acceptance of the sordid human lot without any hope of change.

As we saw in the previous chapter, The Waste Land is grounded in a sense of personal isolation, and the prison of the self is reinforced by one's inability to express oneself or gain the understanding of another. That said, there is no shortage of human love, and certainly no shortage of sexual intercourse, in the poem. What we perceive behind this activity, however, is that it brings no real sense of union to those who engage in it. In failing to attain anything more from human love than the momentary gratification of their sexual urges, Eliot's men and women are even more isolated than before, for they have pursued transcendence in human relationships without attaining anything more than a passing sense of release.

At the heart of the poem, there is the briefest of moments when some transcendence might have been possible. It occurs in what Moody calls "an intense moment of passion, ecstatic or terrible."(Moody, Poet, 79) It is not related in the present tense, but recalled in the memory of a past action that comes to mind in its repetition in the present:

You gave me Hyacinths first a year ago;  
 They called me the hyacinth girl.  
 - Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,  
 Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not

Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
 Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,  
 Looking into the heart of light, the silence. (35-41)

We must, as readers, pay close attention to who actually says these lines. The first two are said by the woman, who recalls another gift of hyacinths, a year previously. The remainder are said, or thought, by her partner, who remembers how he felt on that previous occasion, his memory jogged by the repetition of the original act. We can deduce from his thoughts that he was unable to do anything at that point, experiencing a state of emotional paralysis that made action impossible. In Craig Raine's words, Eliot is "conjuring an experience which has been tragically missed – something from the realm of might-have-been, a hypothesis of happiness." (Clarke 405) The recollected moment is now part of the man's consciousness, but he is conscious of it as something that has passed, as Moody notes:

The experience must be immediate and wholly possessing. To be conscious of it is to be conscious of being outside it. What one must be aware of, then, is the loss of the experience; and the memory of it, together with the ideal of ultimate transcendence, must become a torment to the conscious soul, making its actual life appear a desolate waste. The hyacinth garden, full of flowers, wet after rain, turns to dust. (Moody, Poet, 82)

At the moment when he saw his partner, her hair wet and her arms full of flowers, the man received some transcendent insight that raised their relationship to a higher level, a promise of something truly unique. The ordinary levels of human interaction were momentarily transcended, and a moment of untainted communion took their place. Shelley would see this as the moment where "another's nerves should vibrate to our own" (Shelley 473), and the essence of love is revealed. Eliot's man, however, is stunned into inactivity by what he experiences and, on a physical plane, the moment passes.<sup>10</sup> This moment is at the very core of The Waste Land, and much of the pain in the poem stems from the inability of its people to react to this situation in the manner that would make this transcendence more permanent, as Scofield writes:

<sup>10</sup> The 'garden' motif recurs throughout Eliot's poetry, in 'Dans Le Restaurant', The Waste Land, 'Ash-Wednesday', and the short poem 'New Hampshire', later reworked into the rose-garden of 'Burnt Norton'. As Northrop Frye observes, the image possesses an Edenic quality "associated with childhood, with spring flowers and rains, with a young girl, and with innocence – or at least leaving it is associated with guilt." (Frye 53)

It is a moment of remembered passion, and of passion present in the speaking, a passion which is a mystery poised between emptiness and fullness, between failure and fulfilment. [...] It is the momentary glimpse of something central and formative. (Scofield 111)

As readers, we do not know what happens between the couple after this moment, as the poem is taken up by the voice of Madame Sostotris with her tarot pack. One possible course of interpretation among many would be to assume that the man and the woman, on their return from the garden, engaged in sexual intercourse. To do this, however, would have been to bring their love down to a physical level, which is not the same as attaining the spiritual elevation that Shelley's essay holds at its centre. To have moved from the hyacinth garden to the bedroom is to have travelled in the wrong direction.

We see another example of failed union in the chess-playing couple of Part II. Whereas the man of Part I was unable to speak after his transcendent experience, this couple struggle to communicate at any level. In the words of Moody, they "suffer being terribly alone together." (Moody, *Poet*, 85) The hyacinth girl, a symbol of purity, has been replaced by a neurotic woman who peppers the air with questions that her partner leaves unanswered:

"Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.  
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?  
I never know what you are thinking. Think." (112-14)

Although he does not answer the woman's questions, the man's 'replies' are known to us as readers because they are in his thoughts. In the same sense that we know how the man of Part I felt on his return from the garden, we know how this man would respond to the questions of his partner, if he could bring himself to speak to her.<sup>11</sup> He thinks "we are in rats' alley / Where the dead men lost their bones", a far cry from the Edenic setting in which the man of Part I first offered hyacinths to the object of his love. As Gregory Jay observes, this later couple represent the breakdown of Romantic love:

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<sup>11</sup> The rush of questions and commands in the woman's speech do not really give any time for a reply before moving on to the next question. She is not really addressing the man in a fashion that gives him the opportunity to respond, even if he wants to do so. In the surviving recording of his reading this poem, Eliot reads these three lines quickly, and with only minimal pausing for punctuation.

The failure of romanticism to find in human experiences the sublime it projects as lost also pervades the disharmony of the nervous couple in the subsequent lines of "A Game of Chess." As the opening section dwelled upon the femme fatale, this conversation, or lack of one, indicates the concurrent absence of the saving woman who provides access to life, creation, presence, and the Absolute. (Jay 144)

Whereas the couple of Part I look back on a faint trace of missed transcendence, something has gone gravely wrong with the chess-playing pair, and Eliot seems to suggest that it originates with the corruption of love by sexual drives. The room in which the unhappy couple sit is decorated with scenes from past cultures, and Eliot singles out one particular tale for reference:

Above the antique mantel was displayed  
As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene  
The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king  
So rudely forced       (97-100)<sup>12</sup>

Has the woman here been "rudely forced"? While we can only conjecture the reasons for her condition, something has certainly happened here that has closed off the potential for communion and replaced it with pained isolation.<sup>13</sup> Surely this couple did not deliberately set out to make each other so unhappy, so the possibility arises that their current state results from their having pursued happiness in physical relations, as opposed to seeking a higher, spiritual union. What remains, in their

<sup>12</sup> Eliot's own note directs the reader to the tale of Philomela in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* VI, 412-677.

<sup>13</sup> Whilst we should not read the chess-playing couple as the same couple who returned from the hyacinth garden in Part I, there are some intriguing textual echoes that connect the two sets of lovers. In the manuscript of Part II, Eliot originally had the man respond to his partner's questions as follows:

"Do you know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember  
"Nothing?"

I remember

The hyacinth garden. Those are pearls that were his eyes, yes!

"Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?"

(TWL 19)

The reference to the hyacinth garden was removed from the final version. Gregory Jay proposes that Eliot may have felt that "having his speaker recall that former ecstasy here would be too obvious an irony" (Jay 145). The woman's questions, however, echoing as they do the man's memories of his state of spiritual paralysis, serve to draw our attention back to the earlier moment. In her questions we can see a connection with a man who did *know* and *see* nothing, temporarily rendered inactive by the intensity of his transcendent vision. Significantly, the man of Part I "could not speak" either, something very much in evidence in the reticent chess-player of Part II. Brooker and Bentley, in their reading of the poem, stress the references to hair in the two women, wet in Part I, spread out "to fiery points" here and potentially loose as the woman walks the street. To employ this textual echo, as opposed to a direct reference can be seen as Eliot's way of highlighting the contrasting states of love in the poem, from the trace of spiritual transcendence of Part I to the claustrophobic horror of Part II.

reduced state, is the troubling sense of something that has been missed, a moment when they *did* understand each other, far removed from their current situation, in which “the ivory men make company between us”(TWL 19).

At some point in the past, the chess players may have experienced for the briefest of moments the Shelleyan goal of communion. They have not, however, acted on this experience in the necessary fashion to attain true transcendence. As a result, they are left inconsolable, with nothing but sexuality to fill the void left by something greater. As Moody notes, “Ecstasy annihilates ordinary sense, and afterwards it is the desolation which persists.”(Moody, Tracing, 118) Rather than attain a condition of continued ecstasy, these people have found only the brief flush of rapture and now feel their everyday condition to be intolerable in comparison. Even before his conversion, Eliot had found this sense of simultaneous rapture and pain in the work of the French and Russian novelists of the nineteenth century. In a review entitled ‘Beyle and Balzac’, written in 1919, he noted their understanding of “the awful separation between potential passion and any actualization possible in life”, and their sense of “the indestructible barriers between one human being and another.”(Cited in Brooker, Placing 15)<sup>14</sup>

Whilst The Waste Land is a poem that deals with more than the unhappy marriage of Thomas and Vivienne Eliot, its frequent representations of the failure of human love to achieve lasting transcendence, and the pain that results from this failure, owe much to the state of Eliot’s marriage at the time of its composition. Although he was not to separate from Vivienne until 1932, a sense of distance between the pair had been evident almost from the start of their marriage. Vivienne’s constant ill health and nervous problems, coupled with Eliot’s noted distaste for the sexual act, made their lives together a trying experience.<sup>15</sup> In marrying Vivienne, Eliot had gone against the wishes of his family, and at the same time cut himself off from the

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<sup>14</sup> Eliot’s article was a review of George Saintsbury’s A History of the French Novel to the Close of the Nineteenth Century (Vol.2) and appeared in Athenaeum on 30 May 1919.

<sup>15</sup> Eliot’s attitude towards sexual intercourse is extremely complex. In Lyndall Gordon’s view Eliot’s religious background is formative in this respect. His father described sex as “nastiness”. In the suppressed poem ‘Ode’ (Cited in Chapter One) the aftermath of the sexual act is depicted in terms of disgust. However, we must set alongside these Eliot’s letters from Paris, detailing his desire to be rid of his virginity, and his lewd ‘King Bolo’ verses, in which he certainly gives free rein to his erotic nature.

relative stability of an academic career in the United States, opting instead for the insecurity of living by his pen in London. Feeling isolated and anxious, the nervous collapse which prompted his trips to Margate and Lausanne, where the fragments of The Waste Land came to assume their final form, can be attributed as much to his marriage as his work.<sup>16</sup> It is almost impossible not to see Part II as a portrait of the Eliots at the point at which both of them realised that their marriage would offer nothing but intensified isolation. Writing in 1915, Bertrand Russell identified the distance that was already present:

She is light, a little vulgar, adventurous, full of life [...] He is exquisite and listless; she says she married him to stimulate him, but finds she can't do it. Obviously he married in order to be stimulated. I think she will soon be tired of him. He is ashamed of his marriage, and very grateful if one is kind to her. (Russell 45)<sup>17</sup>

Russell, of course, was a far from neutral observer of the collapse of the Eliot's marriage. Carole Seymour-Jones, in her recent biography of Vivienne Eliot, charts Russell's seduction of Eliot's wife, noting that "Vivien was easy prey for the fickle and predatory Russell, a man with a long history of broken relationships." (Seymour-Jones 92-3)<sup>18</sup> Russell's observation, however, pinpoints the failure of either party to be 'stimulated' by each other into anything other than pained silence. It is worth noting that the line "The ivory men make company between us" was excised from the poem at Vivienne's request. Interestingly, amid

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<sup>16</sup> Eliot's collapse occurred immediately after his mother's return to America. Her visit had been a great strain on him, coming as it did after months of caring for Vivienne, who was suffering a variety of illnesses, both physical and nervous. By September 1921 he was experiencing "severe headaches, which seem to have been the symptoms of acute mental distress" (Ackroyd 113). The specialist he consulted advised a break of at least three months. His staff card at Lloyds Bank gives 'nervous breakdown' as the reason for his leave of absence. Eliot travelled down to Margate on 22<sup>nd</sup> October.

<sup>17</sup> Russell's impression of the couple seems at odds with the view that Eliot gave to his father in a letter of July of the same year:

Now that we have been married a month, I am convinced that she has been the one person for me. She has everything to give that I want, and she gives it. I owe her everything. (Letters 110)

However, subsequent events were to prove Eliot's view of the marriage to be an attempt to convince other people, and himself, of its success. Observers of the Eliots' marriage can sometimes give us a better view of it than the two parties.

<sup>18</sup> Russell was undoubtedly supportive of the couple after their marriage, giving Eliot some £3,000 in debentures, and having them live at his London flat. Although he described his treatment of them as 'paternalistic', there is little doubt that he seduced Vivienne during this time. Whether Eliot only uncovered their infidelity some time after the event or was aware of it from the outset, as Seymour-Jones claims, remains unclear.

many other oblique references to her unhappy marriage, this single reference to a game of chess was to prove the most painful.

The debased nature of human sexuality, and the extent to which it marks a falling away from any spiritual ideal of love is further developed in Part II through the conversation in the pub. This snatch of overheard monologue recounts a tale of a woman already “antique” at the age of thirty-one after a series of pregnancies and abortions who is in danger of losing her husband to a far from well-meaning friend:

“and think of poor Albert,  
He’s been in the army four years, he wants a good time,  
And if you don’t give it him, there’s others will, I said.  
Oh is there, she said. Something o’that, I said.” (147-51)

The corrosive aspect of sexuality is embodied in the plight of the woman. Her husband cannot bear to look at her, let alone contemplate sexual intimacy, and yet the root cause of this is the result of that very intimacy, “It’s them pills I took to bring it off, she said / (She’s had five already, and nearly died of young George)” (159-60). Her ‘friend’ blames her for this state of affairs while simultaneously putting herself forward as an alternative should Albert not find his wife appealing enough on his return from the war.

This view of sexuality persists in Part III. Opening on the banks of the River Thames, the nymphs of Spenser’s poetry have been replaced by other women, abandoned by “the loitering heirs of city directors” who have “left no addresses” on their departure. There is no transcendent quality to be gained in the sexual act, only an inevitable glimpse of human decay, as the reworking of Marvell’s lines from ‘To His Coy Mistress’ makes clear:

But at my back in a cold blast I hear  
The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear. (185-6)<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Marvell’s lines are “But at my back I always hear / Time’s winged chariot hurrying near”. Eliot amplifies the hint of mortality found in Marvell to stress the connection between sexual congress and human decay in his poem. In Grover Smith’s words, “Love and Death gravitate together in Eliot’s own psyche.” (Smith, Memory 68)

The empty nature of sexuality without any transcendent element is evoked in the liaison between the typist and the “young man carbuncular”, an encounter bereft of emotional validation. The act is viewed as being no more than the gratification of a need on the man’s side, and is met with resigned indifference on the part of the woman. The man’s caresses are “unreproved, if undesired”(238) and the “exploring hands encounter no defence”(240). Sexual congress carries with it no emotional significance, but is performed out of a sense of carnal habit. When the man leaves, the woman is “hardly aware of her departed lover” and immediately “puts a record on the gramophone” to stifle the “half-formed thought” that contains the misery of her state. The contrast with the maiden’s distress found in Goldsmith’s The Vicar of Wakefield shows the modern woman’s reluctance to admit that there is any moral or spiritual significance in the sexual act. In the words of Brooker and Bentley, the meeting:

dramatizes the failure of sex to create even a temporary relationship beyond the merely physical plane. [...] It is the form of love without the function of love. (Brooker and Bentley 56)

Nowhere is the failure of love to do anything more than gratify the sexual urge more evident than in the words of the Thames daughters towards the close of Part III. Their detached recollections of occasions like the one at Richmond, where “I raised my knees / Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe” contain no sign of them expecting anything else from their relations. There is not even the vaguest trace of any higher level of human love in the minds of these women:

“After the event  
He wept. He promised “a new start.”  
I made no comment. What should I resent?”(297-9)

Such is the debased nature of love in this woman’s mind that she doesn’t have any sense of what she might be missing. Her violation is not so much a sin as a recognised condition of reality. There is little hope of a ‘new start’ in her life, only more of the same. As F. R. Leavis noted, “sex here is sterile, breeding not life and fulfilment but disgust, accidia, and unanswerable questions.”(Leavis, Bearings, 72)

In terms of the poem's treatment of love, however, 'The Fire Sermon' does see The Waste Land reaching its lowest point, and the faint trace of a solution to its vision of painful isolation can be glimpsed. It enters the poem in the words of St Augustine, describing his arrival in Carthage. In closing Part III with these words, Eliot takes the reader back to another city of carnal abandon that failed, in the long-term, to satisfy an emotional need:

To Carthage then I came, where there sang all around me in my ears a cauldron of unholy loves. I loved not yet, yet I loved to love, and out of a deep-seated want, I hated myself for wanting not. I sought what I might love, in love with loving, and safety I hated, hating a way without snares. (Augustine, cited in Hay, Negative, 62)

This is the testimony of a man seeking a return of his love and finding only momentary satisfaction in lust. Augustine recalls that his abandonment in human sexuality did not fill the void within him that his yearning for love had served to create and that this was only to be met in the love of God. This passage, lamenting the gap between the human and the inherently divine, also provided Shelley with the epigraph to 'Alastor' – another case of unsuccessful searching for emotional union.<sup>20</sup> This reference brings together Shelley's potentially transcendent quest for human love and Eliot's vision of confused sexuality and frustrated emotion. The Waste Land follows Shelley's route to transcendence via human relations, and relates its failure in a modern setting.

With the benefit of critical hindsight, it is possible to read The Waste Land as a poem of latent Christian thought, standing as the Inferno in Eliot's own Divine Comedy.<sup>21</sup> To read Eliot's citation of Augustine as an appeal to a divine element in love may well be to stress the point too much, but if it does not show an awareness of the need for such an element, it does at least recognise the failure of purely human contact to satisfy all of our emotional needs. As Donald Childs notes, "the experience of the void in the middle of human relations leads [...] to a glimpse of something other and beyond." (Childs 117) It is God whom Eliot invokes to pluck

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<sup>20</sup> 'Alastor' has as its epigraph Augustine's words "*Nondum amabam, et amare amabam, quaerebam quid amarem, amans amare*" (Shelley 70).

<sup>21</sup> See Chapter One, footnote 46.

him out of the “burning” of human lust. In the works that followed The Waste Land, a new element would be introduced into his view of human relations, and he would come to re-value human love in a divine perspective. In a 1928 letter to Paul Elmer More he wrote that “only Christianity helps to reconcile me to life, which is otherwise disgusting.”(Cited in Schuchard, Angel 152) To make human love an element of the love of God, however, is crucially distinct from making human love inherently divine, as Shelley strove to do in ‘Epipsychidion’, a poem I will examine here as a contrast to Eliot’s later thought.

### **‘Epipsychidion’: Love as Religion**

Shelley projects onto human love an aspect of religious transcendence, but stops short in his atheism of invoking any truly ‘divine’ origin for his emotions. In seeking love, we seek an ideal of understanding and communion that will, in Platonic terms, make us whole. Love is the driving force in human action because in seeking it we seek something greater than our individual selves, something into which we can be absorbed. What soon becomes evident, however, is that this search will end in disappointment on the human level as we find, like the Maniac, that there has not been the understanding we sought in a relationship, and are left with the pain of isolation. Rather than make us whole, Shelley’s highly idealised love retains the power to destroy those who abandon all to its pursuit. As Steve Ellis notes, “There are no gradations on the ascent into ‘Love’s rare Universe’, but one headlong rush; and the hero is burnt up in the process.”(Ellis 10)

The impossibility of attaining the Shelleyan ideal is best exemplified in the late poem ‘Epipsychidion’. With its title translating as ‘little soul’, it shows clear traces of Shelley’s Platonism, but the language employed is often religious in tone, and Shelley frequently finds his words inadequate – as though the consuming brilliance of his emotions had outstripped his ability to treat them.<sup>22</sup> The earthly woman with whom the poet is enamoured is, like Dante’s Beatrice, gesturing toward the divine,

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<sup>22</sup> In the essay ‘On Love’, Shelley was aware of the potential shortcomings of language when relating the essence of his ideal. A note on the manuscript finds him writing, “These words are inefficient and metaphorical – Most words so – No help” (Shelley 474).

but the atheistic Shelley cannot, or will not, follow her into that realm, and thus stops short at the limits of his human range.<sup>23</sup>

Early references to Emily in the poem present her as something hidden from the poet's view – "Veiled Glory of this lampless Universe! / Thou Moon beyond the clouds!"(26-7) As Wasserman has noted, frequent references to penetration in the poem point toward a desire to escape the self and enter another as a remedy for solipsistic individualism.<sup>24</sup> Language is engaged in a constantly ebbing and flowing struggle to give voice to emotions. It is not just the poet's language that is rendered ineffective by the vision of love, however. His very being is close to being consumed by the feelings Emily ignites within him. Later lines refer to her having "lured me towards sweet Death"(73) in an echo of 'Alastor's closing lines, but this is not presented as the end of human life so much as an entrance into a greater, eternal, union:

See where she stands! a mortal shape indued  
With love and life and light and deity,  
And motion which may change but cannot die;  
An image of some bright Eternity;  
A shadow of some golden dream; (112-16)

In the person of this woman, the poet glimpses something beyond the human realm, and senses that his human love is not in itself an adequate receptacle for the emotions he feels for her. As Wasserman observes, Emily is "the incarnate soul" that "unites the perfection of the transcendent and the earthly and therefore can raise the mortal state to its most nearly ideal condition."(Wasserman 425) The address "Spouse! Sister! Angel!"(130) encapsulates perfectly the crisis of language that the poem's subject has initiated. What is worshipped here is the incarnation of a long-cherished ideal, finally located (or believed to have been located) in the physical world:

For in the fields of immortality  
My spirit should have worshipped thine,

<sup>23</sup> The Dantean aspects of 'Epipsychidion' will be examined in more detail in the next chapter.

<sup>24</sup> "The power to pierce and penetrate to the heart of another would be frustrated by any confinement within the circle of the self or within other limiting conditions." (Wasserman 445)

A divine presence in a place divine; (133-5)

The religious language employed here is fascinating.<sup>25</sup> It blends the 'Lady' of 'Julian and Maddalo' with the visionary 'maiden' of 'Alastor', and finds the poet projecting his ideal of love onto an earthly subject who, in the process, assumes traces of the divine. Opening his essay 'On Love', Shelley asks a crucial question:

What is Love? – Ask him who lives what is life; as him who adores what is God. (Shelley 473)

We cannot, by this reckoning, 'know' what love is, but we can, and do, feel it as the awakening within us of our very highest sensibilities, coupled with an awareness that these are being directed onto something that exceeds them, which we must pursue.

When the state of union that the poet seeks is attained, language will cease to be relevant to the couple, as their understanding will have reached a point that renders words unnecessary. The imagery here is reminiscent of the state described in 'On Love':

And we will talk, until thought's melody  
Become too sweet for utterance, and it die  
In words, to live again in looks, which dart  
With thrilling tone into the voiceless heart,  
Harmonizing silence without a sound. (560-4)

However, at this very point, with the ideal vision of union before him, the poet is returned to his current state, and the 'real' situation reasserts itself. He sees that the perfect vision described is contained within a poetic proposition to his lady. He cannot credit her with the same feelings unless she tells him so herself, and even then the possibility of misunderstanding, which destroyed the Maniac of 'Julian and Maddalo', is still present. Summoning all his poetic energies in a final, all-enveloping image of union, he is overcome both by the poetic effort of his lines and by the enormous quantity of emotional energy he invests in them:

<sup>25</sup> Wasserman sees 'Epipsychidion' as Shelley's attempt to free the Biblical 'Song of Songs' from the religious context that he found unacceptable. The blending of religious and emotional imagery reveals the extent to which Shelley, although atheistic, was versed in Biblical texts.

One hope within two wills, one will beneath  
 Two overshadowing minds, one life, one death,  
 One Heaven, one Hell, one immortality,  
 And one annihilation. Woe is me!  
 The winged words on which my soul would pierce  
 Into the height of love's rare Universe,  
 Are chains of lead around its flight of fire. –  
 I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire! (584-91)

In these remarkable lines, described by Steve Ellis as “a magnificent rhetorical jumble [...] comprising an effort to find something large enough to define a love that would outweigh everything”(Ellis 12), Shelley’s concept of love draws closest to assuming a religious state. It is something that outstrips language, and which holds the promise of a transcendence of our individual consciousness into something greater. Although, as we shall see in the next chapter, he refuses to have love originate with God, as Dante had done, Shelley wants to make love inherently divine, the embodiment of all that is good in our nature, and all that our finer qualities impel us towards. However, in seeking such a union in a human relationship, we risk pain and disappointment as our hopes are not reciprocated in equal measure, and in shunning all relationships to pursue the ideal of love we resign ourselves to a spiritual death apart from all human society in isolation. Shelley’s love holds out the promise of a sublime ‘annihilation’ but this can also become an extinction of the self – always seeking at the limits of this world for what the Christian believes can only be found in the next.

As Carlos Baker notes, Shelley’s concept of love “has become merged with the metaphysical concept of the ‘One’ – that supreme power to which all that is good is born, and to which all that is best aspires to return.”(Ridenour 68) In the realm of human feelings, the likelihood of disappointment is greater, and the unifying vision becomes harder to trace. As Shelley himself noted, “I have everywhere sought, and have found only repulse and disappointment.”(Shelley 473) In The Waste Land, Eliot had found a similar ‘disappointment’ in human relations. With the benefit of his Christian faith, however, he was able to find a transfigured place for human love in a greater scheme. The route by which he was able to do this follows the course of his religious development, from renunciation to accommodation and, eventually, to transcendence.

### Renunciation or Transcendence?

Eliot's acknowledgement of our need for a divine element to raise our human love above carnal gratification is set down most forcibly in his 1929 essay on Dante, and will be examined in the next chapter. The Waste Land supports the view expressed in that essay that "the love of man and woman [...] is only explained and made reasonable by the higher love, or else is simply the coupling of animals"(SE 274) by showing the pain that results from love affairs conducted on a purely carnal level. It also illustrates, however, that while some people have simply given in to their reduced state, like the typist or the Thames daughters, others can still sense the lack of something in their relations, and as such cannot wholly believe that love finds its end in human sexuality. One of these people is the man who underwent some experience in the hyacinth garden, and who is still dwelling on this a year or more later, trying to see the ideal that his partner once represented.

As the opening chapter of this study made clear, Eliot's faith was initially of a profoundly renunciatory nature. In the period around his conversion, there could be no accommodation of past attachments, only rejection of them. Initially, this manifested itself in a total repudiation of human love, both in Eliot's life and his poetry, denying it even the barest trace of divinity. As his unhappy marriage slipped towards separation, Eliot came to feel that human attachments prevented the soul from attaining its divine goal. With extraordinary clairvoyance, Virginia Woolf saw this belief in Eliot after one such crisis in his marriage. In a letter to Roger Fry, from May 1923, she wrote:

That strange figure Eliot dined here last night. I feel that he has taken the veil, or whatever monks do. He is quite calm again, Mrs Eliot has almost died at times in the past month. Tom, though infinitely considerate, is perfectly detached. His cell is, I'm sure, a very lofty one, but a little chilly. (Woolf, Letters 167)

In the first major poem to follow his conversion, 'Ash-Wednesday', Eliot counts human attachments as one of the things that he "does not wish to wish" in his new

life.<sup>26</sup> In Part II of the poem, he proffers “my deeds to oblivion, and my love / To the posterity of the desert” while the leopards sit under a juniper tree, having picked his bones clean of any tainted flesh.<sup>27</sup> In the prayer to the Lady of silences that follows, Eliot asks to be admitted to a rose garden which stands as a metaphor for the religious state of grace:

The single Rose  
Is now the Garden  
Where all loves end

Once again, a flower is associated with human love. In this instance it is not the hyacinth but the rose, the archetypal symbol of romantic love. The rose garden that Eliot wishes to locate, however, is not a human setting (although the image will be reprised as the rose garden of ‘Burnt Norton’) but the divine rose of Heaven (as seen in Dante’s Paradiso). Eliot seeks deliverance from love, believing that he will find no happiness in it. It has brought only pain, whatever its course:

Terminate torment  
Of love unsatisfied  
The greater torment  
Of love satisfied

Unsatisfied love is the Shelleyan quest for the unattainable antitype, carried out in human terms. The result of this is the plight of the Maniac in ‘Julian and Maddalo’. Here, Eliot puts forward another torment, that of love that is, in a human sense, satisfied. In this line, our attention is directed back to the people of The Waste Land, who have ‘satisfied’ love in their sexual union but instead of finding transcendence are left with only the troubling thought of some vague, higher union which was briefly possible. For Eliot, religious faith, when it reaches its goal, enables us to move beyond love, entering “the Garden / Where all love ends”.

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<sup>26</sup> Lyndall Gordon notes that Eliot took a vow of celibacy in March 1928, at the time when the separate poems that were to make up ‘Ash-Wednesday’ were coming together (Gordon 292).

<sup>27</sup> Love, in Dante’s Divine Comedy, which influenced ‘Ash-Wednesday’ greatly, was one of the sins of the leopard. In her essay on the poem, Lois A. Cuddy notes that whereas Dante meets a leopard representing lust, a lion (pride) and a she-wolf (covetousness) in the Inferno, Eliot clearly felt that his major problem was lust as he meets three leopards. See Bagchee 68-99.

'Ash-Wednesday' is a poem of purgatorial ascent, in which the journey of the soul towards God is accompanied by the setting aside of past attachments. This process is not, however, wholly free from the temptation to relapse into old ways. In Part III a moment of distraction is brought on by the remembered music of an antique flute:

Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown,  
Lilac and brown hair;  
Distraction, music of the flute, stops and steps of the mind  
over the third stair

In this sudden recollection of a woman's hair, we may hear echoes of Eliot's earlier female figures, the arms "downed with light brown hair" of Prufrock's reveries, the woman weaving the sunlight into her hair in 'La Figlia Che Piange' or the women's hair of The Waste Land, whether wet, brushed or loose. The colour lilac takes us back to the girl of 'Dans le Restaurant' with her primulas, or the hyacinth girl. In bringing this image into his poem as a distraction, Eliot makes the human relations that it invokes into things to be renounced en route to his divine end.

Ronald Schuchard describes 'Ash-Wednesday' as being in part "the personal drama of a soul struggling with desire, memory, and will while pursuing the way." (Schuchard, Angel 155) Whilst 'Ash-Wednesday' is a poem founded on a theory of renunciation, by the time of its appearance Eliot was already moving towards a viewpoint that posited a transcendent relocation of human attachments into a divine order, rather than a wholesale rejection of all that has gone before. If we look again at the prayer of Part II we can see a dual meaning to the plea to be shown "the Garden / Where all love ends". To find the 'end' of love can mean either the climax of the emotion, the point at which no further feeling is possible or desired, or the 'end' as the point towards which the emotion guides us. If we read the prayer in the light of the latter interpretation then Eliot is not asking to be relieved from human love at all, but to be shown the transcendent point towards which human emotions so faintly gesture.

The Dantean model for Eliot's revised theory of love will be examined in the next chapter. His belief in some greater union behind human relations can be clearly

seen in his essay on Charles Baudelaire, which appeared in the same year as 'Ash-Wednesday' and, I feel, supports my reading of Part II of that poem. Eliot asserts that the true importance of his subject is to be found in his life as much as his work. This may seem a strange claim to make on the behalf of a figure seemingly so immoral, but Eliot believes his subject was engaged in a lifelong quest. "The true claim of Baudelaire as an artist," he writes, is that "he was searching for a form of life." (SE 424) Eliot sees Baudelaire's poetry and life as an attempt to examine the true nature of human desires. In the moral confusion of his excessive sexual liberty a deeper need arises:

[In Baudelaire's work] there is all the romantic idea, but something more: the reaching out towards something which cannot be had *in*, but which may be had partly *through*, personal relations. Indeed, in much romantic poetry the sadness is due to the exploitation of the fact that no human relations are adequate to human desires, but also to the disbelief in any further object for human desires than that which, being human, fails to satisfy them. (SE 428)

Eliot sees behind the frantic human congress of Baudelaire's Paris the faint but persistent realisation that we need something we do not obtain in our sexual relations. The Romantics, in their pronouncements, denied the possibility of any divine love but still found themselves positing emotional and intellectual ideals in its place as over-arching 'goals' that human love could attain. What we find in Baudelaire, according to Eliot, is the painful admittance that the divine state exists, but that our human relations, shorn of any religious context, offer us no route towards attaining it. Eliot believes that his subject had "a restricted vision" and that, as a result:

[t]here is for him a gap between human love and divine love. His human love is definite and positive, his divine love vague and uncertain: hence his insistence upon the evil of love, hence his constant vituperations of the female. (SE 429)

Baudelaire could not make the connection between a divine love he did not know and a human love that caused pain in its constant failure to meet the needs invested in it. As a result, human love becomes degraded and corrupt, vainly pursuing its carnal ends and moving further away from the transcendent as its energies are wrongly directed. For Eliot, whose early poetry saw his own 'vituperations of the

female', this downward movement into depravity is actually evidence of Baudelaire's latent religious nature for, as he argues, in blaspheming we implicitly show our belief in something to blaspheme against.<sup>28</sup> Human love, although a misguided end in itself can, therefore, be seen as acknowledging at some level our profound need of the love of God. Moody sums up Eliot's attempt to reconcile human and divine love thus:

Women are still closely associated with this new love, which turns out to be after all the repressed love of women returned in a new form, one in which women are not themselves the object of love, but are necessary intermediaries. (Moody, Tracing 187)

I do not agree with Moody's claim that Eliot's religious love arises out of the repression of his human emotions. I would contend, rather, that Eliot feels the need initially to repress love of women because it distracts him from his divine goal. What I agree with in Moody's summary is that Eliot's final view of the situation was not one of renunciation but accommodation; divine love is glimpsed, albeit faintly, *through* human love. Women are, therefore, intermediaries; something found in 'Ash-Wednesday' in the prayers to the 'Lady' or 'veiled sister' who retains a trace of the human although identifiable within the poem's religious framework as Mary herself.

In her essay 'Substitutes for Religion in the Early Poetry of T. S. Eliot', Jewel Spears Brooker locates within The Waste Land's sexual inferno an attempt, albeit doomed to ultimate failure, to overcome emotional isolation. Writing on the sexual element of the poem, and the sexual implications of the Grail myth from which it derives much of its imagery, she notes:

It includes by definition at least temporary transcendence of physical separateness [...] Sex is one way of overcoming brokenness, of retying or rebinding fragments into a whole. (Brooker Placing 15)<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See footnote 7 of this chapter for reference to Eliot's treatment of women in his early poetry.

<sup>29</sup> Brooker's essay provides a useful reading of love as a substitute for religious feeling in Eliot's earlier work, and draws a link between the failure of Eliot's marriage and his religious awakening. Realising that marriage did not offer the 'binding' element that he sought to give his life meaning, Eliot was led to "a reevaluation of eros, and indeed, of all human feelings." (Brooker, Placing 15)

Eliot's essay on Baudelaire is a work that sees him moving towards a Christian viewpoint, integrating his past influences into a new way of thinking. The vision of love that dominated The Waste Land, of tired sexual activity yielding only disillusionment and unfulfilled yearning, is now shown to be a stage on the route to a divine love that reconciles the human with a higher ideal. In the divine vision our human relationships are fulfilled and transcended, whereas on the purely human level we are engaged in a fruitless search, as Eliot had concluded when lecturing on the metaphysical poets at Cambridge in 1926. Although referring directly to Donne, the following passage sums up his thought on the Romantic view of love:

The conception of the ecstasy of union between two souls is not only philosophically crude but emotionally limiting. The expression of love as contemplation of the beloved object [...] is the contemplation of absolute beauty and goodness partly revealed through a limited though delightful human object. What is there for Donne? The union in ecstasy is complete, is final; and two human beings, needing nothing beyond each other, rest on their emotion of enjoyment. But emotion cannot rest; desire must expand, or it will shrink. Donne, the modern man, is imprisoned in the embrace of his own feelings. There is little suggestion of adoration, of worship. An attitude like that of Donne [...] leads in fact to most of modern literature; for whether you seek the Absolute in marriage, adultery or debauchery, it is all one – you are seeking in the wrong place. (Varieties 114-15)

The limitations of human love are addressed by Eliot in The Cocktail Party, in the breakdown and subsequent analysis of Edward's affair with Celia. In conversation, Edward hears that Peter is emotionally linked with Celia. Peter sees her as one with whom he had felt a degree of affinity. "The point is, I thought we had a great deal in common," he tells Edward, "And I think she thought so too." (CP 35) This sentence points toward a relationship in which a trace of communion has been found, but is accompanied by a degree of assumption on the part of one party, wishing to believe that the other feels the same way as he does.<sup>30</sup> Peter tells of his confusion at the way in which Celia seems to have drifted away from him, little suspecting that Edward is in part the cause of this, and of the isolation he feels. Edward's advice, that Peter has been 'lucky' in having a relationship end before it became routine, has an empty ring:

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<sup>30</sup> We have already seen this desire to control the way another person 'feels' being expressed in Eliot's early poem 'La Figlia Che Piange'.



them that they have perceived. "I want to understand you," Celia replies, but understanding will not come from its being desired, it can only come from genuine communion, which the two are destined not to share. As the scene ends, Celia expresses the disappointed realisation that her relationship with Edward was never really what she thought it to be:

Celia. I see you as a person whom I never saw before.  
 The man I saw before, he was only a projection –  
 I see that now – of something that I wanted –  
 No, not *wanted* – something I aspired to –  
 Something that I desperately wanted to exist.  
 It must happen somewhere – but what, and where is it? (CP 59)

Celia later recounts these thoughts in her meeting with Reilly. The language in this meeting brings into play the sense of solitude and isolation that dominated Shelley's thought on human relationships. Celia speaks of having "an awareness of solitude" (CP 117) that leaves her seeing relationships in a new light:

Celia. I mean that what has happened has made me aware  
 That I've always been alone. That one always is alone. (CP 118)

This seems a bleak assertion of our condition but, on a human level, Eliot argues that it is essentially correct. Celia goes on to claim that what she feels herself is not a personal disorder but a perception of the wider human state:

Celia. No... it isn't that I *want* to be alone,  
 But that everyone's alone – or so it seems to me.  
 They make noises, and think they are talking to each other;  
 They make faces, and think they understand each other.  
 And I'm sure that they don't. (CP 118)

This is Shelley's personal fear - that we are not understood, and that what we take to be understanding, within a relationship, is actually two people 'missing' each other. Like the Maniac of 'Julian and Maddalo' or the poet of 'Alastor', we seek in the human world someone who mirrors all that we hold dear, and all that we are. Failing to find this person is a crushing blow.

To move beyond the Shelleyan view of human relationships, Eliot introduces a possible reason for Celia's alienation – a sense of sin. This is not necessarily a sense of having acted wrongly oneself, but an indistinct need to atone for something that we do not know. Celia wanted her love for Edward to serve as this atonement, as though by loving another we can counter the sense of wrongdoing:

Celia. And then I found we were only strangers  
 And there had been neither giving nor taking  
 But that we had merely made use of each other  
 Each for his purpose. That's horrible. Can we only love  
 Something created by our own imagination?  
 Are we all in fact unloving and unlovable?  
 Then one *is* alone, and if one is alone  
 Then lover and beloved are equally unreal  
 And the dreamer is no more real than his dreams. (CP 122)<sup>31</sup>

This is the point at which Shelleyan love breaks down. If we seek in the outer world some reflection of what we hold within we fall prey to our illusions, with which we will never be satisfied. We 'use' other people, even with the purest intentions in our minds. When asked how she views Edward now, Celia describes him as "a child who has wandered into a forest"(CP 122), and displays a compassion for him that Reilly opines may be in itself a way of solving her crisis. Compassion, or pity, as Chapter Two of this study has shown, entails thinking of the state of others instead of projecting one's own mental state on to them. It bears the traces of a more religious love that embraces what it finds instead of seeking in people what it believes it needs. On a human level it may not meet our goals exactly, the "treasure I went into the forest to find / And never found, and which was not there / And perhaps is not anywhere?"(CP 122) In changing the focus of our emotional search, however, we may move closer to a greater prize.

Celia's awareness of sin is also a confession of personal inadequacy. She now realises that both she and Edward were engaged in a search that could not yield the result they desired, and that they were wounding each other in this pursuit. Shelley's characters could not admit that their love could result in a painful impasse because they saw it as the very best part of themselves and, in the absence of any

<sup>31</sup> In a review of the play for the Tablet (3<sup>rd</sup> September 1949) Robert Speaight described Celia as one on the threshold of the intolerable discovery – that only sanctity makes sense." (Grant 598)

religious aspect, it assumed a pseudo-divine nature. What Celia comes to realise is that she is seeking in human form something reserved for the divine. Unable to reconcile herself to another round of disappointment and betrayal of the hopes within her, she accepts Reilly's offer of 'another way' - one that requires "the kind of faith that issues from despair" but which holds out the hope of "what you have sought for in the wrong place." (CP 125) Following this route will help her to overcome her feelings of isolation; although still alone in this world, she will avoid "the final desolation / Of solitude in the phantasmal world / Of imagination, shuffling memories and desires." (CP 126) This route is the negative way toward God, as prescribed by St John of the Cross, and a key element of Eliot's religious thought in which the renunciation of the physical world channels the mind into the search for God.

In directing Celia towards God for the fulfilment of her love, Eliot shows how his view of human relations contains the one element that would have validated Shelley's hopes for understanding in another. Our feelings in this world are not sinful, but they will not result in the total communion of which we acutely feel the need. In her love for Edward, Celia was putting into human form the instincts which, unfettered of their human links, direct her towards the divine love that takes up all of our human emotions and subsumes them. In a letter to Geoffrey Faber, Eliot explained The Cocktail Party in the following terms:

There are two primary propositions: (1) nobody understands you but God; (2) all real love is ultimately the love of God. (Eliot, cited in Hay 138)

**'Expanding / Of love beyond desire': *Four Quartets***

In conclusion, I will show how Eliot was able to set out his Christian view of love in Four Quartets and, as opposed to wholly rejecting Shelley's desire for the antitype, show that we can only hope for fulfilment if we propose the existence of something higher than purely human relations.

The Quartets relate the search for, and attainment of, a divine perspective, partly given to us and partly the result of our own careful meditation on the true nature of

our experiences within a higher scheme. Significantly, the first Quartet, 'Burnt Norton' opens in a garden, evoking traces of the hyacinth gardens of Eliot's earlier poetry, with their inhabitants. As in The Waste Land, there is the sense of an experience only partially understood before the bird advises us to leave. This experience, with its mystical overtones, is akin to the one that rendered the man of The Waste Land emotionally frozen, unable to respond in the correct vein to the vision that his partner presented. The important difference here is that Eliot can propose a means by which this tantalising glimpse can be understood. We must attain a divine perspective that orders past experience into the correct pattern, and this can only be the case if we posit the existence of something greater than ourselves behind our lives. "Only in time can the moment in the rose-garden [...] Be remembered; involved with past and future." To possess a sense of divine order is to see beyond our experiences and understand them. The garden is no longer a place of confusion, but of understanding and reconciliation. It is the garden of 'Ash-Wednesday', "where all love ends", and finds its true source.<sup>32</sup>

Although the vision of the rose garden is given to us without our actively seeking it, Eliot's route to faith in Four Quartets is one that follows the negative thought of St John of the Cross, and as such relies upon our recognising the limitations of our own feelings and intellect before we can move towards God. In 'East Coker' he tells us that we must not seek any transcendence in human love, because "love would be love of the wrong thing". Love, like faith and hope, is "all in the waiting" that we must undergo in order to receive God's grace. Shelleyan love, viewed in this light, is love of the wrong thing because, although motivated by high ideals, it seeks something divine in the human world and, as such, will always be disappointed. The essence of love, which Shelley's characters desire so badly, is not to be found in the brief flush of human union, but in the greater scheme of divine grace. "Love", as Eliot concludes in 'East Coker', "is most nearly itself / When here and now cease to matter". As Harry Blamires puts it in his study of Four

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<sup>32</sup> Hugh Kenner noted the connections between the gardens of Eliot's poetry in The Invisible Poet (1960). He remarked that the "rose-garden, for instance, with the passing cloud and the empty pool, corresponds to the Hyacinth garden and the despondent "*Oed' und leer das Meer*," while the "heart of light, the silence" that was glimpsed in the presence of the hyacinth girl is the tainted simulacrum of that light which "is still at the still point of the turning world." (Kenner 262)

Quartets, “Human desire has been shown to be ‘undesirable’, yet its movement is towards that which is unchanging – Love.” (Blamires 40)<sup>33</sup>

Although he regards divine love as the true ‘end’ for human emotion, Eliot does not wholly dismiss human feelings. In ‘The Dry Salvages’ he relocates past attachments and emotions in the transcendent framework, showing that, rather than torment us with the vague promise of something they could not deliver, they actually contained traces of our divine goal. The problem lay in our inability to adequately understand them:

We had the experience but missed the meaning,  
And approach to the meaning restores the experience  
In a different form, beyond any meaning  
We can assign to happiness.

There was nothing inherently wrong with the experience itself, but only with our interpretation, or rather our inability to interpret it. Without a divine perspective, our experiences remain tantalisingly vague, and all we know is that we are missing something, but are unable to identify what we are lacking. Like the figures in Shelley’s poems, we are engaged in a quest without fulfilment, seeking in human relations the divine element that will transform those relations. For Shelley, this search ends in disappointment, rendered more acute by the sense of having missed something. For Eliot, we must move beyond the human dimension in order to fully experience the love of God.

The final Quartet, ‘Little Gidding’ proposes a movement from the human plane onto the divine. Eliot advocates detachment in our human relations, but this is not the same as indifference, as he is at pains to stress. Detachment, rather, is the acknowledgement that we will not find all of our needs met in a human relationship, and that we must look beyond our dealings with other people to see something greater. Significantly, this is something that we often do with hindsight:

This is the use of memory:  
For liberation – not less of love but expanding

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<sup>33</sup> The specifically Dantean elements of this view of human love will be examined in detail in the next chapter.

- Of love beyond desire

Freed from the bonds of the sexual urges that corrupted human love in The Waste Land, the potentially transcendent element of human relationships can again be seen. The feelings that we may have held for other people are not dismissed, but taken up in a greater love and given a meaning that we could not grasp at the time:

See, now they vanish,  
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved  
them,  
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.

It is at this point that the Shelleyan character would find his antitype; not in a human embodiment of his highest aspirations, but in the divine love from which those ideals arise. Human love points us towards this state, and Eliot does not wholly reject it, but advises against burdening it with hopes that it could not fulfil. The quotation from Julian of Norwich, "With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling", tells us that all of our attachments have, if we did but recognise the fact, been motivated by our being 'called' by God. The feelings that we have had were expressions of our desire to regain a state of divine love, and our attempts to find this in human relations, misguided though they may be, were nonetheless genuine expressions of our need. In this sense, Eliot reworks the Shelleyan desire for an ideal into his verse and offers a way in which this ideal could be attained. Shelley, when seeking to define Love, wrote "ask him who adores what is God." (Shelley 473) Eliot would conclude that it is God himself who is the 'end' of human love.

## Chapter Four – The Influence of Dante

The poetry of Dante may be considered the bridge thrown over  
the stream of time, which unites the modern and antient world.  
– Shelley, ‘A Defence of Poetry’

I caught the sudden look of some dead master  
Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled  
Both one and many. – Eliot, ‘Little Gidding’

This chapter will examine the way in which both Shelley and Eliot responded to the work of Dante in their poetry. In their responses we can see the contrast between Eliot’s Christian beliefs and Shelley’s atheism. In his early work, Eliot reiterates many of the problems that Shelley found in his reading of the Divine Comedy and Vita Nuova. In his post-conversion poetry, however, we can see him following Dantean thought to its divine conclusion; something that Shelley, with one possible exception that will be examined later, could not do.

The chapter will begin by looking at Dante’s concept of love, and the way that he subsumes human love into a divine framework as his feelings for Beatrice are transformed into a desire for God’s grace. Referring back to the discussion of the two poets’ treatment of human love, in the previous chapter, we can see how Shelley could not find an adequate focus for love beyond purely human relations. The best example of this is his poem ‘Epipsychidion’, which seeks to restate Dante’s Vita Nuova in earthly terms, but which founders on the realisation that purely human love is unable to fully meet the needs of its poet. The knowledge that human love will not meet our inherently divine yearnings is similarly expressed in Eliot’s poetry up to and including The Waste Land. Only in the later ‘Ash-Wednesday’ and, more satisfyingly, in Four Quartets, can we see Eliot relating human love to divine grace. Reading his 1929 essay on Dante alongside these poems will show how Eliot followed Dante’s thought to a conclusion that Shelley could gesture towards, but not attain.

Moving on from this discussion, the chapter will consider the differing ways in which the two men related to the moral order that Dante set out in the Divine

Comedy. In his later work, Shelley came to draw upon both the Purgatorio and Paradiso greatly, referring to the latter in the 'Defence of Poetry' as "a perpetual hymn of everlasting love" (Shelley 497) and incorporating strong traces of Dante's heavenly imagery into the final act of Prometheus Unbound and the closing stanzas of 'Adonais'.<sup>1</sup> In his earlier work, however, he dwells more on the infernal aspects of Dante's vision, and Dantean echoes in his early poetry are more often indicative of torment and punishment. Reading the content and presentation of the meeting with the Maniac in 'Julian and Maddalo' will help us to see the ways in which the early Shelley relates to the Inferno better than the other parts of Dante's work. In his early work Eliot mirrors this preoccupation with the darker side of Dante, and the testimonies of Prufrock and Gerontion, together with those found in The Waste Land, are of a decidedly infernal nature. In the later poetry, however, Eliot identifies more with Dante's purgatorial scheme, seeing suffering as a step towards purification. The Dantean terza rima passage of 'Little Gidding' will be examined in this light. The chapter will then conclude by examining Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life', seeing in its Dantean echoes the possibility of a late shift in Shelley's own thought towards a similar purgatorial vision. In this unfinished work, we can see Shelley moving towards a revised relation with Dantean thought, and Eliot's praise for the poem shows that he recognised this and sought to make the poem evidence of Shelley's belated awareness of a divine order.

### **Part One - The Dantean Concept of Love**

Dante's work is underscored by the concept of a love that transcends the human dimension. This love is a direct appeal to all that is best in human nature, and acts for the better health of the individual's soul. The most striking aspect of Dante's poetic treatment of love lies in his reconciling human emotions with divine virtues, turning the object of his love into a woman elevated in the midst of the divine, while avoiding any hint of the sacrilegious.

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<sup>1</sup> See Steve Ellis. Dante and English Poetry: Shelley to T. S. Eliot. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1983) for more on the presence of the Paradiso in Shelley's poetry. Richard Harter Fogle's article "John Taaffe's Annotated Copy of *Adonais*" in the Keats-Shelley Journal 17 (1968) 31-52 also notes the Dantean allusions in Shelley's elegy.

From the outset of the Vita Nuova, Beatrice is no ordinary woman to Dante. His recollection of their childhood meeting is immediately placed in context by his referring to her as “the glorious lady”(3).<sup>2</sup> Dante’s life is guided and shaped by Beatrice but, as he notes, this is not a submission to purely carnal passion, but to a force that betters the mind and the soul by its influence:

Although her image that continually abode with me, were Love’s exultancy to master me, nevertheless it was of so noble a virtue that no time did it suffer Love to rule over me without the faithful counsel of reason, in those things where such counsel were useful to hear. (Vita 5)

Love is acting here in the best interests of the lover; it is not the unrestrained and uncontrolled passion that destroys those it seizes, as in the Aeneid, when the unhappy Dido’s condition leads Virgil to call love “a cruel master. There are no lengths to which it does not force the human heart.”(Virgil 94)

Dante believes that Beatrice awakened in him a love that gestured towards the divine. His pursuit of her is not only an earthly quest for love but a desire to be at one with the ideal that inspires all that is best in oneself. His first canzone takes up this theme, portraying her as an ideal woman whose presence can improve those she meets:

My lady is desired in high heaven.  
[... ] for when she passeth by the way  
Love casteth a chill into base hearts whereby  
Every thought of theirs is frozen and perisheth.  
And who should endure to stay and behold her,  
Would become a noble thing or else would die:  
And when she findeth one worthy to behold her,  
He proveth her virtue; for this befalleth him,  
That she giveth him salutation and maketh him so humble  
That he forgetteth every offence. (Vita 60-1)

To endow a woman with these qualities is a bold step, for it credits a mortal with the ability to dispense salvation. However, Dante intends no blasphemy by his praise of Beatrice; rather, he wants to point out that she embodies such virtue that her

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the Vita Nuova, unless otherwise stated, are from the Temple Classics edition (1906).

company elevates those around her. Robert Pogue Harrison notes that the Vita Nuova:

asks us to take seriously the suggestion that she was no ordinary woman, that she was the singular incarnation of transcendence, and that she was nothing less than Dante's spiritual salvation itself. These are weighty, and somewhat shocking, claims to make about a mortal woman, yet the Vita Nuova insists on their truth value. In short, the Vita Nuova represents, among other things, Dante's resolute attempt to *literalize* a poetic trope (the ideal woman) and to equate Beatrice with the prospect of transcendence itself. (Jacoff 36)

For Dante, the love of Beatrice promises more than human fulfilment; it holds out the prospect of spiritual regeneration. A later sonnet notes that Beatrice "ennobles all she looks upon," and concludes with the lines:

What she seemeth when she smiles a little,  
Cannot be told nor held in memory,  
A miracle is she so rare and gentle. (61)<sup>3</sup>

Such a woman could not be equated with any base acts. She is the ideal of love acting in the world. Therefore, the true beauty of Beatrice is her moral, as much as her physical beauty. This gives her a religious dimension within Dante's work.

As if to impress upon the reader the purity of Dante's love, sightings of Beatrice take place in church or on occasions of religious significance. The implication is that Dante's love is pure enough to be contemplated in the presence of God without shame. In Guido Guinizelli's poem 'Al Cor Gentil', the lover's obedience to his lady is compared with that of the angels to God, a presumption for which God later reprimands the poet, saying "You used Me as a comparison for your vain love".<sup>4</sup> Dante does not fall into this trap because his love for Beatrice is a love of the virtues she displays, and by loving these qualities, he is drawn to their source. As Steve Ellis notes, if we accept that Beatrice, by the end of the Vita Nuova, is an angel,

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<sup>3</sup> This closing image finds an echo in John Donne's 'The Relic', which concludes "All measure, and all language, I should pass / Should I tell what a miracle she was." The difference in Donne's poem, as Eliot was to note in the 1926 Clark Lectures, is that Donne is more likely to blur the distinction between human and divine love than Dante, and that their respective approaches to love highlight the nature of their faith.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Ellis, 127.

then we cannot doubt Dante's love of God, as the greatest act of love he can perform in her memory is to accord her a place in Paradise.<sup>5</sup>

In the Vita Nuova, therefore, human love is transmuted into the love that reigns in Heaven. Dante sets down his love in verse that changes the earthly love-struck poet into one contemplating divine grace. Beatrice is a prism through which Dante can see traces of the greater divine love under the influence of which his soul will be redeemed in the life to come. When Dante speaks of the happiness that Beatrice fosters within him he avoids the customary *felicità*, in favour of the theologically charged *beatitudo beatitudine*, a term normally reserved for the eternal happiness attained in the direct vision of God in Heaven.<sup>6</sup> It is a mark of Dante's poetic skill, and also of the theological unity of his vision of love, that any blasphemous aspect to this choice of word is soon dispelled:

By this usage Dante is not in the least *opposing* the happiness he finds through Beatrice to the happiness derived from God. Quite the contrary. By using that word Dante is signalling that the happiness he knows through Beatrice comes ultimately from God. (Jacoff 137)

Beatrice, as the Vita Nuova implies, was certainly 'heaven-sent'. The human and the divine have been reconciled, and earthly love, elevated above its physical elements, leads us towards salvation in the love of God.

### **The Presentation of Love in *The Divine Comedy***

Beatrice's divine aspect is used in the Divine Comedy as a contrast to the baser human passions. Human love is often portrayed as a failure to control our instincts and an indulgence in carnal pleasures, whereas the divine nature of Beatrice draws Dante ever upwards.

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<sup>5</sup> In his chapter 'Rossetti and the cult of the Vita Nuova', Ellis provides a useful reading of the changing interpretation of Dante's love for Beatrice among nineteenth century writers, showing how the human love in their relationship came to be prioritised at the expense of its divine element – something that Eliot aimed to redress in his own reading.

<sup>6</sup> See Christopher Ryan's essay 'The Theology of Dante.' Jacoff, Companion 136-52.

The souls in Hell are there because they have been unable to control their base appetites. Carnal love is one of these appetites, and those who could not control their desires are punished for their excess. In Canto V, Dante and Virgil enter the circle of the lustful, and see a swirling mass of souls, driven along by a fierce wind that recalls how, in life, their lust proved stronger than their reason, and they were unable to keep from sinning:

I learnt that to such torment [are] doomed  
The carnal sinners, who subject reason to lust. (Inf. 5. 38-9)

This is love in its destructive aspect, destroying the power of the intellect and reducing the soul to a passive element at the mercy of the body's drives. We see here the same sense of division between 'mind' and 'body' that Eliot addressed in his early poetry. Whereas the love that Dante celebrated in the Vita Nuova led to an improvement in his character, banishing impure thoughts, this love replaces purity with base desires. Dorothy L. Sayers, in her translation of the Inferno, has these souls being "impelled by love" (5.84); but this is crucially distinct from the way that Dante is impelled by the pure beauty of Beatrice.<sup>7</sup> The tale of Francesca da Rimini, who recounts her sinful love for Paolo, is one of two lovers together for eternity, but together in torment.

It must be borne in mind, however, that lust is punished in a circle near the top of Dante's pit of Hell, and is therefore considered to be one of the less serious sins, stemming, as Sayers notes, "less by deliberate choice of evil than by failure to make resolute choice of the good." (101)<sup>8</sup> What is punished here is a disregard for order and a prioritisation of the lower appetites above those that should draw our attention upward.

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<sup>7</sup> This impulsion also stands in marked contrast with the Commedia's final image – that of the divine love that moves the planets (Para. 33. 144-5)

<sup>8</sup> In the structure of Dante's Hell, the Upper Circles are reserved for the Sins of the Leopard – lust, gluttony, greed, and wrath. These sins result not from intent (the Sins of the Wolf – treason, heresy, fraud and other sins that stem from cunning are punished much lower down, in recognition of their more malicious nature) but from failure to control the appetites, and are not considered as bad as those that are consciously executed by the will.

In Canto XVIII of the Purgatorio, Virgil returns to this theme, calling love the root cause of “every good work and its opposite”(Purg. 18.15), and noting that sin arises out of the direction of love’s impulses toward an improper or undeserving object. Significantly, this discourse speaks of love as a virtuous pursuit which, at the same time, contains the risk of sinful excess. Virgil starts by outlining the soul’s gravitation toward an ‘ideal’ on which to focus its feelings:

The mind which is created quick to love, is  
Responsive to everything that is pleasing, soon  
As by pleasure it is awakened into activity. (Purg.18.19-21)

Having been awakened to Beauty, the soul will seek out what it perceives as the embodiment of its ideal. This, as we saw in the previous chapter, is of great importance in a discussion of Shelley’s concept of love:

Your apprehensive faculty draws an impression  
From a real object, and unfolds it within you,  
So that it make the mind turn thereto (Purg.18. 22-24)<sup>9</sup>

The pursuit of love, at an earthly level, is therefore an attempt to find the representation of the internal ideal. However, this pursuit can lead us astray from the path of goodness. Virgil counsels Dante to retain “the power to arrest it” (Purg.18.72); in other words, not to allow his love to dominate him in the same way the sinners in Hell were ‘impelled’ by their desires. This is a subtle distinction, and one that Dante will expand in Canto XXVI, where he meets the shades of the lustful.

The lustful refer to themselves as those who “followed our lusts / Like brute beasts” (Purg. 26.84); thereby linking themselves to the sinners in Hell, whose crime was a failure to control one’s impulses. In the refining flames, their sins are purged, and the original love that lay beneath their actions is visible once again. Sayers makes this observation:

More clearly here than on any other Cornice, we are shown what Virgil has already told us – that love is the root of virtue and vice alike: the purging

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<sup>9</sup> See my reading of Shelley’s ‘On Love’ and ‘Epipsychidion’ in the previous chapter.

fires burn off the dross, and the good that remains is the good that lay always at the heart of the sin. (Purg. 276)

It is not a sin to love, but it is a sin to foreground human love to the point where we forget its divine origin. The lustful embrace and kiss quickly, anxious to be moving upward into the presence of God. This is in contrast to the lingering tryst of Paolo and Francesca, recalled in the wistful “that day we read [...] no further”(Inf. 5.138). As Sayers points out, “Between these two kisses, damnation and salvation swing balanced.”(Purg. 276) In Dante’s meetings with Guido Guinicelli and Arnaut Daniel the love that is celebrated in conventional love poetry is contrasted with the divine love that draws these souls upwards. Arnaut tells Dante that “I weep and sing as I go”<sup>10</sup> because he can see his earthly love being transmuted into something greater. As Stuart McDougal notes, “Dante’s purgatorial flames, which transmute eros into agape, represent the ultimate in refinement.”(McDougal 60)

Having ascended through the refining flames to Paradise at the peak of Mount Purgatory, Dante meets with Beatrice for the first time in the Divine Comedy. Beatrice admonishes him for lapsing from the pure thoughts that her presence once evoked, complaining that he forsook her “and gave him to others”(Purg.30.127) once she had entered into eternal life. She reprimands Dante for pursuing this erroneous worldly quest:

And he did turn his steps by a way not true,  
Pursuing false visions of the good, that pay back  
No promise entire.                   (Purg.30.130-32)

In canto XXXI, Beatrice tells Dante that his love of her has been his love of God, filtered through a human medium. What Dante wrote in the Vita Nuova now comes to pass; his love for a woman points the way to the divine:

Wherefore she to me: ‘Within thy desires of  
Me which led thee to love the good beyond  
Which is nought that may be aspired to.   (Purg.31.22-4)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> This line is taken from John Sinclair’s translation of the Purgatorio (see Chapter One, footnote 12).

<sup>11</sup> John Freccero notes that Dante’s feelings on seeing Beatrice again mark “the return of an Eros now domesticated and transformed into that amalgam of Christian and cosmic love which is distinctly Dantesque. This insistence on the recuperability of his erotic past distinguishes Dante’s confession from virtually all others in the Christian tradition.” (Jacoff 177-8)

What touched Dante's soul from his very first meeting with Beatrice was not the corrosive passion that undid Paolo and Francesca, or the courtly ideal praised by the poets in Purgatory. As the Purgatorio ends, Dante is pursuing his love for Beatrice to its logical conclusion; almost going *through* her en route to the divine fountainhead from which all right desires proceed.

Dante's concept of love reaches its conclusion in the Paradiso, where the human is transfigured into the divine, and his pursuit of Beatrice fades into his journey towards the presence of God. Her human self is still occasionally to be seen, as Dante's movement through the spheres of Heaven is often marked by his glancing into her eyes, and being transported by them, much as his soul was captured by them on occasions of earthly salutation. However, as Rachel Jacoff notes, the Paradiso is a poem in which the human form becomes pure spirit.<sup>12</sup> Dante is drawn to the qualities and grace that Beatrice embodies in an increasingly non-visual attraction to what is within. In canto 18, Dante refers to his lady-love as "The Lady who is leading me to God."(Para.18.4)

Human love contains therefore a trace of the divine, which is of a potentially redeeming nature, as Beatrice's love was for Dante. If the carnal aspect is too much in evidence, it retains its sinful properties, but, as in the love between Dante and Beatrice, it can lead the parties beyond themselves and absorb their love into the divine love whence it originated. As R. A. Malagi puts it, "Dante is not gathered to Beatrice, but both Dante and Beatrice are united in God."(Sena & Verma 141)

Dante comes to realise that his love for Beatrice has been that of a soul seeking its spiritual fulfilment. Although his earthly love was unconsummated, the love of Beatrice has brought him a far greater union. "My will and my desire were turned by love," he notes in the poem's closing lines, as he becomes one with the divine will that "moves the sun and other stars"(Para.33.144-5). Love has saved Dante's soul, through the figure of a woman whose love is inherently divine.

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<sup>12</sup> Jacoff. 'Shadowy Prefaces: An Introduction to Paradiso' in Jacoff, Companion, 208-25.

## Shelley's Response to the Dantean Ideal

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Shelley's vision of love works primarily on a human level. Rather than see human love as an intimation of the divine, as Dante does, he sees love as an ideal in itself, and places a high value on the fulfilment of love in human relations. Love itself assumes divine traces for Shelley, but this is crucially distinct from seeing it as a means of approaching the divine condition. Shelley comes to realise that human relations are not enough to fully attain the ideal state of love, but without admitting a divine dimension to his thought he cannot adequately assert any other way of pursuing the ideal. As his world-weary cynic, Count Maddalo remarks, "we sought and yet were baffled!" It is this sense of being 'baffled' that causes Shelley's characters so much pain.

Shelley's ideal love is an uneasy blend of the human and the spiritual. As my earlier reading of the essay 'On Love' has shown, he made it a moral and spiritual ideal, enduing it with the purity to raise us to a more refined plane. That said, human love is, for Shelley, the goal in itself; it is not Dante's divine love functioning in human relations. This partial reading of Dante's work and thought is often problematic for Shelley, as Steve Ellis notes:

Whereas the manifestations of Amor in Dante are gathered together into one great synthesis and, as Shelley points out, 'ascend' from the love of Beatrice to the universal love, Shelley's own work, like his life, shows the problems of fitting love for an individual woman into a wider social and spiritual framework. (Ellis 5)

Shelley appropriates the Dantean framework without admitting the role of God. Whereas Dante realised that he must go beyond human affections to find his true 'end' in love, Shelley remains confused in his humanity, gesturing vaguely toward an ideal that he cannot attain, although he feels its attraction acutely. In much of his poetry, as we have seen, this leads to a sense of pain and, as we shall see later when considering 'Julian and Maddalo' in a Dantean light, a state of almost infernal torment that can also be found in Eliot's The Waste Land. The most interesting Shelleyan response to Dante's vision of love is, however, 'Epipsychidion', and this poem will be studied here, with reference to Dante's Vita Nuova.

The subject of 'Epipsychidion' was Emilia Viviani, a young woman of noble descent who was being kept in a convent by her family until her marriage could be settled. This state of affairs naturally earned the disapprobation of Shelley, who railed against familial tyranny as much as its political counterpart. A series of letters passed between Shelley and Emily, with occasional visits, and he soon came to hold her in high personal esteem rather than simply as a cause to support.<sup>13</sup> Her stoical acceptance of her fate earned his deep admiration. The poem that Shelley composed in response to her situation finds him expressing a desire both to liberate her from her imprisonment and then to take her to an unspoiled island, far from the constraints of society, in which the two of them can be united in their pure love.

From its beginning, 'Epipsychidion' is a poem rich in Dantean echoes.<sup>14</sup> In the prefatory 'Advertisement' Shelley equates the poem with the Vita Nuova, describing it as "sufficiently intelligible to a certain class of readers without a matter-of-fact history of the circumstances to which it relates." (Shelley 373) I wish to draw attention here to the implied divinity of Emilia herself, and the problems that Shelley faces in upholding this without admitting the Dantean concept of divine love.

Like Beatrice, Emilia is described in terms 'beyond' humanity. She is inherently divine:

too gentle to be human,  
Veiling beneath that radiant form of Woman  
All that is insupportable in thee  
Of light, and love, and immortality! (21-4)

Although addressing these lines to a woman, Shelley praises the aspects of her that keep her distinct from ordinary humanity. She is, to him, one set apart, a 'living Form / Among the Dead!' (27-8) The implication here is that Emilia is 'alive' in a spiritual sense, whereas those around her are 'dead' in their human condition. Her

<sup>13</sup> In a letter to Clara Clairmont from Pisa in January 1821, Shelley wrote "I see Emilia sometimes, who always talks of you and laments your absence. She continues to enchant me infinitely; and I soothe myself with the idea that I make the discomfort of her captivity lighter to her by demonstration of the interest which she has awakened in me." (Complete Works. Vol. X 227-8)

<sup>14</sup> In his biographical study, Richard Holmes notes that Shelley was reading the Vita Nuova while writing 'Epipsychidion' in the early months of 1821 (Holmes Pursuit 631).

surname, Viviani, echoes the Latin 'vivere', meaning 'to live', and Shelley may well be employing another Dantean motif here – the appropriation of a symbolically significant name for his lady.

Although Emilia is invoked in lines that recall the descriptions of Beatrice in the Vita Nuova, her 'divine' attributes are not from God. They are, rather, to be found in the way that she embodies Shelley's ideal of love, which assumes the place of a deity in his thought. Shelley recognises her as the physical representation of a long-sought ideal, seeing their physical love as an enactment of an attraction begun "in the fields of immortality"(133). Seeing himself as one seeking an ideal, he recalls that he was not initially seeking Emilia as a woman, but was attracted to her when he realised that she embodied all that he held dear. He describes his 'search' in strikingly Dantean terms:

And as a man with mighty loss dismayed,  
I would have followed, though the grave between  
Yawned like a gulph whose spectres were unseen: (229-31)

Pursuing his quest astride the grave calls to mind the Divine Comedy's juxtaposition of love and death, and the spiritual nature of the 'journey' undertaken by the lovers. Shelley goes on to recall how his quest for Emilia entailed some initial errors:

In many mortal forms I rashly sought  
The shadow of that idol of my thought.  
And some were fair – but beauty dies away:  
Others were wise – but honeyed words betray:  
And One was true – oh! why not true to me? (267-71)

This calls to mind Beatrice's admonition of Dante in the Purgatorio, berating him for being misled into human attachments that diverted him from his divine goal. We also see here the necessary presence of the human in Shelley's ideal of love. Although aware of Love's spiritual nature, he cannot avoid seeking its manifestation in human form, and this quest leaves him unfulfilled. We must remember that Shelley is addressing these lines to a physical woman, but that his feelings for her are governed by the belief that she embodies an ideal. The important distinction,

with regard to Dante's work, is that Shelley collapses the spiritual and physical into a human relationship, believing that union with Emilia will elevate him to a higher plane of being.

The conclusion of 'Epipsychidion' finds the poet rhapsodising over his proposed escape, with Emilia, to the secluded isle where they will become one with each other in a physical union with spiritual overtones. This union outstrips the poet's ability to conceive it in language and this breakdown enacts the sense of physical demise in the closing lines:

One hope within two wills, one will beneath  
Two overshadowing minds, one life, one death,  
One Heaven, one Hell, one immortality,  
And one annihilation. Woe is me!  
The winged words on which my soul would pierce  
Into the height of love's rare Universe,  
Are chains of lead around its flight of fire. –  
I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire! (584-91)

Union in love is, in this instance, death to the outside world and entry into the 'immortality' of love. Shelley has made love the guiding principle in the world, and as such believes that fulfilment in love is a condition of spiritual ecstasy.

The treatment of love, then, in 'Epipsychidion' is the most Dantean in all Shelley's poems. The echoes of Beatrice in the figure of Emilia are clear, and the quest motif that provides the poem with its momentum echoes Dante's progress through the Divine Comedy in search of a divine end. In other respects, however, it shows Shelley's appropriation of Dantean material without admitting the theological framework that accompanies it. As Wasserman notes, pursuit of the ideal here "sheds a glory on life and yet is an evasion of life, leading to a death of dubious nature." (Wasserman 417) Whereas Dante would see Beatrice as drawing him, through love, towards God, Shelley omits God and makes love the end in itself. As such, this end is one sought in human relations. No matter how much theory he weaves into 'Epipsychidion', it remains a love poem addressed to a woman, an 'invitation au voyage', a plea for a physical relationship, wrapped in spiritual language. As readers, we are left to ponder whether the couple would have attained the union desired here, or whether they would have parted, like the Maniac and his

lady in 'Julian and Maddalo', realising that for all their aspirations towards purity, human love is ultimately inadequate in meeting our deepest spiritual needs.

I will now examine Eliot's response to the Dantean concept of love, showing how in his early poetry he reiterates Shelley's problems but how, in his post-conversion work, he can offer solutions to the Shelleyan impasse. Central to this examination will be his major critical essay on Dante, which appeared in 1929 and uses the Italian poet as a starting point for an exposition of Eliot's Christian thought.

### **Dantean Love in Eliot's Early Poetry**

The previous chapter drew connections between the Shelleyan conception of love, as something potentially transcendent but ultimately unobtainable in human relations, and that found in Eliot's early poetry. Like those of Shelley, Eliot's characters remain frustrated in their search for something beyond human physicality. Lacking all but the faintest awareness of a divine element in their feelings, they often find themselves in the spiritual cul-de-sac of sexual relations, unable to grasp anything transcendent yet tantalisingly aware that some such transcendent feeling is there to be found.

The most striking use of the Dantean model in Eliot's early verse is his reworking of the celebrated first meeting with Beatrice, found in the Vita Nuova. This childhood encounter is at the heart of 'Dans le Restaurant' and is presented in a slightly different form in The Waste Land. Whereas Dante was, from the first, aware of Beatrice's more spiritual aspect, Eliot's personae experience only a sense of confusion in their encounter with the young girl. The dominant tone, as we saw in Chapter Three, is of an uneasy sexual attraction that draws the feeling of love down to a more physical level and consequently reduces its spiritual importance. In 'Dans le Restaurant', the fact that the tale is recounted by a shabby waiter lends it a seedy air, as though his physical dinginess represented an 'unclean' morality. When Eliot's diner refers to him as a "dirty old man" and offers money for the public baths, the link between 'dirt' and moral impurity is firmly made.

In the midst of that initial meeting, however, there remains the trace of something potentially transcendent that has been missed, which refuses to fade with the passing of time. The waiter still feels it to be “such a pity” that the arrival of a large dog broke off the moment of rapture he felt, and the fact that he is still recounting his tale years after the event is an eloquent expression of its lasting impact on him. In similar fashion, in The Waste Land, the brief moment on the return from the hyacinth garden, which resulted in a loss of sense and paralysis of will, is a source of disquiet in the present. That moment represented a point where some transcendent reality was, briefly, visible, and either through inaction, or the wrong kind of action, the feeling has been lost, and a sense of pain is all that remains.

The infernal presentation of The Waste Land will be examined later in this chapter, but in terms of Dantean love, we can see in it a modern reworking of Shelley’s emotional impasse. We see in both writers the desire for something ‘above’ the world, the subsequent pursuit of this desire, and the painful and puzzling realisation that this desire cannot be met in human relations, but that there is (if we do not admit a divine dimension) no other way of attaining this ideal state, which we call love.

At the heart of The Waste Land, however, we may faintly discern a route beyond the cycle of empty lust. It comes at the close of Part III, ‘The Fire Sermon’ which, after an infernal tour of the riverside and meetings with the violated river nymphs, closes with the lines:

Burning burning burning burning  
 O Lord thou pluckest me out  
 O Lord thou pluckest

burning (308-11)

These flames can be read as infernal in nature, and the inclusion of St Augustine’s “To Carthage then I came” that precedes them points to a sense of sin and judgement. By equating the London of the river nymphs with Augustine’s “cauldron of unholy loves”, Eliot is condemning the round of sexual activity as a state of unremitting torment, with no hope of transcendence. There is another way

of reading these lines, however, and that is to focus on the fact that the Lord can pluck one out of the flames, as Augustine felt had been the case with him. An acceptance of God enables us to be delivered from the purely human round of tainted love. The flames can now be read as those of Purgatorio XXVI, into which Arnaut Daniel so willingly dives. Rather than remain in the midst of such flames indefinitely, a purgatorial vision makes them a necessary stage in the refining process. We must enter, but the love of God will draw us out on the other side:

After presenting the reader with a series of sexual relationships, Eliot juxtaposes citations from St Augustine, Zechariah and the Buddha warning of the fires of lust. By establishing the fire imagery within a Dantean framework, Eliot is preparing for the possibility of purgation at the conclusion of the poem. (McDougal 69)

As with all other positive elements in The Waste Land, this remains little more than the faintest possible sign of redemption. I believe its inclusion makes sense, however, if we consider that this Dantean image is reprised in the quotation “Poi s’ascose nel foco che gli affina”, located among the closing ‘fragments’ that Eliot wishes to shore against his ruins.<sup>15</sup> In the same way that the commands of the Thunder represent a potential solution to The Waste Land’s crisis, the allusion to Dantean purgation contains the possibility of redemption from what initially seemed a ceaseless round of torment.

Written after his conversion, Eliot’s 1929 essay on Dante is both a searching analysis of Dantean thought, and evidence of his finding in Dante a model for the new course he was to take in his own work. Eliot had already written on Dante in The Sacred Wood (1920), but his 1929 piece moves beyond the admiration for Dante’s formal qualities that had been expressed previously, to examine the thought behind the poetry. The second half of this chapter will look at Eliot’s use of the Dantean model of purgation but here I shall focus on the final section of the essay, which sees Eliot reading the Vita Nuova, and coming to accept the Dantean view of human and divine love.

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<sup>15</sup> This line, “Then he hid him in the fire which refines them”, is the final line of Purgatorio XXVI, where Arnaut Daniel dives back into the refining flames.

As we have seen, in his poetry up to his conversion, Eliot's work had largely restated the Shelleyan problem of pursuing something transcendent in purely human relations. Here, he reads the Vita Nuova within a spiritual framework, claiming that only acceptance of the divine element in human love will enable us to make sense of Dante's poem. What we must read in the Vita Nuova is not simply Dante's praise of the earthly Beatrice, echoed as it is in Shelley's address to Emilia, but an understanding of what can be seen *in* Beatrice – the guiding hand of God. Eliot asserts that much Romantic and nineteenth century verse reads the Vita Nuova and Divine Comedy in the wrong light, putting too much importance on the Dante-Beatrice relationship in human terms. Acknowledging that he fell into this trap himself, he notes that "Rossetti's *Blessed Damozel*, first by my rapture and next by my revolt, held up my appreciation of Beatrice by many years."<sup>16</sup> (SE 262) What Eliot now finds in Dante is evidence of a more divine order:

The attitude of Dante to the fundamental experience of the Vita Nuova can only be understood by accustoming ourselves to find meaning in *final causes* rather than in origins. It is not, I believe, meant as a description of what he *consciously* felt on his meeting with Beatrice, but rather as a description of what that meant on mature reflection upon it. The final cause is the attraction towards God. A great deal of sentiment has been spilt, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, upon idealizing the reciprocal feelings of man and woman towards each other [...] this sentiment ignoring the fact that the love of man and woman [...] is only explained and made reasonable by the higher love, or else is simply the coupling of animals. (SE 274)

Only by 'reading' Beatrice as Dante came to do, as a divine agent working in the world, can we fully understand Dante's scheme of thought, "the contrast between higher and lower carnal love."<sup>16</sup> (SE 275) Dante is not idealising human love in the sense that Shelley was apt to do. Rather, he is admitting that we must pass beyond what is merely human to reach the divine.

The timing of this essay, written around the point of Eliot's entry into the Church of England, is crucial to an understanding of it. Eliot is employing Dante here as a focal point for his own religious thought and, finding support for his new beliefs in

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<sup>16</sup> Moody sees Eliot's major poem of this time, 'Ash-Wednesday', a work rich in Dantean echoes, as a reaction against the "imperfectly sublimated sexual feelings in the works of the pre-Raphaelites." (Moody, Poet, 138)

the work of the Italian poet, comes to re-value as a spiritual authority someone who had always influenced him on a poetic level.

As we have seen, Eliot's faith was initially strongly renunciatory in nature, and he pursued a course of discarding all previous attachments in his search for salvation. Written around the time of the Dante essay, 'Ash-Wednesday' is a poem that both appropriates Dantean motifs, and finds Eliot anxious to dismiss any trace of human love from his life. The address to the 'Lady', who functions as both Beatrice and Mary, the three leopards of Part II who have devoured his sinful flesh, and the ascent of the purgatorial staircase of Part III are strong Dantean symbols. Human love, however, is stronger than Eliot anticipates, and the poem ends not with any sense of transcendence, but with the anxious plea to Mary not to ignore his prayers as he struggles en route to his divine goal.<sup>17</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, Eliot became more tolerant of old attachments as his faith became more mature, and in the later work, especially in Four Quartets he does not wish to discard his past life altogether, but rather to incorporate it into a wider, divine order. This is in itself the essence of the Vita Nuova, the location of past emotions and experiences within a framework that makes them stations on a divine quest that ultimately transfigures them.

Shelley and Eliot did not derive their conception of love wholly from Dante's thought but, as I have shown, their response to the Dantean model supports the assertion made in Chapter Three, that Eliot's acceptance of Christianity enabled him to resolve the impasse that we find in Shelley's poetry. Shelley wanted to make love transcendent, and yet locate it within a human framework, and his characters suffer accordingly. Eliot initially restated this problem, but was able to move beyond it once he could reconcile human love with divine grace. As Denis Donoghue notes, Eliot came to see that "his best practice, in addition to daily prayer, was to regard human relations as provisional and ancillary to some relation beyond them." (Donoghue 276) The way in which the two men responded to the model of Dantean love provides us with an interesting case study in their thought.

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<sup>17</sup> Sister M Cleophas' article "'Ash-Wednesday': The Purgatorio in a Modern Mode" (Comparative Literature, XI 1959 329-39) provides a very useful reading of the poem alongside the Dantean model, highlighting the process of renunciation and purification within Eliot's work.

## **Part Two – An Infernal, or Purgatorial, View?**

The second half of this chapter will examine the way in which Shelley and Eliot related to the moral order of the Divine Comedy. Shelley was drawn towards Dante's Infernal vision of punishment in his own poetry, and 'Julian and Maddalo' will be read in this light to bring out the strong Dantean echoes in that poem. The infernal vision is also present in Eliot's monologues of Prufrock and Gerontion. After his conversion, however, Eliot came to accept a more Purgatorial order, in which suffering was not an end in itself but a necessary step towards a higher state. This revised reading of Dante's work is best expressed in the famous terza-rima section of 'Little Gidding'. Without religious faith, Shelley struggled to admit this element of Dante's thought into his own work, although it can be discerned in 'The Triumph of Life', broken off shortly before his death. In this work, strong in Dantean imagery, we can see Shelley attempting to move beyond the cycle of punishment without end, to admit the presence of some 'goal' in the process. This poem is, of course, tantalisingly unfinished, and we will never know what Shelley's overall scheme was. I believe, however, that Eliot's praise for this poem shows that he had identified in Shelley, at this late stage, traces of a change of thought akin to his own. It is significant that Eliot's highest praise of Shelley is centred around a work which gestures towards a new, and possibly more spiritual, response to the scheme of the Divine Comedy.

### **Meeting the Damned in Shelley's 'Julian and Maddalo'**

The most striking Dantean echoes in 'Julian and Maddalo' are found in the setting in which the meeting with the Maniac takes place, and the presentation of the Maniac himself as a soul in torment. In the previous chapter we saw that the Maniac is one "disappointed in love" and that his torment is a heightened sense of isolation arising out of his failed relationship. We can see him as an inhabitant of Dante's Hell, relating to the visiting pair his unhappy history. First, however, it will be necessary to look at the presentation of the madhouse as a Dantean setting.

The two men reach the island "where the madhouse stands" by gondola, in a journey that calls to mind Dante and Virgil's crossing of the Acheron in Charon's

boat (Inf. 3). The madhouse itself is then presented as a place of Dantean torment. On entering it, Julian relates that:

The clap of tortured hands,  
Fierce yells and howlings and lamentings keen,  
And laughter where complaint had merrier been,  
Moans, shrieks and curses and blaspheming prayers  
Accosted us. (215-19)<sup>18</sup>

It is in the midst of this torment that the Maniac is found, disconsolately trying to find relief from his pain in music. In the manner of his presentation, he calls to mind a shade more than a man. His physical condition is that of one worn close to death by his grief, with "pale fingers"(274) and "lean limbs"(279). He is barely alive, and his subsequent retelling of his tale is in words rendered "unmodulated, cold, expressionless"(292) by the despair that "made them so uniform"(294). There is no hope of improvement in his condition, and that makes his repeated retelling of his story a torment in itself. Like the shade of Francesca, he is fated to relive his sin in recounting it with no hope of change. Although his partner is not always with him, in the way that the shades of Dante's sinful lovers are fated to be forever bound together, she is always with him in his thoughts, which cannot move away from remembrance of her, no matter how painful that memory might be. In his 1920 essay on Dante, Eliot outlined the sense in which this continued reminiscence is a torture in itself:

To have lost all recollected delight would have been, for Francesca, either loss of humanity or relief from damnation. The ecstasy, with the present thrill at the remembrance of it, is a part of the torture. [...] It is part of damnation to experience desires that we can no longer gratify. For in Dante's Hell souls are not deadened, as they mostly are in life; they are actually in the greatest torment of which each is capable. (SW 165-6)

Like Dante and Virgil, Julian and Maddalo are only visiting this inferno, and can pass through with impunity. There is also an echo of Dante's relationship with Virgil in the two men's visit, as Maddalo is clearly taking Julian to meet the Maniac

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<sup>18</sup> Compare this section with Dante's first impression of Hell:  
Here sighs, plaints, and deep wailings resounded  
[...] Strange tongues, horrible outcries, words of pain,  
tones of anger, voices deep and hoarse, and  
sounds of hands amongst them. (Inf. 3. 22, 25-7)

in order to illustrate some point about the nature of human love. Julian, as is the case with Dante, is the party relating to the reader what he saw. The Maniac does not talk directly to the two men, as in Dante's Hell, but there are enough echoes in this meeting to enable us to see him as a soul in torment. The nature of this torment is also presented as being eternal. The Maniac has no hope of seeing his condition improved, and anticipates only a life of yearning finishing in the oblivion that will end his grief. Of course, as one still living, he does, unlike a Dantean shade, have the prospect of death as an end to his torment, but, as with the Dantean souls, there is no hope of any resolution, only the accumulation of "death upon despair!"(510)

We learn, from Julian's later visit to Venice, and the testimony of Maddalo's daughter, that there is a degree of happiness at the end of Shelley's poem. Significantly, however, it is caused by an outside factor. It is not that the Maniac improves, but that the Lady decides to return, perhaps because "remorse had brought her low." (601) At the time of the initial meeting with the two men, the Maniac's condition seemed to be beyond treatment, and although the Lady returns meeker than she left, we are not told that her return was in direct response to his distress. Indeed, having recalled that "Her coming made him better (602), Maddalo's daughter goes on to add that "after all / She left him" (605-6) and that the resolution of this tale will remain as silent as the "mute marble where their corpses lie." (615) In the meeting with the two men, we can see the Maniac as Shelley's presentation of a tormented soul in a manner that Dante would recognise as his own. The Infernal model enables Shelley to present in poetic form his own views about the pain of love and the end result of our attempts to find happiness in purely human relations.

### **Contact with the Damned in Eliot's Early Poetry**

Chapter Two of this study read J. Alfred Prufrock as a man tormented like Dante's damned souls.<sup>19</sup> His torment is alluded to in the poem's epigraph which, by using

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<sup>19</sup> Stuart McDougall notes that an early version of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', now in the Berg collection of New York Public Library, has *Purgatorio* XXVI, lines 147-8 ("Be mindful in due time of my pain' / Then he hid him in the fire which refines them") as the epigraph to the poem. Although Eliot changed this in the finished version, to read the poem in light of *this* epigraph, as opposed to the words of Guido da Montefeltro, could provide a different, and fascinating gloss on the nature of Prufrock's suffering.

the words of Guido da Montefeltro, equates this turn-of-the-century 'man about town' with a shade undergoing torment in Hell. Prufrock's monologue, like the speech of Shelley's Maniac, is addressed to us in our implied capacity as observers. We are not necessarily the same as Prufrock, even if we accept his initial invitation to accompany him on his stroll through the city, but his words remain with us after we have parted company from him. In the same way that Dante recognises the shades he encounters, Prufrock is recognisably *like* us. In his appearance he would be a common sight in pre-war London, Paris or Boston. We are left to wonder whether there are others like him in the world around us or, more disturbingly, whether we ourselves, do not find him familiar.<sup>20</sup>

Whereas Shelley's Maniac is mentally tormented in his infernal setting, Eliot's characters continue to function in the everyday world. This is not to say that they feel their torment any less intensely, but the façade of respectability acts as a barrier to expression. In 'Gerontion' Eliot assumed the persona of an old man, and subverted the truisms about age and wisdom to reveal a consciousness for whom age has brought only pain.

'Gerontion' appeared as the opening poem of Eliot's 1920 collection. It is, however, distinct in style and content from the quatrain poems that make up the majority of that volume. As Scofield notes "instead of a superior irony, there is a kind of weary, analytic sobriety and a sense of failure not externally observed but felt within the self." (Scofield 106) Gerontion is "an old man / Being read to by a boy". Age has not brought him any benefits. Rather, it has seen the decline of his senses, an increased dependence on others, and a sense of spiritual drought captured in his "waiting for rain", a line that strongly anticipates The Waste Land, in its equation of failing natural and spiritual powers. We know that Eliot considered attaching 'Gerontion' to the front of The Waste Land, and that Ezra Pound dissuaded him from doing this, so the two poems appeared separately. There are,

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<sup>20</sup> Schneider notes that the epigraph asks us to consider a certain audience for Prufrock's speech:

One in Hell can bear to expose his shame only to another of the damned: Prufrock speaks to, will be understood only by, other Prufrocks – the "you and I" of the opening, perhaps – and, I imagine the epigraph also hints, Eliot himself is speaking to those who can understand this kind of hell. (Schneider 27)

however, strong links between the two in their studies of historical and personal disillusion and spiritual vacuity.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas the souls encountered by Dante in Hell recount the sins that have brought them there, Gerontion furnishes us with a list of things he has not done, and notable events in history at which he was conspicuously absent. This is, in itself, a Dantean torment, however, for it accords him a place in Limbo, alongside those who acted neither for good nor evil and as such are not accorded even a place in Hell.<sup>22</sup> This aspect is useful to consider when looking at The Waste Land. Gerontion feels acutely the passing of a life that he has allowed to slip by without actively engaging it, and old age brings not the respect of others, but self-contempt, awareness of being “a dull head among windy spaces.” Although physically alive, his spirit is already dead.<sup>23</sup> In this respect he takes his place alongside those met by Dante in Hell, like Guido da Montefeltro or Ulysses, who can do nothing except recount their past, as noted by James Truscott:

Ulysses and Guido speak of their past not only because they are removed from it temporally and spatially, but also because it is eternally impossible for them to act again. (Cited in Manganiello 24)<sup>24</sup>

Gerontion, however, is not damned for any active sin but tormented with the realisation that he has not used the opportunities in life that have come to him. The longed-for return of Christ will not bring any new life to him for, not having

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<sup>21</sup> Helen Gardner's essay 'The Waste Land: Paris 1922' (in Litz. 67-94) provides a good summary of the poem's development, and the changes suggested by Pound prior to its publication.

<sup>22</sup> Dante's Limbo is filled with those “Whose lives knew neither praise nor infamy” (Inf. 3 36). These people are neither in Heaven or Hell:

Who were not rebellious, nor were faithful to God;  
But were for themselves.

Heaven chased them forth to keep its beauty from impair;  
And the deep Hell receives them not,  
For the wicked would have some glory over them. (Inf. 3 38-42)

<sup>23</sup> Denis Donoghue notes that the typescript of 'Gerontion' had two epigraphs. In addition to the quote from Measure for Measure, Eliot had Fra Alberigo's words from Inferno 33 121-2 – “How my body stands in the world above / I have no knowledge.” Alberigo was a man whose soul was taken, although his body continued to live.

<sup>24</sup> See the Appendix to this study for a comparison of Dante's Ulysses with that of Tennyson.

understood Christ's first coming as "the word within a word", he will be devoured by the returning tiger in the new year.<sup>25</sup> He is left with his declining senses, and an all-pervading sense of ennui:

I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it  
 Since what is kept must be adulterated?  
 I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:  
 How should I use them for your closer contact?<sup>26</sup>

Gerontion's state is not, at face value, one of torment. However, it is a state without hope of change – an old man driven "to a sleepy corner", from where he will remain vaguely aware of things going on without him, but inactive, while the other 'residents' of his draughty house move around him without any personal contact. Furthermore, he is cut off from union with God and this, in Dantean terms, is torment enough.

In Gerontion, then, we have another 'shade' in Eliot's poetry, and as with J. Alfred Prufrock, we may feel some trace of recognition in this account of what Eliot was later to call "conscious impotence". Indeed, the idea of being a soul in Limbo is as prevalent in Eliot's early work as being a soul in Hell, for one ends up in Limbo as a result of inaction which, in Eliot's scheme of thought, is as bad as 'wrong' action. This sense of inaction, and its punishment in Dantean Limbo, is at the heart of The Waste Land.

A Dantean air permeates The Waste Land, as we wander through the streets of the Unreal City in a similar fashion to Dante's journey through Hell, encountering various shades as we go who recount something of their lives for us. The important distinction between Shelley's re-working of the Infernal motif in 'Julian and Maddalo' and Eliot's use of it here is that Eliot is more concerned with the state of Limbo. As David Wallace notes, "Eliot spends a lot of time in the vestibule of Hell"(Jacoff 250); more time, in fact, than in Hell itself. It seems to be Eliot's view, as he noted in his Baudelaire essay, that the modern world doesn't deserve

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<sup>25</sup> In his guide to Eliot's poems, B. C. Southam traces this reference to Christ as a tiger back to Blake's poem, seeing it as an illustration of "God in his fearful aspect." (Southam 76)

<sup>26</sup> A. D. Nuttall points out that Gerontion is not actually deaf or blind, but that his senses are "failing to carry him beyond himself." (Nuttall 220)

damnation, as it hasn't the will to actively sin. Like Gerontion, the people in The Waste Land look back not so much on sinful acts as on failures to act at all, and their 'torment' often lies in a stifling, empty routine, with the troubling awareness of lacking something that they cannot fully define. As with Prufrock, however, this internal torment can be masked in society, which is why Eliot stresses the ultimate 'unreality' of the crowded modern city of his poem, a city full of people "imprisoned in [their] own solitude", in Helen Gardner's words (Gardner, Art 161), each trapped inside an individual Hell.

The first part of this chapter mentioned the Dantean echo in the 'hyacinth garden' episode. The other significant Dantean reference in Part I of the poem is the image of "crowds of people, walking round in a ring" seen by Madame Sosostris, and equated with the crowd on London Bridge:

I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (63-5)<sup>27</sup>

The echo of Dante's crowd in Limbo is clear in this image and, with it, comes the sense of punishment for inaction that Dante prescribed for those people. We must remember that the souls in Limbo were being punished for a failure to act, rather than for any sin in particular. Hell would not admit them, because they had not shown the will to do anything wrong and, in Dante's order, inaction is punished in the same degree as 'wrong' action. Like Gerontion, these souls have no hope of release, only the stifling routine of their empty lives, a fact acknowledged in Part II in the man's response to the question "What shall we do tomorrow? / What shall we ever do?"

The hot water at ten.  
And if it rains, a closed car at four.  
And we shall play a game of chess,

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<sup>27</sup> Eliot is actually collapsing two Dantean references into this one passage. Initially, there is Dante's remark on seeing the souls preparing to enter Hell that "I should never have believed death had undone so many" (Inf. 3.56-7). The reference to the sighing crowd is from the next canto, where the souls in Limbo are seen:

Here there was no plaint, that could be heard,  
Except of sighs, which caused the eternal air  
To tremble. (Inf. 4.25-7)

Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door. (135-8)

In the same sense that Prufrock retains his outward respectability while suffering internally, the inhabitants of The Waste Land do not show signs of their pain. Indeed, the essence of their torment lies in its personal nature, and the belief, as we saw in Chapter Two, that there is no escape from the prison of selfhood. Although inhabiting the same 'world' as those around them, they are trapped within themselves, facing either the empty repetition of meaningless routine or the acutely painful reliving of past actions or inaction. The most disturbing thing about the Dantean crowd flowing over London Bridge is its impersonality – the lack of any communal element in the gathering. Joseph Conrad wrote that “we live, as we dream, alone.”(Conrad 50) Eliot’s vision of Dantean torment has us suffering, as we live, in isolation.

The Dantean vision present in The Waste Land is decidedly Infernal. There is no possibility of redemption for these people, and their testimonies recall those of the souls encountered by Dante and Virgil who relate the sins that brought them to their station in Hell and then retreat back into the crowd. In the closing injunctions of the Thunder there is a possible solution to the condition of isolation and, in asserting the validity of “the awful daring of a moment’s surrender”, an alternative to the inaction that has cast so many into Eliot’s Dantean Limbo. The poem, however, does not pursue these commands into action, but leaves them suspended as a possible remedy. In his later work, Eliot came to adopt a more Purgatorial scheme, in which a route can be traced through suffering towards purification and transcendence. This becomes pronounced in his work after his Christian conversion, and we can see it in his Christian reading of Dante.

### **Eliot’s Purgatorial View**

In his 1929 essay on Dante, Eliot notes that the Purgatorio is a poem that must be read more with regard to the overall spiritual order of the Divine Comedy than its own poetic nature and content. As he notes, “[d]amnation and even blessedness are more exciting than purgation”(SE 253) and we need to read this poem as the necessary bridge between the two states. For this reason it is “the most difficult of

the three parts". This difficulty is not attributable to its style, which is consistent with the other parts, but with the divine scheme that provides its meaning. We must believe that it is possible for someone to suffer with the goal of expiating their sin and attaining blessedness. For this reason, the Purgatorio yields its true beauty "only when we have read straight through to the end of the Paradiso"(SE 253), when we can appreciate the blessed state that draws these souls in Purgatory onwards, and gives meaning to their suffering.

One of the key aspects of the Purgatorio is the importance of time. In the other parts of the Divine Comedy, time is of no relevance, as souls are either damned or saved for eternity. In Purgatory, on the contrary, time is of great importance, as the souls wish to reach Heaven as soon as possible. The process of purgation is therefore one with its own momentum, as the angels who admonish stragglers keep saying. In his essay, Eliot makes a crucial distinction between the suffering of Purgatory and that of Hell:

The souls in purgatory suffer 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.  
(SE 256)

It is for this reason that Eliot stresses the importance of reading the Paradiso in our understanding of the Purgatorio. We must see the goal that these souls desire if we are to find their suffering justifiable. In the body of his essay, Eliot develops this into his theory of 'poetic assent' – the need, for the time it takes us to read a poem with which we may not share beliefs, to 'suspend disbelief' for long enough to allow the poetry to work on us. As I noted in my first chapter, Eliot himself found this hard to achieve when it came to the work of Shelley, but in this instance he makes a very valid point. We must believe that purgatorial suffering can have a divine purpose if we are to appreciate Dante's poem. Given the timing of this essay, however, I believe that Eliot is alluding to his own beliefs here as well.

In the years immediately following his conversion, Eliot's faith was, as we have seen elsewhere, of a strongly renunciatory nature. The strong Dantean overtones of

'Ash-Wednesday' gesture towards a framework in which the soul can progress towards the divine presence. In this 'early' Christian poem the route is arduous, with the constant danger of relapse into old habits and attachments. What is important, however, is that a divine 'end' has now entered Eliot's poetic universe. Each individual must make the initial decision to seek out God's grace, but once they have done so their life will assume a sense of higher order, in which suffering carries with it the possibility of redemption rather than continual torment. Whereas the people in his early verse had no hope of release from their empty routine, and remained in the state of Limbo without hope, Eliot now posits an order in which suffering can lead to a better state. The crucial element here is whether or not we accept the Christian framework that makes transcendence possible. I will now examine the 'terza-rima' section of 'Little Gidding', where Eliot replaces the Infernal vision of his earlier work with a Purgatorial model in his most striking poetic acknowledgement of Dante's influence.

#### **'Restored by that refining fire': Purgatorial suffering in 'Little Gidding'**

Eliot's greatest acknowledgement of Dantean influence comes in Part II of 'Little Gidding'. In this section of the final Quartet he employs both the style of the Italian poet and images with strong Dantean overtones. In addition to this, he shows an acceptance of Dante's purgatorial scheme and a belief, which has its roots in his Christian faith, that suffering can be both a torment and a path to redemption, depending on our view of it.

The setting in which Eliot meets the 'compound ghost' is one strangely distinct from the everyday world. The meeting occurs "In the uncertain hour before the morning", with clear indications of a time (and place) at which normality may be suspended. The "dead leaves" that rattle like tin echo the souls blown by the wind in *Inferno* V, and possibly those of Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind'.<sup>28</sup> The smoke that hangs in the air adds a further Infernal touch to the scene.

<sup>28</sup> This image can be found in *Inferno* Canto V:

The hellish storm, which never rests, leads the  
Spirits within its sweep; whirling, and smiting  
It vexes them. (Inf. 5.31-3)

The meeting is overwhelmingly Dantean in nature, drawing heavily on Dante's encounter with Brunetto Latini in Inferno XV. Before the moment of recognition there is the look of "pointed scrutiny with which we challenge / The first-met stranger in the waning dusk". This echoes Dante's celebrated description, which Eliot singled out for praise in his 1929 essay, of Brunetto peering at him "as an aged tailor does at the eye of his needle"(Inf. 15.21). In this look, Eliot catches "the look of one dead master", forgotten, then recalled and recognised "in the brown baked features / The eyes of a familiar compound ghost". This can be set alongside Dante's lines:

And I, when he stretched out his arm to me,  
Fixed my eyes on his baked aspect, so that the  
Scorching of his visage hindered not,

My mind from knowing him; and bending my  
Face to his, I answered; 'Are you here,  
Ser Brunetto? (Inf. 15.25-30)<sup>29</sup>

The exact identity of Eliot's compound ghost is the subject of much critical exegesis, but the nature of the meeting is unmistakably Dantean. Eliot's exclamation "What! are *you* here?" echoes Dante's recognition of his former master.

Brunetto Latini is, in Dante's work, a soul damned for eternity, and the tone of his meeting with Dante is melancholy. He is found in the circle reserved for the sodomites, but he can still offer advice to Dante and encourage him to proceed towards salvation. In a similar sense, Eliot's compound ghost offers advice for the redemption of his listener's soul. The speech of the ghost is, as Patrick Grant notes, "on the face of it, depressing"(Bagchee 118) but it does hold out the prospect of an alternative fate if the listener actively pursues salvation by changing his life, avoiding the "fruits reserved for age" that the ghost foresees. Eliot introduces a purgatorial vision here that turns suffering to a higher end. The fire is not one that

<sup>29</sup> Helen Gardner, in The Composition of Four Quartets (1978) notes that in the draft that Eliot originally sent to John Hayward (now in King's College, Cambridge) the moment of recognition was actually a translation of Dante's line. Eliot originally wrote "And heard my voice: 'Are you here, Ser Brunetto?'" This was then changed for the more general "What! are *you* here?", Eliot feeling that he wanted to stress the purgatorial elements of the meeting, rather than the specifically infernal punishment of Brunetto Latini himself. See Gardner, Composition 174-8.

punishes, but one that refines, that burns away the impurities prior to entering Paradise:

“From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit  
Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire  
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.”

The imagery here is taken from Purgatorio XXVI, where Dante and Virgil encounter the souls of the lustful, who are being purged of their sin in order to enter the earthly paradise. The lustful embrace quickly and dive back into the flames, anxious to expiate their sins and attain blessedness. In this sense, their suffering is redeemed by a higher end, enabling them to lament past follies, as the souls in Hell have all eternity to do, but also to anticipate something greater. It is for this reason that the souls willingly enter the flames, and are purified by them as opposed to being consumed. In appropriating this image, Eliot is also signalling his acceptance of the thought that lies behind it, the Christian perspective that enables one to re-value past action within a transcendent framework.

In ‘Little Gidding’ we see Eliot using Dantean imagery to highlight his acceptance of Christian thought. Whereas his earlier poetry had posited a largely Infernal scheme in which there was no hope of release from the torment of one’s past, the later work admits the potential for transcendence that enables us to move beyond the past into a greater future. This is not to dismiss suffering altogether, but to make it more than simply the inescapable punishment for our actions in this life. Human fallibility is always with us, but a divine viewpoint makes acknowledged sin the starting point on the route to grace. At the conclusion of ‘Little Gidding’ Eliot brings together the purgatorial fire and the divine rose, drawing everything into a divine order and, by doing so, giving everything meaning.<sup>30</sup>

On the 4 July 1950, Eliot addressed the Italian Institute in London. The talk was entitled “What Dante Means to Me”, and was later published in the 1965 volume To Criticize the Critic. Rather than give a lecture on the Italian poet, Eliot chose, as the title suggests, to speak on Dante’s influence in his own work, and his feelings as

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<sup>30</sup> The refining fire is found in Purgatorio XXVI, and the Heavenly Rose, the petals of which are filled with the saints, is found in Paradiso XXX.

one who had read the Italian's work for many years. Having spoken of the Dantean 'London Bridge' scene in The Waste Land, Eliot mentions his attempt, in 'Little Gidding' to create a passage "intended to be the nearest equivalent to a canto of the Inferno or the Purgatorio, in style as well as content, that I could achieve." (CC 128) After explaining the technical aspect of this passage, and the problems posed by his decision to adopt terza-rima form, he mentions the extreme difficulty of adequately producing a 'Dantean' poem in English. The one instance of a successful Dantean poem in English that he countenances is Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life', and through a shared relationship with Dante, Eliot writes of Shelley not in terms of disapprobation, but of praise.

Calling 'The Triumph of Life' "Shelley's greatest tribute to Dante" (CC 130), Eliot asserts it to be Shelley's greatest poem. It is, indeed, of such magnitude that "One wonders whether even Shelley could have carried it to successful completion", an odd remark, given Eliot's previous dismissal of Shelley's gifts. What is clear to Eliot is that Shelley has been impelled to his greatest work by the example of Dante:

By a natural affinity with the poetic imagination of Dante, a saturation in the poetry [...] his mind is inspired to some of the greatest and most Dantesque lines in English. (CC 130)

As Gregory Jay reminds us, the citation of 30 lines from 'The Triumph of Life' in the essay represents "an extraordinary tribute considering the steep decline in the number of quotations in Eliot's later prose." (Jay 165) Again, it is interesting that Eliot can now admit to finding greatness in Shelley's work. What he clearly sees in Shelley at this point is one who has a Dantean vision of things. This is not simply a question of appropriating various images into one's own poetry, but rather the ability to write poetry in which the affinity comes as much from the subject as from the language. Earlier in this chapter we saw the infernal aspects of Shelley's Dantean vision in 'Julian and Maddalo'. In his reading of 'The Triumph of Life', however, is Eliot crediting Shelley with something else – an understanding of Dante's purgatorial scheme?

Clearly, the answer to the above question is of great importance to the way in which Eliot relates to Shelley in relation to 'The Triumph of Life'. Given his previous

complaint that he cannot enjoy Shelley's work on account of the thought contained in it, we must ask if he could praise 'The Triumph of Life' in these terms if it only expressed an infernal conception of punishment without end. I believe that Eliot praises this poem because, some twenty-three years after his Christian conversion, he has come to appreciate that Shelley might have been gesturing towards some religious feeling here. Significantly, Eliot recalls some lines that "made an indelible impression upon me over forty-five years ago".(CC 130) This would take his contact with the poem back to 1905, locating his feelings within that phase of youthful possession he referred to in his Harvard lectures of 1932-3. In the initial phase of renunciation that followed his conversion, such early attachments were cast aside but, with the Dantean Christian framework to help him, Eliot returns to Shelley's poem and accommodates it within his Christian view. He asserts, furthermore, that in 'The Triumph of Life' Shelley was attempting something that went beyond anything expressed in his poetry up to that point. Although the unfinished nature of the poem invites speculation rather than conclusive comment, I believe that Eliot's praise for Shelley's final work is not simply a question of stylistic admiration. What he identifies in this unfinished poem is Shelley's attempt, by the appropriation of Dante's framework, to gesture towards something divine.

### **'The Triumph of Life': Shelley in Purgatory?**

As a result of its unfinished nature, Shelley's final poem has always generated much critical speculation, and in his 1950 essay Eliot himself expressed some curiosity about the conclusion Shelley might have gone on to reach.<sup>31</sup> From the text of the poem, however, I believe we can trace a theoretical framework in Shelley's thought within which suffering is not simply of an Infernal nature, with no hope of any redemptive end. At the heart of this poem we can see Shelley attempting to locate suffering within a Purgatorial model which, in itself, makes the poem a gesture towards the more divine aspects of its Dantean precursor. If we read 'Epipsychidion' as an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to connect Shelley's idealism with Dante's divine framework, then we may be able to agree with Ralph Pite, when

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<sup>31</sup> Harold Bloom notes that the poem is "probably as complete as it could be; like the two *Hyperions* of Keats, it resolves itself by breaking off." (Bloom, *Visionary* 275)

he sees this poem as Shelley's attempt to move "towards the uncertainty and hope of the Purgatorio." (Clark & Hogle 198)<sup>32</sup>

The most immediately discernible Dantean element in Shelley's poem is its adoption of terza-rima. Whereas Eliot found it an impossible limitation to maintain a rhyming terza-rima in his Dantean tribute, Shelley sustains this demanding form throughout his poem. Therefore, in its very nature, 'The Triumph of Life' draws our attention back to the Italian master, and the thought it shares with the Divine Comedy is supported in its form. David Wallace calls it "perhaps the most Italianate poem ever written in English." (Jacoff 247)

Another important Dantean echo in Shelley's poem is the motif of the Triumph itself. Throughout the Divine Comedy, Dante relates what he saw to the reader as though he actually *saw* it. There is rarely a movement into 'visionary' recollection. For the majority of the time he wants us to believe that he actually sees the described scenes and people. At first glance, then, Shelley's poem differs because it relates what happened to Shelley while in a dream-like state, during which "a Vision on my brain was rolled..." (40) If the treatment of the material is different, however, there is an important connection in the content of the vision. What Shelley perceives is a 'triumph' in the Roman sense, the pageant in which captured soldiers and booty from military campaigns were paraded through the streets of the city. The Dantean echo in this image, however, draws our attention away from this 'triumph' and onto the 'pageants' seen by Dante in Purgatory and Heaven. These are not purely displays of superiority, but celebrations of divine order and love. Often made up of saints and angels, with symbolic representations of theological doctrines, they are 'triumphs' in the sense that they affirm the divine order.<sup>33</sup> Shelley's poem explores the implications of both of these views.

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<sup>32</sup> Shelley was certainly familiar with the last two parts of Dante's work. He read them in William Cary's translation, which appeared in 1814, while living in Italy. Steve Ellis notes the Dantean influence in several of Shelley's poems from this time, most notably in the fourth act of Prometheus Unbound, which was added later and shows the influence of Dante's Paradisal imagery. See Ellis 3.

<sup>33</sup> The main pageants seen by Dante are those of the Sacrament (Purg. 29&30), the Church (Purg. 32) and the Church Triumphant (Para. 23).

The initial description of the triumph is very much along Dante's infernal lines. J. Hillis Miller notes that "For all its rapid pace and linguistic exuberance, 'The Triumph of Life' is surely one of the darkest and most shadowed of all major poems in English." (O'Neill, *Shelley* 227) The stream of people seen by Shelley echoes the souls in Limbo of *Inferno* III and anticipates Eliot's crowd on London Bridge:

and a great stream  
Of people there was hurrying to and fro  
Numerous as gnats upon the evening gleam,  
  
All hastening onward, yet none seemed to know  
Whither he went, or whence he came, or why  
He made one of the multitude (44-9)

There is no distinction in this throng. Like the vast crowds seen by Dante in much of Hell, they present simply "a captive multitude" (119) running before and after the mysterious chariot of Life. Why are they there? Shelley offers an explanation, and interestingly makes the captives of this crowd those who wanted to be seen as life's conquerors:

all those who had grown old in power  
Or misery, - all who have their age subdued,  
  
By action or by suffering, and whose hour  
Was drained to its last sand in weal or woe (120-3)

In his autobiographical essay 'The Crack-Up' (1936) F. Scott Fitzgerald remembers how he once believed "life was something you dominated if you were any good. Life yielded easily to intelligence and effort, or to what proportion could be mustered of both." (Fitzgerald 39) Shelley's crowd is made up of those who have acted on that premise; they wanted to impose themselves on life while alive, feeling the need to assert their identity in action. By enlisting them in its train, Life has rewarded their presumption of superiority with subservience, as Simon Haines notes:

The captives are those whom Life conquers by virtue of their own strength,  
over themselves and over the world. The stronger they are the more  
completely they are subjugated by means of that part of themselves they  
have not overcome or known. (Haines 232)

In place of their worldly fame, these people now form the uneven ranks trailing behind the triumphal car, not even identified by names in Shelley's vision. In this image, Shelley is very consciously making his triumph one of Imperial design, "As when to greet some conqueror's advance / Imperial Rome poured forth her living sea"(112-13). Life is a destructive force, quite literally destroying those with whom it comes into contact. Their hubris is punished by being crushed beneath the wheels of the onrushing chariot, the anonymity of this being, for those used to exercising power, punishment enough. An attempt to impose oneself on this onward rush will be unsuccessful. However, Shelley makes a further distinction between those who at least chose to *do* something in life and those who did not manage even that gesture. Behind the chariot and the throng that is crushed beneath its wheels, he sees another group:

Behind,  
 Old men, and women foully disarrayed  
 Shake their grey hair in the insulting wind,  
  
 Limp in the dance and strain with limbs decayed  
 To reach the car of light which leaves them still  
 Farther behind and deeper in the shade.      (164-9)

These are the people who did not attempt to impose themselves on life at all, and such is their condition now that they actively pursue the car in the hope of being crushed by it. In Shelley's scheme, there is a degree of merit in being one of the former group that is missing in those motivated only by "impotence of will" to seek in punishment the distinction missing as a result of their inaction.

This image, of those vainly pursuing the car, is of a Purgatorial, rather than purely Infernal nature. In according various degrees to suffering, Shelley seems to be admitting traces of a scheme within which some suffering can work to a better end. We may see the crowd rushing around the car being destroyed, but can also find in this destruction a means of *release* from personality that echoes the transcendence of individuality found in the Christian location of the self within the divine order. Those left behind are, by contrast, pale reflections of the former, fuelled by "frost" rather than the more animated, and purgatorial "fire"(175). In their "impotence of will" they show a lack of that animating force which, although turned to the wrong

end, was at least present in those now under the wheels of the chariot. In this sense, we may see those trailing behind in the triumph as those in Dantean Limbo, punished not for their actions, but for their inability to act at all, whether for good or evil. We have seen Eliot's response to this condition in the character of Gerontion, and in his essay on Baudelaire he asserted that, in some cases, there was more merit in sinful action than in utter inaction. By sub-dividing those being punished, and making their punishments different, I believe Shelley is trying to give some degree of relativity to the fates of the souls in this poem.

The Dantean echoes of the poem are further developed with the appearance of Rousseau. Initially, Shelley mistakes him for "an old root", an image that evokes the wood of suicides in *Inferno* 13.<sup>34</sup> These are the lines that Eliot recalls having read with such feeling in his adolescence. Rousseau will be a guide, in the manner of Virgil, and also the interlocutor amongst the souls that Shelley sees. In the words of Harold Bloom, "As Virgil guided Dante, so the relic of Rousseau is to guide Shelley, to purify his vision." (Ridenour 172) Like Dante's shades, he is driven to tell his story, but can also explain the nature of Shelley's vision.<sup>35</sup> When asked the identities of those chained to the car, he answers "The Wise, / The great, the unforgotten" (208-9) but explains that their torment arose from the shortcomings of their knowledge when alive:

their lore

Taught them not this – to know themselves; their might  
 Could not repress the mutiny within,  
 And for the morn of truth they feigned, deep night

Caught them ere evening." (211-15)

For all their worldly achievements, the souls here did not 'know' themselves. They never attained that peace with oneself that comes from acceptance of the divine

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<sup>34</sup> Walking through the wood of suicides, Dante tears the branch from a tree and is surprised to hear it cry out in pain. He is told by Pier delle Vigne that "men we were, and now are turned to trees" (*Inf.* 13.37) and that they are being punished for committing suicide and therefore violating the sanctity of the body.

<sup>35</sup> Franklin sees Rousseau's function within the poem as being largely interpretative. He notes that Rousseau can "objectify the sufferings and limitations shared by the poet-narrator and make them more understandable to him." (Franklin 972)

order, the peace that Piccarda Donati tells Dante of in the Paradiso.<sup>36</sup> Their pursuit of worldly approbation is now turned into a form of torment, mirrored in their constant attachment to the onrushing chariot of life itself. Shelley realises that human fame is only a passing state in relation to posterity, and regards the distinguished roll-call with a sense not of merit but of transience. As George Franklin notes the poem relates “the inability to ‘pass beyond humanity’, that frustration of the attempts by persons to escape human perspective.”(Franklin 971)

Rousseau shares much with the souls encountered by Dante in the Commedia. The vital difference, however, is that while he understands to some extent the controlling order behind this Dantean vision, he does not understand how he came to be part of it. This is in contrast to the inhabitants of Dante’s Hell, who can recall the sin that led to their damnation, but lack any understanding of the overall scheme within which their damnation is aligned. Rousseau’s speech echoes, significantly, that of the souls in Purgatory, who can see their present suffering within a potentially transcendent framework. Given the unfinished nature of the poem, we can never know whether Rousseau was destined for any degree of transcendence within Shelley’s vision, any trace of what Tilottama Rajan calls “the agent of redemption [...] which may be called the purgatorial imagination.”(O’Neill, Shelley 251) Rousseau’s final utterance provides the ‘The Triumph of Life’ with its last words – “Happy those for whom the fold / Of” – which neither tells us *who* is blest within Shelley’s vision or *how* they came to be that way. In Shelley’s depiction of Rousseau as a spirit of essentially pure sentiments corrupted in humanity there are definite traces of a soul in need of purgatorial refining. The nature of Rousseau as Shelley’s guide here also leads us to conclude that Rousseau is in possession of some element of understanding that enables him to appreciate the spectacle he beholds. His knowledge is limited, but he does nevertheless have an interpretative function.

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<sup>36</sup> The soul of Piccarda tells Dante, upon being questioned about the hierarchy of bliss in Heaven, that each soul is happy to occupy the position allotted to it by God. She tells him that “His will is our peace” (Para. 3.85), thereby making acceptance of God’s scheme the necessary condition of being at rest in oneself.

In his interpretative role, Rousseau is able to counsel Shelley against repeating the errors of those chained to Life's car. Rather than seek human glory, one should adopt a divine perspective on the progress of life. This is not necessarily a rejection of human endeavour, but simply recognition of its inevitable limitations:

Figures ever new  
Rise on the bubble, paint them how you may;  
We have but thrown, as those before us threw,  
  
Our shadows on it as it past away.                   (248-51)

It is not worldly glory that should be sought, but self-knowledge and reconciliation to one's own nature.

In this sentiment Shelley's poem finds an echo in Part II of 'Little Gidding'. The two poems share the imagery of leaves being blown on the wind to denote continual movement, but the closest link is seen when we compare Rousseau's counsel to that of the compound ghost. The acknowledgement of the limited scope of our achievement quoted above finds an echo in the ghost's view of his own poetic work:

"I am not eager to rehearse  
My thoughts and theory which you have forgotten.  
These things have served their purpose: let them be. [...]  
For last year's words belong to last year's language  
And next year's words await another voice."

In the speech of Eliot's ghost, worldly success is a shallow reward, eventually shown to be of little or no value when seen from the perspective of the eternal. Rather than look back on our 'success' with satisfaction, it will become a source of pain for us, as we are forced to confront things we may have ignored at the time, "the shame / Of motives late revealed". It is for this reason that we will find worldly acclaim little more than the approval of fools.

Without redemption, Eliot's compound ghost foresees no rest in the afterlife, only continual movement "unless restored by that refining fire". In this respect, we can see the absence of spiritual peace as leading to ceaseless activity, like those who pursue the chariot of Life to the point of exasperation. Eliot's reference to a

refining fire turns our attention back to the distinction made by Rousseau in Shelley's poem. He claims that whereas those who travel behind the car are animated by ice, those around it are animated by fire. I believe that we can see those souls around the car as being engaged, to some extent, in a purgatorial process, and this is what Eliot came to recognise in Shelley's poem, and what enabled him to return to it in his later essay and single it out for praise.

The nature of the purgatorial process in Shelley's poem lies in the motivation of those who surround the car. We know, from Rousseau, that their overwhelming aim when alive was to influence the world around them. Like the revolt of Prometheus, which Shelley had addressed earlier, their actions may not always have stemmed from selfish motives, but the presence of a desire for personal gain has led to them requiring some refining to burn off their pursuit of glory and leave only their altruistic motives. The fire of Dantean Purgatory serves this purpose, burning away the dross of human love from the poets in Canto XXVI to leave them with the kernel of pure love that belongs with the divine. Some of those Shelley sees, like Plato, have produced works of great value for subsequent generations, but are punished for their attachment to worldly love, which prevented them from fully being at peace with themselves and therefore limited their ability to convey truth to others. Others, like Rousseau, are punished for having a misplaced ideal of love, realising now that:

if the spark with which Heaven lit my spirit  
Earth had with purer nutriment supplied

Corruption would not now thus much inherit  
Of what was once Rousseau - (201-4)

There is a vital element of pure feeling in the actions of these people. What has brought them to their purgatorial state as opposed to condemning them outright to infernal punishment is the continued presence of this pure feeling, although it is corrupted by human faults; pride, desire for glory, confusion of earthly love with the divine ideal that lies behind it. Seen in this light, the people who are being truly tormented in Shelley's poem are those who lag behind the car, without ever being crushed by its wheels. For those who are overrun by it, there is the prospect of

annihilation of self and therefore the faint hope of relocation within a transcendent reality. Shown the error of their ways, but left with the pure sentiment that motivated their actions, Shelley's figures can be seen to be undergoing a torment that holds out, at some point, the hope of a better state to come. Rather than desiring to master life for their own glory they now submit to being crushed by it in an action representative of their new sense of status within a potentially greater order.

Eliot's praise for this final poem of Shelley's, then, arose from his perceiving in it the trace of a change in Shelley's thought. As he had written in 1929, it is only by reading the Paradiso that the Purgatorio comes to yield its full significance. To accept a purgatorial model, one must believe in a transcendent state that exists as the reward *for* that purgatorial process. Eliot may have believed that, in 'The Triumph of Life', Shelley had started to move towards this scheme of thought. He saw Shelley's Dantean vision as moving beyond the purely infernal to admit purgatorial elements and images. This may well have led him to conclude that the poem showed traces of a 'maturity' lacking elsewhere. In writing his own Dantean tribute in 'Little Gidding', Eliot was also invoking Shelley's great unfinished poem and attempting the degree of spiritual reconciliation that is tantalisingly absent and yet potentially present at the heart of Shelley's final vision.

## Chapter Five – The Limits of Language

‘Well here again that don’t apply  
But I’ve gotta use words when I talk to you.’ – Eliot, Sweeney Agonistes

‘You must say words, as long as there are any.’ – Samuel Beckett<sup>1</sup>

This chapter will examine the way in which both Shelley and Eliot address the problematic relationship between language and reality in their work. Shelley, who gave the poet exalted status among men, argued that language had the power both to represent the poet’s vision of ‘reality’ and to work beneficial effects on its audience as they found a sense of communion with that vision. In practice, however, he often found that language was unable to fully express the measure of the poet’s vision, and in his poetry there is often a feeling of unease that something potentially transcendent is evading him. Shelley’s viewpoint is often that of one frustratingly removed from some greater state, with only partial powers of perception and limited powers of expression. Eliot’s early work echoes this view, drawing our attention towards those points at which language is not in itself capable of conveying what we feel we have to express. In the work of both poets this leads to feelings of frustration with the poetic medium which, for all its artistry and expressiveness, cannot fully relate the range of impressions that inspire it. Eliot’s Christian faith offers a solution to the problem. It is in the later work of Eliot, most notably in Four Quartets, that we see him reconciled to linguistic shortcomings, and this is because he has, by that point, come to see language in a more transcendent light. Shelley wants his words to do everything, and is pained when he feels them to be inadequate; Eliot, after initially finding this problem to be his own, comes to realise that, from the religious viewpoint, “the poetry does not matter”. Human silence is not an expression of failure, it is a necessary contrast to the voice of God.

### Shelley on Language

For Shelley, poetry possessed great power, but language itself was often found wanting. In the ‘Defence of Poetry’ (1821) he made great claims for the poetic

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<sup>1</sup> From The Unnameable. 418.

medium and the poet's skill in conveying his perception of the world to his audience:

The pleasure resulting from the manner in which they express the influence of society or nature upon their own minds, communicates itself to others, and gathers a sort of reduplication from that community. (Shelley 482)

We shall see these views reiterated in the Preface to Prometheus Unbound, where the poet is seen as one who can, by his words, awaken feelings in his audience and galvanise the isolated members of that audience into a community of understanding. The word "reduplication" leads us to imagine an infinite number of links being formed in a chain of meaning. Each act of understanding adds another person's consciousness to the poet's original vision, which is itself conveyed anew to an ever-increasing audience. The use of the communal image is interesting, because it draws together Shelley's theory of language and his view that the individual consciousness needed to be subsumed into a society of like-minded people.<sup>2</sup> This community will give strength both to its members and to the poet as he finds his own thoughts echoed by others. How does Shelley see language working in this instance? For him, the true 'poetic' element of language lies in its ability to express one's world-view so well that others recognise their own perceptions in it:

Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become through time signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts. (Shelley 482)

This is not simply the view found in Pope's famous dictum that poetry is "what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed." Shelley's poet draws attention to things that had *not* been perceived before, things missed by others, and by his language gives us a new sense of understanding the world. The power of the poet lies in his ability to make known connections that are not evident to other people. Therefore, the function of language becomes closely bound with the poet's ability to understand what they themselves perceive. Through language, we may obtain

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<sup>2</sup> Shelley often makes expression and comprehension aspects of an ideal state. In the essay 'On Love' he writes that love leads us into "a community with what we experience within ourselves", and that in the state of love, "if we reason, we would be understood" (Shelley 473). To be understood is therefore both a linguistic and spiritual goal for him, and failure in this process, as we have seen in 'Alastor' or 'Julian and Maddalo', becomes doubly painful.

knowledge. The extent to which readers 'recognise' it will define their ability to share in the poet's reality. This stage of the process is doubly complicated, however, as it relies on the poet's ability to find appropriate words for his insight, and the audience's finding those same words relevant to themselves.

Although the poet may possess 'insight' himself, Shelley makes the mark of his success his ability to foster understanding in others. The vision needs to be communicated, and the poet will be judged accordingly. To retain a vision in isolation is not, in itself, enough to make one a great poet. Indeed, we could say, citing the young poet of 'Alastor' as evidence, that the silent visionary is a failure in Shelley's world. When discussing the relationship between the poet and his audience, we must, then, consider the role played by language in the exchange. Language must represent the world and at the same time transfigure it. The poet must see the same things as other men and then relate them in ways that exceed the 'normal' perceptions of those around him. Shelley makes the following claim on behalf of the poet:

To be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word the good which exists in the relation, subsisting first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression. (Shelley 482)

Poetry, indeed any act of expression, arises out of turning one's perception of the world into a form that works upon others. The role of language in this action can be problematic, as we must first locate the words that do justice to our own perceptions, and then use these words in the belief that they will foster the same perceptions in others. The second half of this transaction can never be conducted with certainty, as we can never be sure that all words mean the same to all people, loaded as those words are with personal meanings and echoes. The poet, as Shelley claims, "participates in the eternal, the infinite"(Shelley 483) but language is very much a human construct, and if the poet is to take his audience with him in this activity it must be after he has mastered his own means of communication.

It will be evident at this point that the question of language is intrinsically bound up with the condition of selfhood that was examined in Chapter Two. Wasserman notes that "the power to pierce and penetrate to the heart of another would be

frustrated by any confinement within the circle of self or within other limiting conditions.”(Wasserman 445) Language can be read as one of these “limiting conditions”. It is no coincidence that the young man in Shelley’s most searching early study of selfhood, ‘Alastor’ should be a poet. For poetry to be successful, in Shelley’s view, there must be some correlation between what the poet perceives and what he can successfully evoke in his audience. If this connection is not sufficiently established, the poet will feel his ‘elevated’ status to be an isolated condition. Words must bear the burden of this task, and yet in Shelley’s own verse, as we shall see, there are many moments when language buckles under the strain placed upon it.

As in the essay ‘On Love’, Shelley’s ‘Defence of Poetry’ sets up an ideal. His poetry recalls the pursuit of this ideal, and the evidence points overwhelmingly to a pursuit in vain. The ideal eludes Shelley’s grasp, and he records both the desire to believe and the struggle to realise it. Towards the end of the ‘Defence’ Shelley claims that poetry “is indeed something divine”(Shelley 503), and that it retains the power to be “the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds.”(Shelley 504) It preserves our sense of the transcendent, arresting “the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life”(Shelley 505). The poetic medium is the means by which we capture and then store our sense of the ineffable. “Poetry”, as he famously declares, “redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man.”(Shelley 505)

In Shelley’s thought there is a level ‘above’ poetry, some transcendent state that is only ever glimpsed briefly in our life. Poetry offers us a means of preserving our brief glimpses of this state, simultaneously setting them down in a form that offers others the chance of experiencing that state themselves. The problem here lies in the forever shifting nature of the language we use, and this is frequently a source of unease in Shelley’s work. One poem, ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’, will be examined in detail later, but there are several other instances in which this problem can be seen.

Chapter Two examined ‘Alastor’ as a study in painful self-consciousness, but we can also read in it the problems of expression facing a sensitive nature when a sense of communion is lacking. As a poet himself, Shelley’s young man is driven by the

desire to communicate his vision, but concludes that this is not possible. The understanding on which Shelley sets such value in his later essay eludes his persona here and is a contributing factor in his physical decline and eventual death. In the later 'Epipsychidion', a poem described by Michael O'Neill as being "as much about poetry as it is about love"(O'Neill, *Literary*, 139, linguistic failure occurs when Shelley attempts to convey the intensity of the lover's vision. The breakdown of language is initially a measure of the lady's perfection. She is seen as the flame at which the poet's "moth-like Muse has burnt its wings"(53). In her presence, the poet's "dim words [...] flash, lightning-like, with unaccustomed glow" and he is momentarily raised above his everyday state. Continued existence at this level, however, leads to deterioration in the condition of language. Should the anticipated union occur, language will give way to unspoken communication:

And we will talk, until thought's melody  
 Become too sweet for utterance, and it die  
 In words, to live again in looks, which dart  
 With thrilling tone into the voiceless heart,  
 Harmonizing silence without a sound.           (560-4)

On one level, this is the ideal state that we find in the essay 'On Love' – the moment of pure communion with the consciousness of another where language falls away. However, this anticipation of union also draws our attention to the problematic status of language in the present, for when Shelley tries to convey how this would be, he finds words failing him:

The winged words on which my soul would pierce  
 Into the height of love's rare Universe,  
 Are chains of lead around its flight of fire.-  
 I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire!           (588-91)

As in 'Alastor', expression and existence are interwoven. Failure of one entails that of the other, and the poet 'dies' as his words give way beneath him. The ability to set down in words the heights our thoughts attain is not always found in Shelley's verse. What is contemplated often remains obstinately outside the scope of linguistic expression. Language becomes a burden that drags thought down to our level and precludes us from being raised to the higher condition to which we aspire. I will now consider how Shelley's linguistic problems are restated in Eliot's early

poetry, and the ways in which Eliot's personae are frequently reduced to silence when they perceive their vision to be incommunicable.

### **'It is impossible to say just what I mean!': Linguistic Problems in Eliot's Early Poetry**

Like Shelley before him, Eliot found himself face to face with the problematic relations of language and reality in his early work. In his first volume of poems his characters struggle to relate the exact nature of what they feel, always conscious that the words they use are not as expressive as they would like them to be. The outwardly self-assured narrator of 'Portrait of a Lady' finds himself imagining the following surreal situation:

And I must borrow every changing shape  
To find expression . . . dance, dance,  
Like a dancing bear,  
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.

The pursuit of an adequate medium eventually drives this man to the cries of animals, as his attempt to express himself in words breaks down. In an extreme sense, this passage draws attention to a shortfall between our vision of reality, which impels us to use words, and the words we use.

J. Alfred Prufrock is famously tongue-tied, conjuring up opening lines of conversations only to talk himself out of using them, convinced of their inefficacy before they are uttered. He is, however, also conscious of and concerned with the shortfall both between the words he uses and the effect he wishes to attain, and the things he wishes to express and the words he finds himself using. There is a sense of something tantalisingly out of his linguistic reach in the poem. In Stephen Spender's words, "his failure, for which he despises himself, is a failure to relate either with another person or with the Absolute." (Spender 40) He wants to relate his experience to the drawing-room audience, but anticipates only bored indifference.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As I mentioned in my study of the poem in Chapter Two, Prufrock *expects* a negative reaction, which is not a guarantee that he *would* receive one. This negative sense of expectation, however, further constrains the self to the point at which speech is rejected even before it is uttered. Prufrock's talking himself out of speech is, ironically, the only 'conversation' he has.

As a result of his failing to utter anything, he remains painfully trapped within his sense of selfhood, a consciousness turned inwards with no prospect of expressive release. The nature of Prufrock's self-consciousness has been examined earlier in this study, but his problematic relationship with language exacerbates this sense of isolation even as it conveys it to us readers. Prufrock himself wishes to be relieved both of his self-consciousness, and the attendant reliance upon language, expressing the desire to be "a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of *silent seas*"(my emphasis).

If Prufrock's conversational gambits are dismissed before they reach the point of utterance, this is because a less than favourable response is anticipated on the part of his audience, "one, settling a pillow by her head," who would wearily note that "that is not what I meant at all." On one level, this shows a breakdown of empathy – a lack of communion that casts both parties into social solitude, isolation and an increased sense of selfhood. It is the worst possible response that Shelley could envisage for a poetic utterance. It can, however, also draw attention to the problematic inefficacy of language.

Prufrock attributes these dismissive words to one of his potential audience, but they could just as easily be his own.<sup>4</sup> If his opening lines are discarded, it is not because they do not work on other people, but because he does not *think* they will do so. He is filtering his speech before saying it, always feeling that he has not found the desired formula for expression, that whatever line he comes up with is not representative of what he truly means. As none of his words are ever uttered, we can, however, never be wholly sure that they would receive the response that he expects. Prufrock's great linguistic problem is that he is aware of this condition, but unable to resolve it. This is best shown in his outburst towards the end of the poem:

It is impossible to say just what I mean!  
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a  
screen:

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<sup>4</sup> The nature of Prufrock's entire 'Love Song' is ambiguous. The 'other' to which his words are addressed may be another person, or another part of his own psyche, invited to "go and make our visit" through the city streets. If we are uncertain as to the addressee of his words, a similar degree of uncertainty arises when we consider the other voices that are reported within the poem.

A cry of anguish at the shortcomings of language is immediately followed by another attempt to express the self in language, using another image. Prufrock remains aware of his failure to express himself, and yet sees no alternative to another attempt at expression.

Throughout the poem, we feel, as readers, that something transcendent is missed. There is more to the world than the banal chatter and rattle of teacups, and Prufrock knows this. His torment is that he cannot put it into words. There is one point within the poem when he comes close to succeeding in this action:

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets  
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes  
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?...

This is a 'poetic' image, albeit included with a touch of irony on Eliot's part, a vision of the world put into words by one who is acutely sensitive to life going on around him. The image fades away, however, and joins the ranks of Prufrock's other unused conversational lines. It is, nonetheless, distinct from those lines in its representational power, lingering in our minds after we have read it. Prufrock dismisses it as he does the others, but significantly he does not do so on the grounds that its expected audience would not find it fitting. Rather, he allows it to trail off into silence, as though the image has overwhelmed him, and he cannot continue to develop it within his poem.

There is, then, a very real sense of linguistic struggle in Prufrock's thoughts. In his typically self-deprecating comparison of himself with Hamlet, Prufrock draws our attention to another character engaged in a struggle with "words, words, words" (II.2.193). Hamlet remains aware of the close relationship between life and language, giving Horatio the closing injunction "in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, / To tell my story"(V.2.341-3) and dying with the closing words "The rest is silence"(V.2.352). Whereas Hamlet physically dies into 'silence', however, Prufrock foresees a social 'death' in which he is recalled to the tea-time chatter of the women, unable to get beyond his own linguistic inhibitions. Language is not able to wholly relate either what we feel or what we see. We have, however, no alternative means of expression at our disposal, and so the struggle carries on,

leaving us painfully aware that if we do not adequately express what we perceive, we will find those perceptions tormenting us, trapping us within our selves whilst we strive to tell others what we feel. Language promises to be the key to our prison, but it can also be the bars at the window.

The lines in which Prufrock describes the city streets would be at home in 'Preludes', a series of short poems about city life.<sup>5</sup> What makes these four poems interesting is their changing narrative stance. In the first poem, the tone is of a vision that is universal, although perceived by an individual. Anybody could smell the steaks in passageways, or find a newspaper wrapped around their feet as the wind picks up. In the second, however, a blend of personal and impersonal perspective draws our attention to a perceiving consciousness behind the poem. Whilst the first stanza relates the city's revival "to faint stale smells of beer" as the crowds gather at "early coffee-stands", the second makes a personal observation:

With the other masquerades  
That time resumes,  
One thinks of all the hands  
That are raising dingy shades  
In a thousand furnished rooms.

Although using the impersonal 'one', a single consciousness is behind these lines – one who both sees the city life around him as a 'masquerade' (not an objective description, but rather one that implies a point of view) and finds himself contemplating the lives of others within that city. From initial omniscience, we have moved to limited perception – one can think about these people, but only through the artificial medium of poetry can we claim to 'know' what they do.

In the third poem, we are with one such occupant of a furnished room, waking up after a night in which sleep has revealed "the thousand sordid images / Of which your soul was constituted". The poet can mentally enter one of these rooms, but can

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<sup>5</sup> The four poems that make up 'Preludes' are closely bound with 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. Southam records that the first two were written in Harvard in October 1910, the third in Paris in July 1911 and the final one back at Harvard around November 1911. Eliot, in a 1946 letter to John C. Pope, recalls that 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' was completed in the summer of 1911 (Southam 45), thereby linking the poems chronologically as well as by milieu and subject matter.

only go so far. Although able to relate what his addressee would see or hear, because he can see and hear them too, he is unable to adequately record what they would think:

You had such a vision of the street  
As the street hardly understands

The poet cannot understand this vision either; it is outside of his experience, and all the poem can do is gesture towards it. Kenner notes that this is “almost a transfiguring vision”, but it is not expressed within the poem, which “fades into empirical banality”(Kenner 30). As Moody concludes, “It is not a world in itself that we are being given, but [the poet’s] consciousness of it.”(Moody, Poet, 24) A soul may be described as being split into “a thousand sordid images”, but only the owner of that soul can ever know what those images are. There is a sense here of poetry being made to stop short in the face of its subject matter. Shelley wanted the poet to perceive and communicate the connections in his world that others missed; Eliot can sense these connections, but like Shelley finds communication eluding him.

The ‘Preludes’ are poems underscored by an awareness of a ‘higher’ level of reality, but simultaneously unable to fully grasp that reality in language. The word ‘Prelude’ implies that something potentially greater is coming, but these poems end before that event. The first poem closes with the line “And then the lighting of the lamps”. As readers we may expect more to come, led on by Eliot’s “And then...” but this is actually the point at which we leave the poem. Whatever ‘happens’ next, we will not know of it. Even when moving to and fro between omniscience and individual empathy, Eliot cannot fully penetrate the world and relate it to us. The addressee of ‘Prelude 3’ has had a vision that the street does not understand, but the poet cannot tell us what that vision was. In the final poem we find these lines:

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

The language here is consciously imprecise. 'Fancies' conjures up the use of the imagination. 'Images' evokes a process of representation. If fancies are curled around images, the nature of those images becomes harder to define, although we are moved by those same fancies. In similar fashion, the "suffering thing" remains no more than a notion – 'thing' being an imprecise way of referring to an object. As Moody notes, this section "intimates an ideal beyond the images afforded by experience, but places that as notional merely."(Moody, Poet, 25) There is something *in* the city that Eliot is not able to set down in words, something that can be gestured towards but not named, and for all the detail in the descriptions of the city, it is that closing sense of something infinite and ungraspable that haunts 'Preludes' as it haunts Prufrock's thoughts. If we think back to Shelley's view of poetry, there has been a fundamental breakdown in these works in the relationship between what is perceived and what is communicated. Language is not necessarily a means of release from our self-consciousness, but may indeed reinforce that self-consciousness to the point at which we no longer feel that we can express ourselves. Our words can be an extension of our own selfhood more than an independent means of release, something Shelley was to explore in Prometheus Unbound, a poem that undercuts the views expressed in his 'Defence' in its less optimistic view of linguistic communication.

### **"A Voice is wanting": Language in *Prometheus Unbound***

With its debts to Aeschylus, Milton and Dante, Prometheus Unbound represents the greatest instance of the epic vision in Shelley's work. If we recognise the vast scale of its subject, however, we should also pay heed to the status and function of language in the poem. In the Preface, Shelley sets down his thoughts on the nature of poetic 'imitation' and the use of language to foster understanding between people:

Poetry is a mimetic art. It creates, but it creates by combination and representation. Poetical abstractions are beautiful and new, not because the portions of which they are composed had no previous existence in the mind of man or in nature, but because the whole produced by their combination has some intelligible and beautiful analogy with those sources of emotion and thought, and with the contemporary condition of them. (Shelley 134)

In making poetry, and by implication language, mimetic, Shelley posits a relationship between the poet's world-view and that of his audience. When language 'works' upon us, it will express the essence of what we ourselves perceive to be true. The best poetry will make intelligible the world in which we live. Language, when employed with greatest success, provides us with some insight into reality. Shelley famously affirms here that "didactic poetry is my abhorrence" (Shelley 135) but posits in place of outright preaching an order in which poetry works for man's betterment through a state of shared understanding.<sup>6</sup>

After the drama of Act One, which centres on Prometheus' recall of his curse on Jupiter, Act Two opens with an exchange between Asia and Panthea, spirits of the earth. On encountering her fellow spirit, Panthea enquires as to the cause of her distress and, being told that it cannot be set down in words, asks that she may "read thy dream" by gazing into her companion's eyes. This image, calling to mind the manner in which Dante's questions in the Paradiso are often 'answered' in the gaze of Beatrice, leads Panthea to relate her own vision of Prometheus' release. Significantly, in communicating this vision, Panthea admits a sense of deeper uncertainty:

I always knew what I desired before  
Nor ever found delight to wish in vain.  
But now I cannot tell thee what I seek;           (II.1.95-7)

Even as her vision is being communicated, Panthea retains a sense of something elusive, something that is not being adequately expressed. Whereas she 'knew' in the past, she now finds herself unable to articulate what she seeks, and this inability calls into question, implicitly, the extent to which she actually 'knows' what she wants. This 'other dream' is seen by Asia only in passing, "a thing of air" that

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<sup>6</sup> Initial critical reception of Prometheus Unbound was far from Shelley's hoped-for state of understanding. John Gibson Lockhart, reviewing for Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, spoke of a "pestiferous mixture of blasphemy, sedition, and sensuality" (Barcus 238) in the poem. An unsigned review in The Literary Gazette concluded:

An' these extracts do not entitle the author to a cell, clean straw, bread and water,  
a strait waistcoat, and phlebotomy, there is no madness in scribbling. (Barcus 233)

Some reviews praised the poetry itself whilst attacking the content. An unsigned review in The Lonsdale Magazine lamented that "so fine a poet should have espoused so detestable a cause" (Barcus 251). If Shelley wanted his words to bring a community of like-minded people into being, this final distinction between language and thought is in itself a harsh criticism, for it calls into question the connection between language and thought that he had spelt out in the Preface.

comes between her and the vision of Prometheus' release she sees in her companion's eyes:

DREAM                      Follow, follow!

PANTHEA  
It is mine other dream. –

ASIA  
It disappears.                      (II.1.131-2)

This dream will eventually be revealed as relating to the fall of Jupiter, an event Shelley will describe in Act III. At this point, however, it remains tantalisingly elusive, leading the pair on in the form of "aerial tongues" that grow "more faint and distant" as they recede.

Deciding to follow these voices, the two maidens are led by them to the realm of Demogorgon. This is a deep chasm with oracular properties, visited in the past by those seeking meaning and guidance in their life. The approach to Demogorgon's cave is both a topographical descent and a journey towards linguistic meaning. Barriers are penetrated en route to understanding, a journey "Through the veil and the bar / Of things which seem and are"(II.3.59-60).

This journey is also a search for knowledge, an attempt to locate something concealed from view, to be found 'behind' reality. When finally confronted with Demogorgon, however, the maidens' quest for knowledge does not reach the well-defined end that one might have expected:

DEMOGORGON  
Ask what thou wouldst know.

ASIA  
What canst thou tell?

DEMOGORGON  
All things thou dar'st demand.                      (II.4.7-8)

The knowledge that has been sought remains elusive even as it is 'found'. It is not some objective goal, but a revelation that originates in each individual, and will vary in each case. Demogorgon's replies will shape themselves on Asia's questions. He will tell her what she wants to know, but she must herself 'know' what she desires in advance, a textual echo of Panthea's earlier claim that "I always knew what I desired before"(II.1.95). This is a relative form of understanding, and it is contingent on language to bring it to resolution. Asia must know what she wants to ask; she will not be told what she does not, to some extent, already know. Given that Asia and Panthea have found language wanting in the past, we must doubt that they will adequately express their desires here, and so will obtain only a partial answer to the questions they only partly know how to phrase.

Initially, Asia's questions are answered. Demanding to know what made the world, she receives the answer 'God'. By the same token, "Almighty God" is responsible for the finer qualities of that world, "thought, passion, reason, will, / Imagination."(II.4.10-11) "Merciful God" is responsible for the bestowal of love on mankind. Asia's questions become problematic, however, when she asks the following:

And who made terror, madness, crime, remorse,  
 [...] Abandoned hope, and love that turns to hate;  
 [...] And Hell, or the sharp fear of Hell? (II.4.19,24,28)

In response to this, Demogorgon replies "He reigns." The understanding here is that the same God who created the world out of benevolence also created Hell, whilst giving man the degree of free will that leaves him free to choose either option. Asia, however, is unable to make this connection, and asks again for a name, adding "I feel, I know it – who?" Demogorgon's response is unchanged – "He reigns". Asia must reach the conclusion for herself, reconciling the two aspects of the God of the poem, coming to terms with man's potential for self-induced Promethean punishment or release into freedom.<sup>7</sup> Only by seeing the necessity of

<sup>7</sup> As I noted in Chapter Two, *Prometheus Unbound* is another example of the close connection between self-consciousness and linguistic expression in Shelley's work. Prometheus obtains release in the act of 'recalling' his curse on Jupiter – the verb standing for an act of recollection and also the retraction of past speech. Hearing his own words uttered by the phantasm of his enemy, Prometheus recognized the connection between them, that "his own intellectual and moral errors were externalized by Jupiter's existence and tyranny" in Charles Robinson's words. (Robinson 122)

this twin-faceted God will the vision of Panthea become intelligible. Language can lead us towards this, but the final acknowledgement must come from deeper within. It is for this reason that the truths Demogorgon offers are relative to the questions, and the expressed needs, of his interlocutors.

This quest for ultimate answers, and the relative status of language in relation to transcendent reality, is brought out later in Act II. When Asia has made the connection between Demogorgon's 'God' and the tyrannical Jupiter, she endeavours to ensnare the oracle into confirming this, asking him "Whom calledst thou God?" Demogorgon, however, is not so easily led, and returns "I spoke but as ye speak"(II.4.112).

Should we read Demogorgon's replies in these exchanges as wilfully evasive, or do they highlight the problematic status of language within Shelley's world-view? I believe that this exchange shows that language is something that enables each of us to understand his own reality. The problem here is that if language is so personal, there is little hope of us attaining understanding with another, for we will never be sure that our words mean the same to others as they do to ourselves, something that will be evident when we come to consider Eliot's The Waste Land. If words are, therefore, to some extent arbitrary, we must acknowledge that language itself can offer only traces of deeper truth, as Demogorgon says:

- If the Abysm  
 Could vomit forth its secrets: - but a voice  
 Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless;  
 For what would it avail to bid thee gaze  
 On the revolving world? (II.4.114-18)

The possibility of the abysm vomiting forth its secrets is raised, but tails off into oblivion as a possibility that will not be realised. The deepest secrets, lost at the foot of the abyss, remain out of our reach.<sup>8</sup> To make them "imageless" is to assert the relative inability of our words to make them intelligible. Language cannot

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<sup>8</sup> Demogorgon's abysm echoes the ravine of 'Mont Blanc' which, as Michael O'Neill points out, "is object as well as emblem of the poet's thinking. In its otherness it prompts in Shelley the discovery that mind is distinct from object, that the object can never be fully drawn up into the mind, that language can only stand in for objects." (O'Neill, Imaginings 44)

express them, and the only possibility of their being revealed would be in the confusion of their being 'vomited forth', lacking expressive form and therefore almost impossible to comprehend. In our use of language we impose our own view on the world, in the same way that Demogorgon does not proffer knowledge freely, but responds to the specific injunctions of those who question him. As Asia concludes, "Each to itself must be the oracle", as opposed to relying on the words of another. But is this subjective view a wholly adequate response to our desire for knowledge? Demogorgon's speech seems to answer this question in the negative, rhetorically asking Asia "what would it avail to bid thee gaze / On the revolving world?"(II.4.118-19) This seems to indicate that Asia remains unable to fully comprehend, and relate, what she perceives. Even if she could conceive the 'whole' vision she would be unable to express it to another.

The image of the revolving world finds an intriguing echo at the close of Eliot's 'Preludes':

Wipe your hand across you mouth, and laugh;  
The worlds revolve like ancient women  
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

In our earlier reading of 'Preludes' we identified the awareness of some greater reality that the poems approach without fully grasping. These closing lines, coming after the most metaphysically speculative ones of Eliot's poem, those dwelling on "some infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing", serve to bring poet and reader back to mundane reality, or rather, their inability to relate anything 'higher'. In the closing lines, we find Eliot resigned (in this poem) to not fully relating what is perceived, laughing uneasily at the refusal of the world to submit to his words. What does language do in these instances, except gesture towards something frustratingly ineffable?

There is a clear sense of a transcendent reality behind the events of Prometheus Unbound, but language is in itself inadequate when it comes to expressing it. The words we use are subjective, already conditioned by their having been selected by us, and therefore likely to attract responses that are themselves limited in scope. Our understanding remains limited, unless we admit the fundamental inadequacy of

language and receive some higher vision, in the same sense that the Spirits of the Hours, which are indistinct in Asia's dream, manifest themselves at the end of Act II. Although Shelley asserts in the Preface that language can foster understanding between people, the characters of his poem are forced to admit the relative nature of the linguistic medium. If understanding is obtained, it is at those points, like Asia's gazing into Panthea's eyes, at which language itself is set aside.

Shelley's epic Promethean vision is also a searching study of the problematic status and function of language, and shows that excessive reliance on words can lead to confusion. I will now read Eliot's most famous poem from a linguistic viewpoint to show how it, too, addresses the subjective meanings of words, and the way we struggle to convey to others our individual vision through the shifting medium of language.

### **Language and Reality in *The Waste Land***

Previous chapters of this study have read The Waste Land as a study in isolated self-consciousness and as evidence of the reduced status of human love in Eliot's world. Here I wish to consider the problematic status of language within the poem, and the feeling that there exists some greater reality that cannot be expressed by Eliot's characters, in the same way that Shelley's "deep truth" evaded attempts to represent it. Russell Elliott Murphy's essay on the poem provides a very useful reading in this respect. He connects the poem's fragmentary structure with the question of its overall 'meaning':

The Waste Land is meaningful only as a commentary on the severe limitations upon our ability to arrive at meaning, and it achieves that 'meaning' by disassociating itself from the techniques of meaningful literature [...] It is not, however, the thematic substance of the poetry's literary fragments, or their sources, for that matter, that constitute the poem's meaning; the poem's meaning is instead the unavoidable fact that that apparent substance, like all verbalised human reality, is always only fragmentary and therefore, by definition, useless if intended for the purposes of any coherent meaning or vision. (Bagchee 57)<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Russell Elliott Murphy. "It is impossible to say just what I mean": The Waste Land as Transcendent Meaning." in Shyamal Bagchee (Ed.) T. S. Eliot: A Voice Descanting 1990, 51-67.

Linguistically, The Waste Land remains a fascinating jumble. Constantly switching from one language to another, Eliot's poem exudes the air of an attempt to set down in words something that slides away from the grasp of one particular language. The poem's epigraph draws our attention to the problematic nature of referential language, relating as it does the exchange between the Cumaean sibyl and the children who bait her in Petronius' Satyricon. The sibyl's words are related in Greek, which, in the midst of a Latin quotation, sets them at a double remove from us as readers. With this communication problem, the concept of the sibyl as a receptacle of knowledge is also subverted, something that is repeated in a more ironic fashion in the modern sibyl, Madame Sostotris, being hampered by "a bad cold", prevented from seeing all of the cards she deals out.<sup>10</sup> If there is a degree of understanding to be found in the oracles of these women we will not appreciate it as our ability to connect with them is limited. In the modern world, however, it is still to them that we predictably turn. The evocation of the sibyl takes us back to the classical world, and to the "oracular cave" of Shelley's Demogorgon in Prometheus Unbound.<sup>11</sup> As we have seen earlier, the knowledge that Demogorgon proffers is actually something the enquirer already 'knows' but doesn't recognise, as opposed to something objective. Eliot uses the limited powers of his debased sibyls to mock our attempts to discern meaning in the speech of another.

The status of language in relation to the world is connected with this limited sense of understanding. If our grasp of the world around us is only partial, then the situation will be exacerbated by our attempting to relate it to someone else in words, which are themselves often found wanting in a descriptive capacity. The words we use mean something to us, but can we be sure they mean the same thing to another? This aspect of the poem is intrinsically linked to its prevailing sense of isolation. Madame Sostotris asks her audience to remind "dear Mrs. Equitone" that "I bring the horoscope myself / One must be so careful these days." (57-8) She anticipates some degree of corruption if the words are transmitted through another. This

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<sup>10</sup> In the drafts of the poem, Eliot had "These fragments I have spelt into my ruins" (TWL 81) instead of the later "shored against". The original reference turned attention back onto the Sibyls of classical literature, who located meaning within the leaves they spelt out.

<sup>11</sup> Eliot's introduction of Tiresias later in the poem makes another connection with classical literature, as Tiresias was the aged prophet of Oedipus Rex, another figure in possession of knowledge sought by others.

exhibits a breakdown in the belief that language can 'mean' the same things to all people. On these grounds, the sense of communal understanding that Shelley hopes for in the Preface to Prometheus Unbound looks a forlorn prospect. A fascinating line in the original manuscript, later deleted, came between the close of Madame Sosostri's reading and her words to the speaker, and quoted the words of St John the Divine, taken from Revelation 22.8, "I John saw these things, and heard them" (TWL 9). In the contrast between the modern sibyl and the Biblical divine we see the gulf between the sibyl's partial and vaguely conveyed vision and one of the supreme works of visionary and religious literature in the Western canon.

Although a poem of many voices, The Waste Land is also concerned with the failure of speech. One of the most eloquent of its silent figures is the man of Part II, who keeps his thoughts to himself while his neurotic partner fires questions at him. As I remarked in Chapter Three, we may or may not choose to see him as the same man who recalls the return from the hyacinth garden in Part I, but both men withdraw into silence when confronted with what they perceive, and that silence is as expressive as the words of their respective partners. The man of Part I was so overwhelmed by his initial experience that "I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed".<sup>12</sup> Only after a year of recollection can he attempt to set down in words what happened to him, and significantly he recalls the experience in largely negative terms, able to relate what he had temporarily 'lost' with more clarity than what he actually received. Michael Edwards draws attention to this vision, calling the hyacinth garden episode one moment "which seems to escape the toils of language by looking to a possibility beyond speech":

'I knew nothing' is not the same as 'I did not know anything': like silence, 'nothing' is positive, as in Mallarmé (or Lewis Carroll). A silence beyond words and a nothing beyond matter are attained in an apparently ecstatic vision of 'the heart of light'. (Edwards 108-9)<sup>13</sup>

The man of Part I has experienced the briefest of insights into some higher scheme of things, and in that moment his everyday language was of no use to him, "looking

<sup>12</sup> Spurr argues that the line break before 'Speak' is itself significant, claiming that it "intimates formally the theme of the inarticulate." (Spurr 28)

<sup>13</sup> Michael Edwards. Towards a Christian Poetics (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984).

into the heart of light, the silence.” The man of Part II is also silent, but his silence is expressive of a sense of horror, of something also deeply felt, but by no means transcendent. Whereas the man in Part I lost his sense of reality, this man’s is all too painfully present. When asked what he is thinking of, his mental reply is “I think we are in rats’ alley / Where the dead men lost their bones.”(115-16)

The woman perceives her partner’s silence to be a sign of withdrawal, asking “Are you alive or not? Is there nothing in your head?”(126) There is actually a great deal in the man’s head, but he does not feel he can convey it to his partner, possibly because she is the root cause of much of his anguish. Instead, it surfaces in his thoughts, while his outer self engages in a game of chess. What we have here, then, is both the sense of isolated pain, and the feeling that language cannot adequately express what is felt.

It is significant that the man of Part II ‘speaks’ only to himself, as opposed to addressing another. In his withdrawal from discourse, I believe we can see an awareness that his words would not convey all that he feels. In thinking them to himself he understands them totally, but would the woman know what to make of his responses to her questions? This, of course, leads us into a vicious linguistic circle, in which we do not speak, believing that we would not be understood, and so find our isolation intensified in much the same sense as J. Alfred Prufrock, or the poet of Shelley’s ‘Alastor’, as I remarked in Chapter Two. There may be more to this, however, than the relationship of language to the perceiving self. It may be that words are indeed not fully capable of conveying our perceptions, limited like the truncated conversation that closes Part II, where Lil’s friend attempts to hold court only to be interrupted by the repeated “HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME” of the landlord. We need to ask, is the babble of The Waste Land an attempt to convey something that remains out of our linguistic reach?

As I have remarked earlier in this study, The Waste Land is a poem that restates the problems of Eliot’s early verse and simultaneously points towards solutions to those problems without itself reaching them. The fact that it does not successfully resolve its own questions is, I believe, due in part to the absence of the full religious

dimension that would enable this to be the case.<sup>14</sup> It does, however, suggest directions in which our efforts might be diverted to attain some resolution to our problems. The question of transcendence in The Waste Land comes to the fore in this final part, which combines an apocalyptic vision of collapse with the desire for personal regeneration. On the one hand, the world is plunged into chaos as the 'unreal' cities collapse to the "murmur of maternal lamentation". On the other, the personal desire for spiritual healing remains, and at the close of the poem is rewarded with the injunctions of the Thunder.

The speech of the Thunder is framed in transcendent terms. It comes from above the jungle, which waits "humped in silence." We may read it as offering guidance for men from some spiritual dimension, and its religious provenance supports this, but, as Brooker and Bentley point out, the Thunder only 'says' the same thing three times. "The passage is not about messages from above", in their view, "but about interpretations." (Brooker & Bentley 189) We do not really receive the transcendent advice from above that the poem may seem to present. The subsequent interpretations are those of men, attaching words to the original utterance and deriving meaning from those interpretations. In this sense, Eliot's poem reiterates Shelley's lines in Prometheus Unbound, that "each to itself must be the oracle".<sup>15</sup> Within The Waste Land, however, the glosses given to the Thunder's speech offer the prospect of resolution to the isolation felt by its characters, even if they remain little more than suggestions. Like the maidens in Shelley's poem, we have, by the close of the poem, come to realise that language cannot wholly contain any transcendent truth, but that our ability to derive anything from it lies in our own powers of interpretation. These powers are not always adequate to process what we receive, but in lieu of any alternative we must continue to use them.

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<sup>14</sup> I believe that The Waste Land, in some key respects, gestures towards Eliot's later religious poems without itself attaining their conclusions. I would add, however, that this is not the same as claiming The Waste Land as an inherently Christian poem 'before the event', as argued in the work of Helen Gardner and, more recently, in Lyndall Gordon's biography of Eliot.

<sup>15</sup> The connection between the two poems is made in an essay on Eliot by E. M. Forster (published in Abinger Harvest, 1936). Forster remarks that "It [TWL] is just a personal comment on the universe, as individual and as isolated as Shelley's Prometheus." (Forster 90) Although wishing to stress the personality in these poems, Forster also draws our attention towards the relative status of language and perception that they both address.

Where, then, does this leave language within Eliot's poem? It cannot be dismissed as wholly inadequate, but we must come to admit its limitations. As Murphy points out, we need to admit that meaning may "not succumb to verbal analysis or verbal reformulations." (Bagchee 55) We must reconcile the linguistic medium with the things it struggles to express, appreciating that there is some higher reality, but that we cannot expect words to reach it, as Brooker and Bentley write:

Transcendence to the Absolute is the only answer, and that answer cannot be accepted without a leap beyond philosophy into faith. Something after meaning is needed before meaning can be found in a coherent form.

(Brooker & Bentley 199)

Out of the jumbled lines of The Waste Land, Eliot closes with the desire to establish some degree of order:

*Poi s'ascese nel foco che gli affina*

*Quando fiam uti chelidon – O swallow swallow*

*Le prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie*

These fragments I have shored against my ruins (427-30)

At first reading these lines may strike us as a chaotic jumble, the secrets that Shelley's abyss would "vomit forth" without thought to form or order. There is no unifying language, as we find ourselves facing Italian, Latin, English and French, but is there any unity in what is being expressed?

These closing fragments are united in their sense of speech being elevated to something higher. We must examine each fragment in turn to see this more clearly. The first is the closing line of Dante's Purgatorio, Canto XXVI. It describes how Arnaut Daniel, having stepped from the refining fire to speak to Dante, returns to continue his purgation. "Then he hid himself in the flames that refine them." Daniel has been encountered on the circle of the lustful, and this is also the one where we find the poets, whose sin was to have praised the human element of love in preference to the divine love that Dante asserts via his love for Beatrice, which is also his love for God. Seen in context then, this image of purgation is one in which the poet is refined as a man, and his poetry is also raised to a higher level. Although

undergoing the purgatorial flames, Arnaut is one who continues to “sing as I go” (Purg. 26.142).

The second image comes from the Pervigilium Veneris, and translates as “When shall I be as the swallow?” When this is set alongside the quotation from Tennyson’s ‘The Princess’, in which the Prince appeals to the bird to be the messenger of his love, we see two instances in which human speech is changed into birdsong. This sense of transcending language in the purity of song draws our attention back to the myth of Philomela that figures in Part II of the poem. Philomela was turned into a nightingale so that her song “Filled the desert with inviolable voice” (101); the twin sense of “inviolable” in that line referring both to her freedom from any further sexual violation by Tereus and the purity of her song. Philomela’s sister Procne, in Ovid’s version of the myth, was herself turned into a swallow. In both of these references, then, human speech (and by implication poetry) is transmuted into something inherently more pure.

The final fragment comes from Gérard de Nerval’s sonnet ‘El Desdichado’ (‘The Disinherited’). As Southam puts it, Nerval’s poet “speaks of himself as the disinherited prince, heir to the tradition of the French troubadour poets who were associated with the castles of Aquitaine in south-western France.” (Southam 198) At first reading, this line may evoke thoughts of a destroyed tradition, but if we remember that Nerval, the nineteenth century poet, is using it as a starting point for his own sonnet we may see this image of decline as part of another poetic tradition, one that returns to the past in order to make use of it again. In this sense new life is restored to the ruined tower, and the poetic tradition is revived.

These fragments, then, are “shored against my ruins”, as Eliot’s narrator tries to build some defence against the overwhelming sense of collapse and confusion in the world around him. On one linguistic level, they are part of that confusion – jumbled lines, shorn of context and linguistically disparate, relevant to an individual but not to a wider audience. If we dwell on them, however, and trace their collective significance, we see them united in describing how ‘fallen’ language can be transcended. One must first admit that language has limitations, and then consider means by which words can be endued with new life and relevance, or subsumed

into something greater altogether. Murphy sees the poem as evidence of the fundamental shortcoming of language and art, reading it as:

[a]n imaginative engagement with the essential chord of human suffering: that we crave meaning and yet have never found it to remain for long in any satisfactory form either in experience or art. (Bagchee 60)

We cannot, however, remain long with the knowledge that language is inadequate without speculating on some means of transcendence by which this problem could be resolved. If language is indeed limited, where is the greater power that can subsume it? As a poem, The Waste Land does not follow this path to linguistic transcendence, closing in the reiteration of the Thunder's interpreted commands and the thrice-uttered "Shantih" to induce some formal ending.<sup>16</sup> What we have found there, however, is the awareness that language, although limited in one sense, can assume new meaning if we posit a transcendent force that can elevate it to a higher plane. Paradoxically, this only becomes clear when one admits the limitation of language, and confronts its essential inefficacy. This is what The Waste Land helps us to do.

At the close of The Waste Land, then, we are faced with the possibility that a breakdown of linguistic expression can actually be evidence of some higher state that transcends language. Eliot's poem is therefore evidence that Shelley's vision, that of a community of individuals reached through language, is ultimately unrealisable. It ends, however, on a note of promise, hinting that our abandonment of language may actually be the point at which we can attain a higher degree of understanding. Interestingly, Shelley actually expresses this sentiment in one of his early poems, the 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', in which he makes linguistic inadequacy evidence of the existence of a power that outstrips the words he uses to describe it. Lacking a faith with which to reconcile this belief, Shelley's poem stands as an isolated instance of this view, but a reading of it will show how Eliot

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<sup>16</sup> In her reading of the poem, Cleo McNelly Kearns sees the repeated 'Shantih' as a vital element in the poem, turning it from a personal meditation into a spiritual prayer uttered on behalf of others. "Shantih", she writes, "makes of what comes before it a communal as well as a private utterance." (Kearns 228) It is interesting that Eliot defined this Sanskrit word by comparison with the Christian "peace that passeth all understanding", a peace which draws believers together in a body of belief and communal understanding.

was later able to move beyond the Shelleyan linguistic impasse, whereas Shelley remained mired in problems of expression throughout his poetic career.

### **Awareness of the Absolute in 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty'**

Although Shelley could not admit the idea of the Christian God being behind the Universe, he frequently attempted to raise his own ideals and beliefs to divine status. We have already seen this in Chapter Three, in relation to his conception of human love. As Ridenour writes:

At his most anti-religious Shelley never thinks of the idea of divinity as irrelevant to man. He regularly assumes that there are kinds of experience that call attention to themselves for their qualitative difference from the rest of life, and which seem to demand a theological vocabulary. They intimate the possibility of a richer and more satisfying life of tranquility and fulfilment. (Ridenour 5)

The early poem 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', like Eliot's *The Waste Land*, stands as Shelley's attempt to reconcile linguistic inadequacy with some higher force, and thereby give it meaning. As with Eliot's poem, we are left with the possibility of reconciliation rather than reconciliation itself, but Shelley does gesture towards a possible reason for a breakdown of linguistic expression, even if he himself found such a reason hard to adhere to in his later work.

In this poem 'Intellectual Beauty', a fusion of knowledge and virtue that owes much to Shelley's classical reading, comes to stand as the prevailing power in the world.<sup>17</sup> The opening stanza tells us, however, that we can never directly perceive this power at work. Indeed, even the shadow of this power "floats though unseen amongst us"(2) – thereby setting it at a double remove from our senses. In this striking Platonic image we cannot even perceive the shadow, much less the force itself. Indeed, we may come closest to perceiving this power after it has departed, "like memory of music fled"(10). Interestingly, Shelley does not see this as a source of confusion, and stanza one closes with him reconciled to the existence of a power "that for its grace may be / Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery."(11-12) This may

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<sup>17</sup> In their edition, Donald Reiman and Sharon Powers note that 'Intellectual' means 'nonmaterial', and therefore refers to something perceived by the mind as opposed to the senses.



invoking its aid. The language embodies, on the other hand, his awareness that he cannot construct a framework capable of holding this ideal in place. The manner in which it eludes him is itself represented in his attempts to define it. He fears the departure of this ideal and a lapse into "dark reality" after brief illumination. As a poet, this failure of expression pains him. Awareness that there is something that "these words cannot express" means positing some transcendent power above the physical world. If this power can be invoked by the admittedly imperfect medium of words, then Shelley can be reconciled to the limitations of his own language. If not, he will find himself like the poet in 'Alastor', alone with the tantalising visions that arrive and depart at will. The poem 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', then, is an attempt to set down the attributes of this guiding force, and at the same time to attempt to create a framework through which it may be invoked in the future.

Recalling his own unsuccessful attempts to locate a guiding force in conventional religion, Shelley asks Intellectual Beauty to reward his personal dedication, enabling him "to fear himself, and love all human kind." (84) He cannot himself bring this about, but he believes that the right combination of words can create a rite by which Intellectual Beauty can be summoned to aid him. At the heart of this poem we can see Shelley very much aware of the *existence* of some Absolute power through awareness of its *absence* in much of his life. He defines his sense of a prevailing force in the world by thinking on the consequences of that force's absence, and is driven to set down in words a combination of praise and supplication by which he hopes to invoke that force. The poem, then, turns its own sense of linguistic limitation into evidence that it needs the higher power that will resolve that condition.

Shelley's 'Hymn', however, remains troubled by the failure of language. He wishes that his words could do more than they are capable of achieving, and asks something greater to meet him at the point of linguistic breakdown. As in Eliot's early poetry, the sense of resolution is lacking that could regard this breakdown itself as a valid, and perhaps even necessary aspect of something greater instead of striving unsuccessfully for expression. The key difference in Eliot's later poetry is that linguistic inadequacy comes to be regarded as a positive element in itself. Before reaching that, however, we must examine how Eliot came to revise his view

of language, and turn the hints at the end of The Waste Land into an order of thought that he could practice himself.

### **Moving Beyond Language in Eliot's Conversion Poetry**

The Waste Land gestures towards a condition in which language is transcended via acknowledgement of its inadequacy, but does not itself attain that state. Eliot argues for a transcendence of the poetic / linguistic medium that will enable him to see a new relationship between unstable language and wider 'reality'. It is only at the point where we admit the limitation of language that we can see a route beyond our linguistic impasse.

In Eliot's next major poem, 'The Hollow Men', there is a similar sense of linguistic breakdown. Their "dried voices" are heard only as whispers, "quiet and meaningless / As wind in dry grass". Sound exists without sense. With their voices almost inaudible, and divorced from meaningful expression, these men occupy a reduced state in relation to others, distinct from those who have "crossed / With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom". Like souls in Dantean Limbo, they are not "violent" and real but only "hollow" or "stuffed". There is also a sense of evasion in their words, awareness of the "eyes I dare not meet in dreams" and simultaneous desire not to have to meet them. Rather than confront their condition head on, the Hollow Men seem to shy away from the words that would define their state:

In this last of meeting places  
We grope together  
And avoid speech  
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river<sup>18</sup>

Speech is here seen as a defining act – something that would contain within expression the reality of the hollow men's condition. For this reason it is avoided, finding its form only in the ineffectual whispers. It could also be argued, however, that the Hollow Men avoid speech because they have come to realise the

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<sup>18</sup> In the Purgatorio, Dante describes those left behind on the far side of the river Tiber as being both physically stranded and also left without intellectual understanding, as Sayers translates:

Those left behind seemed strangers in the land,  
Gazing about like men who test and try  
Some unknown thing they seek to understand. (Purg. 2.52-4)

fundamental problems of the language they use. As in Shelley's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', there is a 'shadow' faintly visible in this poem, but whereas Shelley felt the shadow prompted him towards poetic expression, Eliot's *Hollow Men* find it reduces them to silence, coming between their desires and their actions, constraining them and making them ineffectual. I believe that this shadow can be seen as representing a sense of linguistic inadequacy, a barrier between what is sensed and what is passed on to another:

Between the conception  
And the creation  
Between the emotion  
And the response  
Falls the Shadow

If we refer back to Shelley's 'Defence of Poetry', we can see how this shadow disrupts the poet's process of apprehension and expression. Shelley's poet drew strength from his apprehension of what existed "between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression." (Shelley 482) Eliot finds that the shadow of language comes between the stages of that process and limits the efficacy of any resultant creation. The constant usage of 'between' draws attention, as Christopher Ricks has noted, to the poem's attempt to mediate from one state to another, and the potential for misunderstanding that this constant movement entails.<sup>19</sup> If the *Hollow Men* do not speak, it may be because they, like Prufrock, believe they will not be able to say what they mean.

Interspersed with the mediations on the shadow, however, we find some other, revealing linguistic fragments. The single line "For Thine is the Kingdom" precedes the stanza quoted above, and this sudden citation of a line from the Lord's Prayer sits oddly with the surrounding poem. Indeed, it is situated against the right margin of the page, so it is both part of the flow of the poem as we read it, and simultaneously distinct. Eliot repeats the line just before the close of the poem, again off-setting it from the main body of the text. What, then, is the importance of this religious fragment?

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<sup>19</sup> See Ricks, *T.S. Eliot and Prejudice*. 209.

Initially, we may see the fragment of prayer as another failed attempt at expression, one of the prayers formed “to broken stone” that Eliot has mentioned earlier. The words may seem like an attempt to make one desperate gesture towards God, as Alan Woodcourt attempts to get Jo the crossing sweeper to recite the same prayer in Dickens’s Bleak House.<sup>20</sup> The other off-set fragment that Eliot introduces into the poem is “Life is very long” which, as Southam notes, comes from Joseph Conrad’s novel An Outcast of the Islands, where a broken man is kept alive as punishment as instead of being killed (Southam 217). If we allow this fragment to set the tone of the poem’s conclusion, we may see the attempted utterance of the Lord’s Prayer as a vain attempt on the part of the Hollow Men to attain release. Although they pray to God, they will not be given the death that would release them from Limbo, and remain beside the tumid river, vainly awaiting deliverance. They are, however, trying to pray, and by implication this means that they admit the presence of a recipient for those prayers. In crediting God with power in their order of things, are they not positing something or someone who can transform their state? Referring back to Shelley, if the Hollow Men admit the existence of God, is this not also akin to Asia’s realisation in Prometheus Unbound that “he reigns”, and that there is a guiding power in her universe? The function of language can be to bring us into contact with this higher power, and facilitate our understanding of its existence.

The problem faced by the Hollow Men is that they can only approach God through the words they use, and as such will encounter the same linguistic problems that plague them in other attempts at expression. The lines from the prayer return before the poem’s close, but this time only as truncated snatches of language:

For Thine is  
Life is  
For Thine is the

<sup>20</sup> Dickens makes the scene of Jo’s death one of considerable pathos, as the young doctor encourages him to make some attempt to pray the Lord’s Prayer, and so leave the world with some degree of religious assurance:

“Jo, can you hear what I say?”

‘I’ll say anythink as you say, sir, for I knows its good.’

‘OUR FATHER.’

‘Our Father! – yes. That’s wery good, sir.’

‘WHICH ART IN HEAVEN.’

‘Art in heaven – is the light a-comin’, sir?’” (Dickens 705)

The moment of deliverance is not found, and the world ends “not with a bang but a whimper”. What is significant, however, is that the *Hollow Men* hold out the hope, even if that hope is ultimately unrealised, of some deliverance from their spiritual and linguistic impasse. The need to pray is perceived, but in this pre-conversion poem, the belief that would validate the prayer is not present, and it remains one utterance among many. Scofield claims that “in a graph of Eliot’s spiritual progress, ‘The Hollow Men’ would be at the lowest point.” (Scofield 143) Ricks, arguing for a slightly more positive reading of the poem, notes that “it is not that a vacuum has been filled, rather that a hollowness has been admitted.” (Ricks, *Prejudice*, 216) I believe that what we have here, as in *The Waste Land*, is an expression of despair and a faint trace of how Eliot will resolve, or at least respond to, the linguistic problem. The closing whimper, as Moody notes, may be “the cry of one beginning the New Life.” (Moody, *Poet*, 126)

As stated in the opening chapter of this study, Eliot’s faith was initially based on a strong renunciation of past beliefs and practices, and in ‘Ash-Wednesday’ we find him confronting the essential inadequacy of language and poetic form seen from his recently attained, although not wholly assured, Christian perspective. In a review that appeared in *The Athenaeum* in April 1919, and which was never subsequently republished, he had spoken of the need to triumph “over the natural sin of language” (cited in Bush 6), and here he brings his religious belief to bear on this linguistic issue. Paradoxically, of course, he expresses this in the form of a poem. The poem tries to balance a sense of linguistic inadequacy, in the face of a higher reality, and a desire to continue using this flawed medium to express one’s thoughts on the issue.

In the opening lines of the poem the tone is that of a man who believes he has passed beyond his previous life into a new reality. The references to turning may strike us as being religious if we connect them with the sermons of Lancelot Andrewes that Eliot was reading at the time.<sup>21</sup> In this sense the soul is seen as ‘turning’ towards God, and therefore away from past attachments. Another source for that opening line, however, is Guido Cavalcanti’s poem “Ballata, written in exile

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<sup>21</sup> Andrewes’ sermon for Ash Wednesday 1609 took as its text Jeremiah 8, with its theme turning towards and away from God. His sermon of 1619 also returned to this theme.

at Saranza”, included here in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s translation:

Because I think not ever to return,  
 Ballad, to Tuscany, -  
 Go therefore thou for me  
 Straight to my Lady’s face  
 Who, of her noble grace,  
 Shall show thee courtesy. (Rossetti 166)<sup>22</sup>

In this poem, the exiled poet sends his poem to speak to his lady on his behalf. This is a prioritisation of the poetic medium, giving it the power to ‘stand in’ for the physical presence of the loved one. Eliot, whilst using Cavalcanti’s line, seems to renounce this elevated status for poetic endeavour, no longer “desiring this man’s gift and that man’s scope”, claiming that he feels he shouldn’t mourn the “vanished power” of poetic composition. As Eloise Knapp Hay remarks, this locates the poem within the tradition of negative theology, resolved to discard anything that may hinder the soul’s journey towards God.

Eliot is trying to put poetic language behind him here because he finds it ultimately misleading. Time “is always time / And place is always and only place”. Poetry has led to imprecision in this respect, substituting the appearance of reality for reality itself. Eliot prefers to be freed from illusion, renouncing what had occupied him in the past on the grounds that it is not wholly real. As a poem, ‘Ash-Wednesday’ wants to be a final separation from the poetry that diverts Eliot’s thoughts from their spiritual end. Previous attempts to express himself via this medium are things that he wants to forget:

These matters that with myself I too much discuss  
 Too much explain  
 Because I do not hope to turn again  
 Let these words answer  
 For what is done, not to be done again  
 May the judgement not be too heavy upon us

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<sup>22</sup> Rossetti translated this poem for his volume Dante and His Circle, which was first published in 1861

The concern of 'Ash-Wednesday' is, of course, far more complex than the simple desire to renounce past poetic attachments. Although Eliot expresses a wish to be released from writing poetry, he does this within a highly crafted poetic form. Rather than focus on the desire not to write poetry, I believe we should ask why Eliot feels this renunciation to be necessary. It is, I believe, partly because he has realised the problematic, and potentially misleading, status of language in relation to reality.

The mystery of the Incarnation came to occupy Eliot's thought a great deal after his conversion, and the dual nature of the Greek 'Logos' is fundamental to a reading of his poetry from this point onwards. Christ is often described as the 'Word', and Eliot was aware that this divine 'Word' could not be fully contained in the human words that made up a poem. As Linda Leavell claims, 'Ash-Wednesday' "recognizes that the words of man will never meet the Word of God, and yet it acknowledges an ineffable Word beyond nonsense." (Olney 149) The divine word remained "unheard, unspoken", and Eliot was engaged in trying to "redeem" the purity it represented from the attempts to locate it within the lower form of human language. At this early stage in his Christian faith, as with other attachments in his life, no accommodation could be recognised; human words could say much but invariably left the higher word unspoken:

Where shall the word be found, where will the word  
Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence

Awareness of the 'Word' of God necessitates renunciation of the words of man, "the empty words of earthly language", as Lois Cuddy describes them (Bagchee 81). Only silence is expressive enough in this capacity. Attempts to locate this feeling within language will leave us suspended between "word and word", in an image of failed mediation that echoes the 'shadow' of 'The Hollow Men'. For this reason, when Eliot finds his thoughts drawn back into poetic celebration of the world of his childhood in the closing section of the poem, he sees it as a relapse, asking to be blessed for "I do not wish to wish these things", the double use of 'wish' informing us that Eliot cannot wholly control his subconscious desires. The

lines that follow are intensely personal, and capture to great effect the still-forceful memories of past happiness:

And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices  
In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices

These words have managed to re-awaken feelings considered discarded earlier in the poem. By a process of involuntary reaction, this evocation of summers spent sailing off the New England coast stirs the mortal Eliot back into life. Mortified by this lapse, feeling it to be evidence of some lack of power on the part of his new faith, Eliot follows it by pleading "Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood". He believes poetic language to be a distraction, offering the visions that we wish but diverting us from the higher dream of spiritual growth. The poem closes with his expressed wish that his "cry" should come unto Mary's (and therefore God's) attention, and that he may be delivered from the temptation of past attachments. It is significant that the final utterance of this most highly wrought poem is the non-specific "cry". Eliot clearly wishes to keep his faith distinct from any of the compromised words that he finds so inadequate in the act of expressing it. If words are to be used, they should be those of God, not of men, as Eliot makes clear in the closing lines of Part III:

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

### **'Every poem an epitaph': Linguistic Limitation in *Four Quartets***

In an essay on Four Quartets, Moody makes the following observation:

Getting the better of words is of the essence of Four Quartets. Its major design is to so use words as to make them mean what is beyond words; or, to put the same idea another way, to so transform the understanding of the world which is in its words that it will be perceived as the divine Word in action.           (Moody, Companion, 147)

In the period around his Christian conversion, Eliot regarded poetry as something that could, and perhaps should be sacrificed to his faith. In 'Ash-Wednesday' he feels guilty about the act of poetic composition and this guilt is in keeping with the tone of his faith at that time. As with other areas of his life, however, he came to revise this initially harsh doctrine, and admitted these past elements into his new life as he saw them being transcended in his faith and relocated in a greater scheme. Poetry comes to represent an attempt, valid although fundamentally flawed, to express the deeper truth that faith provides. Once we admit that this truth will be largely inexpressible, we can re-value language accordingly. Failure to say exactly what we mean is not cause for frustration with the medium of language, but evidence of something greater, something transcendent and divine. If we believe in this, we will not be so anguished by the relative failure of the words we vainly use to express it, and fall into the destructive self-consciousness seen in the poet of Shelley's 'Alastor' or Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock.

Four Quartets brings Eliot's poetic career to a triumphant conclusion. The themes and images of his early work return, but are re-valued and given a new, divine context. A sense of prevailing order is seen in the work, as Eliot comes to appreciate the pattern in his own experience as being that of a soul in search of God. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the way he regards language itself. Whereas he used to be frustrated by its failure to adequately convey thought, he now accepts its shortcomings as necessary proof of a greater reality. Seen from his new perspective, the inability to say just what we mean is as eloquent as our previous attempts at expression. We must see the limit of language as the starting point of something greater still.

C. K. Stead notes that "the discourse of Four Quartets points towards moments where communion with the Infinite has been achieved, but can only indicate them within the poem they lay outside." (Stead 179) At the heart of 'Burnt Norton' lies a mystical experience that frustrates attempts to locate it in language. Described as it is within the poem, the vision reads as a linguistic contradiction, with the unseen 'others' moving "in a formal pattern / Along the empty alley" to look into a dry pool "filled with water out of sunlight". Each image sets itself up as being impossible in the physical world, and the language alerts us to this. What is being described

cannot be 'real' in any sense that we can comprehend it, and language breaks down in its attempt to put the experience into words. Significantly, the advice to leave the garden comes from a bird, not from a human, and yet we understand the bird's speech as if it is speaking our language. We can see here that language is being asked to relate something 'outside' the realm of ordinary reality, and if we have trouble absorbing what we have witnessed, it is in part because words can point only to its 'unreality' rather than the essential reality at its core. Eliot reiterates this in his later attempts to locate the rose-garden experience within the physical world, admitting that "I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where." In Moody's words, the attempt to relate this experience combines "the carrying of empiricism as far as it will go, with the wisdom to know that empiricism is not all." (Moody, Poet, 187) There is something elusive and inherently unreal about this experience that manifests itself in a breakdown of referential language. We cannot rely on words to express what we experience.

The problematic relationship between language and reality is captured in the opening lines of the poem, as Eliot sets up an alternative vision of reality – a vision defined via the medium of language:

Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose-garden. My words echo  
Thus, in your mind.

The effect induced by the 'words' of the poem is likened to that of our footfalls on a journey that we never made. Language constructs a vision of something unreal, working upon our senses, echoing in our minds as we ponder the words over and over. The lasting impression left by these lines, however, is the possibility that language can mislead us, presenting something that *did not* happen in such a fashion that we begin to believe it *did* occur. As the words 'echo' we come to accept them. The whole rose-garden episode may be a linguistic illusion, or it may be a memory transfigured in retrospect by the words with which we try and describe it. Either way, we must regard 'Burnt Norton' as a poem concerned with the shifting relationship between language and what we perceive as 'reality'.

In Part V of the poem, Eliot stresses the unstable relationship between words and the objects to which they refer:

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.

Words cannot be relied upon to mean what we want to express. Indeed, the way in which several images collapse into each other here is itself an example of the “imprecision” of words – Eliot searching for an exact word, and running through several in the process. The words we use will be assailed by “shrieking voices / Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering”, drowned out in the “roar that lies on the other side of silence”, that George Eliot refers to in Middlemarch. (Eliot 194)

If this is the case, what remedy can Eliot find for this crisis? He offers an alternative view, in which it is not the words themselves, but the form they assume, which can convey meaning:

Words, after speech, reach  
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness,

It is not through the words themselves that meaning will endure, but in their ordering within a greater framework. Each individual word, with its attendant referential problems, takes its place in an ordering medium, and that medium contains the experience. Rather than focus on the individual word, we must regard the greater whole. Helen Gardner offers a useful reading of this concept:

The word itself, like the note in music, has meaning only in relation to other words. It exists in time and in usage; and since contexts and usages change, the life of a word is a continual death. Yet within a pattern, in a poem, the word’s life is preserved almost miraculously by art, in a kind of true life beyond its life in speech; it is there stable, not in itself, but in its relations to all the other words in the poem, which in turn are held to their meaning by their relations to it. (Gardner 7)

This linguistic view owes much to Eliot's own faith, with its vision of the individual ceding importance to the greater whole. Each word is defined by its relations with others, in the same sense that the individual relinquishes their claim to attention in order to take their place in the wider community of believers, subsumed into a greater reality. This, as Chapter Two has shown, was Eliot's answer to the problem of self-conscious isolation, and in Four Quartets we see questions of expression and self-consciousness being brought together and reconciled in his Christian faith. Whereas in Shelley's work, and in Eliot's poetry up to this point, failure to express oneself exacerbated feelings of isolation, Eliot now argues for a reduction in our desire for personal expression and a simultaneous acceptance of our place within a greater order. We may see how his theories of language and self-consciousness come together if we compare the lines quoted above with a passage from Part V of 'Little Gidding':

And every phrase  
 And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,  
 Taking its place to support the others,  
 The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,  
 An easy commerce of the old and the new,  
 The common word exact without vulgarity,  
 The formal word precise but not pedantic,  
 The complete consort dancing together)

Linguistic problems are overcome when the words are in harmony, a consort "dancing together". The image of the dance recurs in Four Quartets as one representing balance and order. We may recall in this image the dancers of 'East Coker', "Keeping the rhythm in their dancing / As in their living in the living seasons" or the refining flames of 'Little Gidding' "Where you must move in measure, like a dancer." To portray words 'dancing' implies a sense of harmony and stability that is missing in previous views of language, where it is seen as something unstable and erratic. This harmonious view of language is, I feel, inherently connected with Eliot's revised view of the self in these, his most Christian poems. Rather than focus on the self, or the individual word, and lose sight of the transcendent perspective, we must lose the individual view to appreciate the greater vision. If each word does not adequately convey our experience here, the finished

poem, 'Burnt Norton', will in some form retain the essence of what is strictly ineffable.

In Four Quartets, the relationship between perception and expression is akin to that posited by Shelley in his 'Defence of Poetry', with the poet addressing the relationship "between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression." (Shelley 482) The crucial difference is that Eliot is now reconciled to the shortcomings of the words he is using. In his earlier poetry, this problem of expression exacerbated the condition of self-consciousness, as we have seen in our reading of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', which itself re-enacts the poet's crisis of Shelley's 'Alastor'. In Four Quartets, Eliot re-values language in order to make expressive failure a stage en route to overcoming selfhood. Our individual perceptions can be subsumed into something greater, but we may not find the words to fully convey this to others. The success of Four Quartets rests on the issue of whether we can be reconciled to this state of affairs, accepting that transcendence may not be something we can actually convey in words. Edward Lobb neatly summarises this element of the poems:

The great themes of Four Quartets – love, poetry, and eternity – all involve transcendence of the limitations of self and individual perception; the meditations on poetry deal with the impermanence and inevitable imprecision of our attempts to communicate. (Lobb, Romantic, 52)

Eliot comes to see poetry as a way of capturing, to some limited degree, a trace of those divine moments when we briefly glimpse the transcendent reality behind the everyday world. In Part V of 'East Coker', we find him once again conscious of the problem of referential language, having spent, or as he feels, largely wasted, twenty years "trying to learn to use words" with no success:

and every attempt  
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure  
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words  
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which  
One is no longer disposed to say it.

The feeling of frustration that Eliot vents in the opening lines of Part V stems from a sense that he lacks control. His time has been wasted in "trying to learn to use

words” – the double activity in that quote pointing out to us that his time has not been spent *using* words, but trying to learn *how* to use them. There is a crucial difference. Eliot has sought control of language, to impose his will on what he writes, to make words mean what he wants them to mean. In this, like J. Alfred Prufrock, he has been frustrated, finding only imprecision, in the same sense as the words of ‘Burnt Norton’ would not stay in place. Language is not wholly under our control, and the more we strive to make it so, the more we will feel its essential vagueness. Any poetry that results is irrelevant as soon as it appears, expressing only what we no longer feel. The change of tone in the later lines of Part V stems from acceptance that we will not produce exactly the poem that we wish to write. An element of peace is gained in the understanding that others have tried, and that any gains made in the past have been lost in the meantime. What is important here is not the desire for control over language, but the attempt to express oneself using language that we know to be flawed. If our poems ‘fail’, they will point towards something greater, as those of others have before us. Denis Donoghue, in his recent study of Eliot, stresses the need to retain an awareness of what language will *not* do for us:

It is impertinent to assume that there are words for everything: if there were, music and silence would be redundant. There are moments in which language stands baffled, saying of whatever it has just said that that is not what it meant at all. Such moments are welcome because they tell against the idolatry of language to which we are, in some moods, susceptible.

(Donoghue 47)

This awareness of poetry’s limits is expressed in Part II, where Eliot follows the highly stylised section “What is the late November doing...” with the opinion that it was:

a way of putting it – not very satisfactory:  
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,  
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle  
With words and meanings.

The words have not expressed what he wanted them to, and consequently he feels dissatisfied. The essence of his experience remains unexpressed, bound up in “the intolerable wrestle” with language, the “chains of lead” that checked Shelley’s flight in ‘Epipsychidion’. Eliot admits the relative failure of his previous attempt, but

intriguingly adds that “the poetry does not matter.” This seems an odd comment, and we must ask ourselves ‘why does it not matter?’

In ‘East Coker’, the second half of Part II is an exploration of the negative theology that Eliot was to employ in his spiritual life. Those things to which we attach importance in this world are systematically examined and found wanting in the light of our spiritual condition. Like the wisdom of the “old men”, poetry is something we consciously construct to render the world in a form we recognize and feel we control. In admitting that poetry is not the be all and end all of his relations with the world, Eliot is locating himself within a greater order in which those things that he cannot express will assume meaning for him. In her reading of ‘East Coker’, Eloise Knapp Hay shows how Eliot reconciles poetic deficiency with his faith:

Poems, like mankind, ‘all go into the dark’. Every new poem in the tradition moves along the way of eminence laid down before, each one transforming the tradition, though each is only a partial way of expressing what words about the Word merely approximate. (Hay 175)

What we find in ‘East Coker’, then, is Eliot coming to realize that his failure to fully contain the world in language should draw his attention away from his own condition to contemplate some greater reality. When Shelley found language constricting, it was due to its inability to express what he felt, as with his poet in ‘Alastor’ or the maidens of Prometheus Unbound. He was painfully aware that if his premise “each to himself must be the oracle” was correct there was no hope of any community through language. Here, Eliot is reaching the conclusion hinted at in The Waste Land’s closing fragments; that it is only by positing something greater than poetry that we can be reconciled to the fundamental shortfall of poetry, and language in general. As Hay points out, “language (always the poet’s primary concern) loses integrity without a coherent religious tradition within which to mature.” (Sena and Verma 7)

In ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ Shelley found himself trying to invoke some unseen force that he believed to be active in the world. He portrayed Christianity as an unsuccessful attempt to define this ineffable power, but made that same power a substitute for the Christian God. What makes the ‘Hymn’ distinct from Shelley’s

other work is that he can admit the existence of something he cannot fully comprehend or describe and yet regard his failings as proof of the power of his subject. Eliot, in the fifth section of 'The Dry Salvages', traces a route to Christian faith that runs through other attempts to see beyond our own reality. He makes our unsuccessful search for spiritual meaning evidence of our desire for something transcendent, a truth that can only be found in God. He acknowledges, however, that only the smallest proportion of us will ever fully gain the knowledge we desire:

But to apprehend  
The point of intersection of the timeless  
With time, is an occupation for the saint –

The "point of intersection" is the Christian Incarnation, the point at which the Divine 'Logos' or Word was made flesh. To appreciate this truth is a state reserved for very few people, and for them it is not attained by a constant struggle to understand, but by the surrender of one's intellect to a higher force that bestows understanding freely. It is, in the scheme set out in 'Ash-Wednesday', the reward for those who "sit still". This is crucially distinct from wrestling with words to express our own perceptions. As Gunner concludes, "to search for meaning in a realm of time and decay is to invite frustration and, finally, apathy." (Gunner 109)

Knowledge of this failure does not, however, lead Eliot to despair. He now concludes that whereas the saint can fully apprehend the Incarnation, most of us have to make do with much less:

For most of us, there is only the unattended  
Moment, the moment in and out of time,  
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,  
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning  
Or the waterfall, or the music heard so deeply  
That it is not heard at all,

The images here take us back to the central experience of 'Burnt Norton', a moment that defied attempts to pin it down in language, remaining aloof from categories of time and place, "lost in a shaft of sunlight". This, claims Eliot, is as close to transcendence as many of us will come, but such experiences can still point us towards a greater reality:

There are only hints and guesses,  
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest  
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.  
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.

Whereas the Saint will understand all that he perceives, most of us will have tantalising glimpses of something that we cannot fully comprehend or convey to others. Rather than allow these flashes to torment us, as Shelley's poet did in 'Alastor', we must admit that they are part of something we cannot fully comprehend ourselves. Only by resigning our limited vision to the idea of something greater can we attain understanding, which comes not as a goal reached by us, but as a gift from God. We must relocate our experiences within a framework that we cannot fully understand. A necessary consequence of this will be that our attempts at expression will be as partial as our understanding, but we should not see this as a sign of failure. Rather, the presence of something that we cannot fully define in the imperfect medium of words should draw our attention towards a greater reality that is defined paradoxically in the breakdown of language.

'Little Gidding' draws together the previous three Quartets, and indeed all of Eliot's poetry up to that point, in a final resolution. Our individual perceptions of the world are subsumed into the Divine vision, and in a similar process, past struggles with language are transcended in a scheme that both legitimates further linguistic endeavours and reconciles their inherent failure with a greater goal.

As in 'Burnt Norton', we find ourselves initially facing a setting that defies attempts at description. The terms in the opening stanza are seemingly opposed to each other, collapsing existing definitions into strange new combinations. The season is "midwinter spring", a time that refuses to submit to previously held seasonal distinctions. Other phenomena confuse us: although the darkest time of the year (midwinter), the brief flare of the sun "flames the ice" with a blinding glow. There is no sign of life, and yet the snow on the hedgerow gives the brief effect of "transitory blossom [...] a bloom more sudden / Than that of summer". In order to capture the essence of this moment, Eliot pursues a route of negative description – attempting to define something by drawing attention to its illusory nature in the same manner that the rose-garden experience of 'Burnt Norton' was related.

Unlike the first Quartet, however, capturing this natural phenomenon in words is not our goal. Indeed, Eliot asserts that whenever we journeyed to this chapel, “At any time or at any season / It would always be the same”. Our attention should be focused on the building itself, or rather, on what the building represents – a place “where prayer has been valid.” We are asked to kneel in this place but, significantly, we are not asked to pray. Prayer is, of course, a linguistic activity. Although it should be more than “an order of words”, it will nonetheless require us to consciously shape our language to express what we feel we need from God, as Blamires has noted in his reading of the poem:

It is noteworthy that we are not even asked ‘to pray’; presumably because that would be to put the demand too actively – implying that we ourselves have a positive contribution to make by virtue of our own virtue. Rather we are simply asked ‘to kneel / Where prayer has been valid’. The impersonal emphasis [...] is important; for the very nature of true prayer itself, as here defined, calls for something simpler, humbler, more receptive, than consciously ordering words, giving the mind a job to do, [...] and thus embarking on that complex assertive activity in which there is a self, consciously praying, manipulating a vocabulary and hearing the performance of the voice. Prayer is none of these. (Blamires 133)

If we doubt the efficacy of words, we may not say anything, but Eliot does not wish us to fall into the language trap that reduced Prufrock to silence here. Rather than concern ourselves with our own thoughts and expressions, we should take time to absorb the words of others, to ponder previous generations:

And what the dead had no speech for, when living,  
They can tell you, being dead: the communication  
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the  
living.

The dead can truly express themselves because they are freed from the constraints of linguistic expression. They have moved beyond the reliance on words that hinders us in the present, and seen their language freed from its problematic relation to the things they wanted to describe. If we can appreciate this, we will appreciate a sense of freedom from time and place, making the chapel “the intersection of the timeless moment / [...] England and nowhere. Never and always.” Again, the setting is defined by linguistic contradictions; two states that cannot, in our view of

reality, cohere. We must, however, believe that this is possible, even if our language cannot define the reality of this state. The “intersection of the timeless”, we will recall from ‘The Dry Salvages’ is something perceived by the saint. In order to get close to that condition, therefore, we must be prepared to admit the fundamental inadequacy of our own verbal medium.

Further evidence of the shortcomings of language is provided by the compound ghost of Part II. With its echoes of the meeting between Dante and Brunetto Latini, we may see this “dead master” as being an amalgam of Eliot’s poetic forbears. If the ghost is indeed a poet, however, he is one who has realised the relative status of language to reality:

For last year’s words belong to last year’s language  
And next year’s words await another voice.

Language is constantly changing, and what is expressed one year may not retain its exact meaning in the next. Only after death can this linguistic issue be fully resolved, as the ghost finds “words I never thought to speak” – words that do not stem from his conscious desire for expression, but which are bestowed from above in answer to his need. The attempt to “purify the dialect of the tribe” is part of the lifetime’s effort rewarded by the bitter “fruits reserved for age”. In this encounter, the ghost speaks a language that perfectly expresses the warning note he wishes to sound. This is because he is one of the ‘dead’ whose speech has been freed from the linguistic problems encountered by those still living. For this reason he can now see his own problems of expression subsumed into a new bond between words and reality that liberates him even as it draws attention to his past mistakes. Scofield sums up the understanding reached in these lines:

First he [the Ghost] dismisses his own ‘thought and theory’ and bids the narrator dismiss his: the human wisdom of poetry and poetic theory is of no use at the point which they have both reached. (Scofield 234)

As we have seen when looking at ‘Burnt Norton’, Part V of ‘Little Gidding’ begins with a meditation on the relationship between words and knowledge. In keeping with the sense of reconciliation found elsewhere in the poem, Eliot is able to cease

his 'wrestle' with words and meanings and place his poetry at the service of a higher power, arguing for a reduction in the status of individual words in favour of a harmonious order, "an easy commerce of the old and the new, [...] The complete consort dancing together".

The strength of this ideal construction rests in the internal harmony between the individual words. Rather than rely on individual meanings and a desire for illumination, we must admit the fundamental instability of words and at the same time knit them together to form a sentence in which each of them supports the other. It will not matter here if each word is not wholly precise in its nature – the finished sentence will draw its meaning from the bonds between them. The poem that results may be a flawed expression, but in recognising its own shortcomings it also gestures towards something greater, making itself both "an end and a beginning". To attain this state is to bring the poem to a conclusion, as Gabriel Josipovici writes in his essay on Four Quartets:

As 'Little Gidding' draws to its end, we have the sense not so much of a path having been traversed as of a field having been gone over until every patch of ground has been touched. Then it is time to stop. But now stopping will not be a sign of failure but of triumph, the voice will cease not because it cannot find a way forward but because it need say no more.

(Josipovici 50)

To conclude, then, Eliot's early poetry found him confronting the problematic status of language that Shelley had found before him. Shelley upheld a belief in the power of language to unite people in a community of mutual understanding, but in his poetry we see that understanding attained purely through language is impossible. Words never mean exactly the same thing to all of us, and as such cannot wholly represent individual perceptions. Shelley was aware that there was some transcendent reality behind the everyday world, but that the words he used to try and convey this to others were inadequate. The sense of the Absolute persists in Shelley's work, but he is never fully reconciled to his own inability to set it down in language. He wants his words to act in ways that they are incapable of doing to his satisfaction.

In Eliot's early poems, the perceiving self encounters Shelley's language problem, and feels this same linguistic shortfall acutely, finding no remedy for the situation. As I have shown throughout this study, the young poet in 'Alastor' and J. Alfred Prufrock have much in common, and nowhere is this better illustrated than in their shared sense of being constrained as much by language as by their self-consciousness. In The Waste Land, and later in 'The Hollow Men', Eliot tried to posit some transcendent reality that would make linguistic inadequacy a sign of understanding. As he lacked the support of his Christian faith at the time of these poems, however, they remain gestures towards that goal rather than records of his having successfully attained this resolution. In this respect they share with Shelley's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' the sense of being aware of something that they can only define by its absence.

With Eliot's Christian conversion, his views on the nature of language, and of poetry itself, undergo a fundamental revision. Initially, as with much else in his life, this is manifested in fierce repudiation, in this case the desire to be freed from poetry altogether. As his faith matures, however, poetry is not wholly cast out, but is worked into his new outlook to the point at which linguistic problems are taken as proof that our present situation is limited in nature, but at the same time gestures towards a greater end. It is in this end that the problematic status of language, as with so many other elements of life, will be subsumed and reconciled, and Eliot can say "the poetry does not matter" with conviction. The late essay "Poetry and Drama", written in 1951, finds Eliot regarding the shortcomings of art as evidence of something inherently greater:

It is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, [...] to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation; and then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a recognition where that guide can avail us no farther. (OPP 87)

The evocation of a Dantean image and scheme takes us back to the conclusion of 'Little Gidding'. It is fitting that the final image of Four Quartets is the conjunction of the fire and the rose, for this directs our attention towards the rose of Heaven, on which Dante closes the Divine Comedy in a similar expression of linguistic inadequacy:

Oh but how scant the utterance, and how faint,  
To my conceit! And it, to what I saw, is such  
That it sufficeth not to call it little. (Para. 33.121-3)

For Eliot, as for Dante, the point at which one's language is found to be inadequate is the point at which one is closest to God. Words are not worthless, and indeed can gesture towards something transcendent. In order to come to terms with their inherent inadequacy, however, we must posit a condition in which that inadequacy will be a positive aspect instead of a tormenting problem. Eliot found this in his Christian faith, and thereby attained the sense of resolution that eluded Shelley. He sees that when language fails, its failure gestures towards something far greater, as George Steiner writes:

It is just because we can go no further, because speech so marvellously fails us, that we experience the certitude of a divine meaning, surpassing and enfolding ours. What lies beyond man's word is eloquent of God.  
(Steiner 59)

### **Conclusion: Christian Romanticism?**

In the opening chapter of this thesis, I examined Eliot's vehement, and very public repudiation of Shelley in one of the 1933 Norton Lectures, and suggested possible reasons for the severity of this critical attack. It was of such intensity that one cannot help but feel it stemmed from a desire on Eliot's part to distance himself from a precursor who had been a formative influence on his work, and with whom he still felt an intense affinity. In this sense his rejection of Shelley fits the Bloomian model for an 'anxiety of influence', with Eliot uncomfortably aware that, in Moody's phrase, "the dead may speak through the living voice"(Moody, Poet 5), and that his own work was greatly indebted to that of Shelley. Although this reading is valid, I believe that Eliot's desire for distance was only partly attributable to poetic reasons. At the time of the Norton Lectures, the newly Christian Eliot found Shelley a dangerous figure, and believed him to be an impediment on his route to a new spiritual life.

As this study has shown, Shelley's influence in Eliot's early poetry took two forms. Firstly, there was Eliot's appropriation of Shelleyan motifs and images. This was particularly evident in the early years of Eliot's career, the years of adolescence when, as he noted, influence is strongest, and Eliot found Shelley useful as he sought to locate his own poetic voice. Secondly, there was Eliot's feeling of a shared concern with Shelley's subject matter. Although there are unmistakable traces of the first kind of Shelleyan influence in Eliot's poetry, my aim in this study has been to explore in detail the extent to which Eliot, in his work, actually found himself confronting the same issues and problems that had perplexed Shelley a century earlier. Although ostensibly moving away from Romanticism, Eliot found that he was facing the same questions that the Romantics had encountered. Furthermore, he came to realise that he was unable to offer any satisfactory resolution to these questions, and only restated them in a modern context. If he attacked Shelley so strongly, can we read in that attack Eliot's sense of frustration at not having moved beyond the world-view of his poetic forbear?

This study has explored the ways in which Eliot's early verse restated fundamental Romantic concerns. The essential solitude of the self in its dealings with the world; the tantalising promise and eventual failure of romantic love; and the nature of language as a means of expressing reality were crucial to the thought of the Romantics, and all of them are addressed in Eliot's own work. As Gunner notes in her reading of The Waste Land, Eliot made the Romantic age into "a catalyst for turn-of-the-century despair and alienation." (Gunner 113) Rather than resolve Romantic problems in modern poetry, however, he was frustrated by these same problems. In the early work, up to 'Ash-Wednesday', they are restated without resolution. In an early fragment, he wrote "I shall convince these romantic irritations / By my classical convictions." (March Hare 83) The reality, however, was to prove somewhat different. Although he affected an ironic stance in his early poems, and cultivated his theory of impersonality as a means of distancing the poet (and by implication, himself) from the poem, these early works are full of personal emotion. Eliot may well have found Romanticism 'irritating' on account of his inability to move beyond it.

When Eliot came to attack the Romantics, I believe that it was partly due to his painful realisation that he was enacting in his poetry, and in his life, the very problems they had faced before him. This would have been acceptable to him if he could have found a solution to these problems but, initially, this was not the case. It was not so much that Eliot found the Romantics to have been 'wrong' in their response to the world but rather that he was afraid that they might have summed up their situation, and his, accurately. By the mid-1920s, with his marriage disintegrating, and the fear that his best poetry was already behind him, Eliot found in the Romantics evidence of all that troubled him. By 1927, he had found his personal answer, as Louise Glück notes:

What has driven these poems from the first is a terror and need of the un-understandable other. When the terror becomes unbearable, the other becomes God. (Olney 324)

Eliot eventually resolved his problematic sense of Romantic affinity in his Christian faith. I say eventually, for the initial expression of this faith was a fierce repudiation of all past attachments and influences, an attempt to totally purge one's

life of anything that had previously been considered valid and which, in the light of one's new belief, must be seen as erroneous and potentially corrupting. It is in this light that I believe we must read the 1933 attack on Shelley. As Spurr notes, Eliot's faith manifested itself initially in vehement rejection of anything that was not supported by tradition and orthodoxy:

In the years surrounding his religious conversion in 1927, Eliot's critical tactic depends less on the defensive capabilities of the intellect alone than on the kind of order residing in philosophical, cultural, and religious institutions; the mind's defence against its own primitive impulses now entails their submission to a 'coherent system' of thought and belief.

(Spurr 115-16)

I am not concerned with that initial phase of Eliot's faith so much here, for it was soon replaced with a more moderate and accommodating outlook that recalled to the fold some of those influences that had been cast out earlier. Shelley was not, as Eliot came to admit, wholly wrong in his ideas or his approach to the world. It was, however, only from the viewpoint afforded by his faith that Eliot could see a solution to the Romantic, and specifically the Shelleyan condition, a condition that had been very much Eliot's own.

Previous readings of Eliot's relationship with the Romantic poets have read his adoption of Christianity as an attempt to construct something with which to oppose the influence of Romanticism. As Bornstein writes, Christianity "answered the need for a force without to combat chaos within, providing both social orthodoxy and individual grace." (Bornstein 150) I believe, however, that Eliot's faith was, in the long run, more to him than a bulwark against troubling past influences. As it matured, and the initial phase of fierce renunciation gave way to a more tolerant outlook, it gave him the broader perspective that he had lacked whilst in the midst of his dilemma. Moody has read Eliot's faith purely as an exercise in self-negation, claiming that Eliot "could be reconciled to human life and its relations upon condition of being conscious of them as nothing." (Moody, *Tracing*, 191) To adopt this reading of his Christianity is, I feel, to have only a partial view. Although this sense of worldly negation is present in Eliot's initial faith, a sense of transcendence becomes visible as this faith matured, and this is crucial when considering Eliot's return to past influences in the light of his Christianity. From the mature assurance

of his Christian belief, he could see where previous, Romantic beliefs had been wrong and, significantly, he could appreciate where they had come close to being right.

Eliot's mature view of Romanticism, then, was not that it was a malignant force that must be suppressed. He had adhered to that conviction in his early critical career, when he found that, much to his anxiety, he was treading the same ground as the Romantics in his poetry, preoccupied with the same issues and theories that he dismissed roundly in his criticism. His feelings of discomfort intensified after his conversion, when he came to see Romanticism as not just a source of anxiety, but of deviance. His religious conversion had offered him an alternative to the Romantic world-view but, as we have seen in Chapter One, his faith was initially based on extreme renunciation, and Romanticism was one of the first things to be cast out by the newly-Christian Eliot. This, however, was not an adequate response to the question of past attachments in art or life. Eliot soon came to realise that the only way that he would come to terms with the Romantic elements in his work was not by repudiating them altogether, but by locating them within a scheme that made them pointers en route to a transcendent end. As Moody has concluded, Eliot turned to God initially to fill the void that he came to perceive in his world-view: "His acceptance of Christian belief and practice followed from and served his way of feeling; not the other way around." (Moody, Poet 153) Eliot reached his Christian position in 1927 by following other alternatives to their unsuccessful conclusions, as Brooker, in her excellent essay on religious substitutes in Eliot's early work, makes clear:

He had begun with the Arnoldian position that belief was impossible, but religion or some substitute was essential. He had tried Bergsonianism, eros, aestheticism, humanism, idealism, and seriously considered Buddhism. But in the end, Christianity was the only scheme satisfying both his intellectual and his emotional needs, the only scheme permitting him to unify his life and his art; or, as he came to say, the Christian scheme was the only one which *worked*.<sup>1</sup> (Brooker, Placing, 26)

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<sup>1</sup> In an essay entitled "Religion without Humanism", written in 1930, Eliot noted that he had a need for discipline in his faith, and that for him personally, this was met "in no other way" than in dogmatic religion. (Cited in Allan 101)

In a letter written on Shrove Tuesday (20<sup>th</sup> February) 1928, to Paul Elmer More, a spiritual confidant in the early years of his faith, Eliot noted that he perceived a 'void' at the heart of human life. He added that "I am one of those whom this sense of void tends to drive toward asceticism or sensuality, and only Christianity helps to reconcile me to life, which is otherwise disgusting." (Cited in Schuchard, Angel 152) This initial phase of asceticism in life and art was to pass, however, and a period of rapprochement, in both poetry and human attachments, can be seen by the second half of the 1930s.

As his faith became more mature, Eliot brought the Romantic poets, and Shelley in particular, back in from the cold. They were no longer the demonic forces that had led him astray in the past, but necessary figures in his development. They were concerned with issues that Eliot had himself returned to in his own work. In his view, they had not provided the answers to the questions they raised, but whereas this had troubled him in the past, the Christian Eliot could see their attempts as being valid in themselves. The answers that he had found inadequate were signs of a sensibility gesturing towards something transcendent. Having attained, in a partial sense at least, the state the Romantics (and his earlier self) had sought, Eliot could take a more benevolent view of their attempts to get there.

In Chapter One I used the term 'Christian Romanticism' to describe Eliot's mature relationship with Shelley and the other Romantic poets. I believe that we must see the older Eliot as one who subsumes Romanticism into his Christian faith. Attempts to dismiss it out of hand did not, and could not, succeed. If Eliot railed against the Romantics so much, it was because he knew this to be the case; they were too much a part of his own poetic character to be summarily put aside. The means by which he was able to come to terms with them was by setting them within the context, ironically, of the very faith they did so much to attack. Eliot came to see Christianity as the necessary *answer* to Romanticism. From the religious viewpoint, the issues that had so preoccupied the Romantics could be resolved. The Romantics could not be dismissed unless the questions they raised were satisfactorily answered, and it was only from a Christian viewpoint that Eliot felt he could do this.

So what questions did Eliot feel the Romantics, and Shelley in particular, raised? I believe that Shelley was acutely concerned with the relationship between the self and the world; with our desire for some transcendent reality and the attendant pain of failure in this quest; with the need to believe that love could meet all our needs, even if the evidence did not support that belief; with the relativity of language to experience and reality. Shelley, as we have seen, found himself facing all of these issues in his poetry and his life, and responded in a number of ways. Eliot realised that he was confronting the very same issues in his own work and, significantly, that he was not finding any new answers. As Franklin notes, for all of the differences we may see between them, "Eliot and Shelley find themselves in the same metaphysical predicament."(Franklin 961)

Faced with the knowledge that he was restating the very ideas in his poetry that his criticism set out to disparage, Eliot must have felt deeply ill at ease with the Romantics. His Christian conversion offered the means, and the rationale, to break with them, but this knee-jerk reaction could not be sustained for long. It was not enough to claim that the Romantics were simply 'wrong', and that he was, in his faith, 'right', for that would mean writing off as wholly worthless everything that he had done in his career and life up to that point. The only long-term satisfaction could come from returning to the Romantics and showing how their questions could be answered by faith. To do this would make the questions valid in themselves, and at the same time provide answers that would enable him to chart his own course beyond these past influences.

Shelley could not admit a divinity into his work, unless it was a tyrannical presence against which revolt was necessary. He had to develop a world-view that did not include God, but found himself faced with a void that needed filling nonetheless. Love, Intellectual Beauty and a belief in human perfectibility were called upon to meet this need, and Shelley strove to make them believable alternatives. What he found, as I have shown, is that these ideals were never as efficacious in reality as he wanted them to be. The self remains fundamentally isolated in the world, and the barriers of individual perception and emotion are not wholly overcome in his verse. Shelleyan 'pity' does offer a trace of transcendence, as my reading of Prometheus Unbound has shown, but it is not as powerful as the Christian love that guides

Eliot's later work. Shelleyan 'love' is a fine ideal, but proves hard to enact in human relations, compromised as they are by their inherent carnality. Our search is just, but if we do not admit a divine element, and re-value our love accordingly, it will fall short of the goal we seek. Even the power of poetry, something Shelley never ceased to advocate, falls down when faced with the instability and ultimate fallibility of the language we use. Only in admitting a greater reality, and coming to terms with the shortcomings of language, will we resolve this issue.

Eliot could not make Shelley into a Christian poet, but he did, as his own faith matured, identify points in Shelley's work at which a yearning for transcendence could be seen. As we have seen in his praise for Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life', the "greater maturity" that Eliot finds in the work is often bound to a deeper religious understanding on Shelley's part, a sense of his reaching for a religious scheme that Eliot had himself found in Christianity.<sup>2</sup> If Shelley was initially cast out as a demonic influence by Eliot's renunciatory faith, he was later re-admitted as a fellow pilgrim, who had failed to attain the goal that Eliot himself had reached. In this light, Shelley's poetry bore witness to his attempt to locate something that proved beyond him, an attempt that Eliot could appreciate in his position as one who had pursued a similar course, although with more favourable results.

In recent years there has been a critical movement to reconcile Shelley and the Christian faith he attacked with such vehemence, aimed at positing an anxiety of religious influence in Shelley's own relationship with Christianity. This is not a wholly new approach, as it can be traced in Robert Browning's essay on Shelley, which appeared in 1852. Browning argues that Shelley's avowed atheism masks a deeply religious sensibility, and the poet retained his own brand of 'belief' whilst disparaging the institutionalised church:

I call Shelley a moral man, because he was true, simple-hearted, and brave, and because what he acted corresponded to what he knew, so I call him a man of religious mind, because every audacious negative cast up by him against the Divine, was interpenetrated with a mood of reverence and adoration, - and because I find him everywhere taking for granted some of

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<sup>2</sup> See my reading of 'The Triumph of Life' at the end of Chapter Four.

the capital dogmas of Christianity, while most vehemently denying their historical basement. (Roberts, Browning, 587)

Taking their cue from Browning, more recent critics have stressed the strong religious tones in Shelley's work, and read him as a poet with a religious sensibility that found expression in non-Christian terms. Timothy Webb, in his book Shelley: A Voice Not Understood (1977) noted that "There can be little doubt that Shelley was a poet who, in his own way, was acquainted with the varieties of religious experience." (Webb 37) Although he attacked the institutional structures of the church, and what he perceived to be the restrictive dogmas of Christianity, Shelley's nature remained deeply religious and found expression in his repeated attempts to make love, poetry, intellectual beauty or innate human perfectibility valid substitutes for faith itself.

Webb also notes that "Shelley was genuinely attracted by the literary qualities of the Bible." (Webb 130) We have seen this sense of literary influence in Shelley's working of the Biblical 'Song of Songs' into 'Epipsychidion', noted by Wasserman in his reading of the poem. The language of religious experience is often employed by Shelley to give weight to the claims he makes on behalf of his secular ideals, and this sense of textual allusion may also alert us to another, deeper affinity. This thought is further developed by Robert M Ryan, who sees Shelley's disdain for institutional religion as evidence of a deep sense of divinity:

Shelley himself cultivated such an exalted idea of what a Supreme Being might be that he was intolerant of any inadequate or distorted representation of it. [...] Shelley's atheism, his intolerance of all religion, can be seen as an expression of respect for a purer conception of divinity than most of the world was able or willing to imagine. (Ryan 194-5)<sup>3</sup>

Shelley's repeated expressions of respect for the teachings of Christ, whilst professing his disdain for Christianity itself, show that he regarded the fundamental teachings of the New Testament as correct, but betrayed by the religion that had grown up around them. In the years that followed Eliot's assault on the diabolic Shelley, then, it has become more acceptable to view him as inherently more

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<sup>3</sup> Robert M. Ryan. The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789-1824. (Cambridge UP, 1997) Ryan's book offers a useful study of the abundance of religious thought and sentiment in Romantic poetry, from Wordsworth through to Byron.

religious than we might at first suppose. Although there is no sign that Eliot's later reassessment of Shelley contributed to this shift in critical opinion, we may now regard Shelley as a poet with distinct Christian traces. From a religious viewpoint we may see, as Eliot did, that Shelley's atheism brought him face to face with what in others would be grounds for faith.

In his study of Eliot and Shelley, Franklin makes the following assertion:

Eliot and Shelley share both an epistemology and a deeply felt need to find a solution to the problems created by that epistemology. That the solutions they each find turn out to be different solutions (for Eliot Christianity, for Shelley the decision to remain suspended between fear and hope) should not blind us to the agreement of their underlying philosophies or to the importance of these mutual concerns as a basis for understanding their work. (Franklin 960)

I would qualify this statement by saying that Eliot came to appreciate that whilst Shelley's alternative to religious faith was itself inadequate, his failure testified to the need to carry on searching. The 'problems' were not addressed to Shelley's satisfaction, and the occasions when we find Shelley admitting this to himself are the most poignant in his work. Shelley did not, I feel, willingly exist "suspended between fear and hope", as Franklin perceives him. He wanted to believe strongly in something, and his biography shows us a man never at ease with himself, always aware that something was missing. Richard Holmes subtitled his biography of Shelley 'The Pursuit', and Shelley may well strike us as a man always impelled by something he cannot wholly comprehend, and dogged by a sense of absence that he cannot quite define.<sup>4</sup> Like the young poet in 'Alastor' he is pursued by his awareness that something is not right. Eliot, I believe, was able to do the one thing that Shelley found beyond him – to 'solve' his own inherently Romantic anxiety by the application of Christian faith, and to make this faith the necessary 'answer' to Romanticism. Writing in 1939, he expressed his belief that all men share an inherent sense of the divine, but that their lives are defined by their response to it:

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<sup>4</sup> One of the most striking instances of Shelley's sense of being 'pursued' is his meeting with his double, walking on the terrace of their house in Lerici. The vision asked him "how long do you mean to be content?" before vanishing. This occurred on June 23<sup>rd</sup> 1822. Shelley drowned on July 8th.

The religious sentiment, which can only be completely satisfied by the complete message of revelation – is simply suffering from a condition of repression painful for those in whom it is repressed, who yearn for the fulfilment of belief, although too ashamed of that yearning to allow it to come to consciousness. (Baillie & Martin 39)

Applying this thought to the Romantics, Eliot could regard them as men who felt a divine presence but did not wholly admit it. He could see in their work evidence of a sincere desire to believe in something. He could also, from the viewpoint of his Christian faith, appreciate that their search, although motivated by the right reasons, had been unsuccessful because they had not admitted the one element that would have given meaning to their enterprise.

Eliot's mature view of Shelley, then, was that he had a 'God-shaped hole'. By the close of his own career, he felt that there was nothing inherently wrong with Shelley's thought except the absence of the one thing that would bring it to a satisfactory conclusion. In the same way that he repudiated it when he found himself re-enacting its failings, Eliot could come to terms with Shelley's world-view when he knew a way to resolve its problems. This rapprochement with Shelley's thought also entailed a process of poetic accommodation, which this study has followed, with Romantic concerns re-located in a transcendent Christian context. In Christianity, Eliot could make sense of the Romantic problems that Shelley had wrestled with and, rather than reject them, could trace them to a conclusion that Shelley had found frustratingly elusive.

### Appendix – Eliot and Tennyson

This study has shown how Eliot's Christian faith enabled him to accommodate into his own work the influence of a precursor who had previously been a source of anxiety for him. His initial repudiation of Shelley stems from the realisation that he was, in his own work, confronting the same questions and issues that had preoccupied the Romantic poet, and restating them in a modern idiom without being able to offer a solution to them. It is only with the degree of assurance gained from his Christian faith that Eliot feels able to admit to the presence of Shelley in his own work, and this is because he now feels himself to be in possession of the divine viewpoint that Shelley sought and lacked. Possessing this transcendent understanding, Eliot can return to the issues that he had earlier tackled unsuccessfully and offer solutions to them. He can also admit the influence of other poets in his earlier work, because he now feels himself to be crucially distinct from them. If he feels their beliefs to be wrong, he can believe himself to be in the right, and by the same token he can highlight and praise anything that he perceives to be a step towards a divine end in those who influenced his earlier work.

This model for looking at Eliot's thought is not necessarily restricted to Shelley, however. I believe that it can be applied to a number of those listed among his youthful influences. Here, I will briefly look at Eliot's relationship with another nineteenth-century poet, Alfred Tennyson, and show that Eliot's Christian faith enabled him to reassess both the presence of Tennyson in his own work and the thought contained in Tennyson's poetry. Although not a Romantic poet himself, Tennyson was nonetheless concerned with many of the issues expressed in Romantic verse. In tracing the relationship between Eliot and Tennyson we can see the extent to which Eliot's faith enabled him in later years to re-appraise one who had influenced his poetry and at the same time been dismissed roundly in his criticism for expressing thoughts akin to Eliot's own.

### The Influence of Tennyson in Eliot's early work

Eliot does not refer to Tennyson as an early influence in the same way that he speaks of his past relationship with Shelley, but we can see in his early poetry a distinct Tennysonian presence. Christopher Ricks, who edited Eliot's early verse for the volume *Inventions of the March Hare*, references Tennyson considerably in his index, and there are some interesting textual echoes to be found in the poetry of this period. In the words of Louis Menand, Eliot's use of Tennysonian imagery and style "borrows a mood and announces a debt." (Menand 16)

The concluding lines of Eliot's 'Second Caprice in North Cambridge', an early poem that anticipates 'Preludes' in its content, run as follows:

With an unexpected charm  
And an unexplained repose  
On an evening in December  
Under a sunset yellow and rose.       (14-17)

The third stanza of Tennyson's 'The Lotos-Eaters' includes the line "The charmed sunset linger'd low adown / In the red West". When we find a reference later in Tennyson's stanza to "that rosy flame", and think of the reclining lotos-eaters in a state of 'repose', the Tennysonian echo in Eliot's lines takes hold in our consciousness.

Another instance of Eliot using Tennyson's language and imagery can be identified if we read these lines from 'Locksley Hall Sixty Years After':

From that casement where the trailer mantles all the mouldering bricks –  
I was then in early boyhood, Edith but a child of six –

While I shelter'd in this archway from a day of driving showers –  
Peep the winsome face of Edith like a flower among the flowers. (257-60)<sup>1</sup>

Eliot's poem 'Interlude in London' takes place indoors, "among the bricks", watching the rain soften the gardens. He collapses Tennyson's images into the

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Tennyson's poetry are from the Oxford Authors edition, (ed. Adam Roberts 2000)

single “mouldy flowerpots”, and the driving showers become “sudden rains”, but the echoes are definitely present. Whereas Tennyson’s image has a child-like innocence, Eliot reworks it into a world-weary outlook, hibernating in a routine of “marmalade and tea at six” and indifferent to the weather, “apathetic, with cigars”. Of course, we may also see Tennyson’s image – the boy and girl sheltering from the rain, the reference to flowers – returning in Eliot’s work a number of times; in the waiter’s reverie in ‘Dans le Restaurant’ and the hyacinth garden memory at the heart of The Waste Land. Clearly, in his early poetry Eliot’s own reading of Tennyson is worked into his poems, as he searches for a voice and imagery of his own. At this formative stage of his development as a poet, I believe he found Tennyson a valuable precursor.

Apart from textual echoes, however, did Eliot take anything else from the Victorian poet? Tennyson developed the idea of the dramatic monologue, with his works ‘St Simeon Stylites’ and ‘Ulysses’, expressing his thoughts through the speech of an assumed character. Eliot was to adopt this method in his first volume, using J. Alfred Prufrock, and the young man in ‘Portrait of a Lady’ as personae to express his emotions. We may also be justified in reading some of the Ariel poems, ‘The Journey of the Magi’ and the world-weary ‘A Song for Simeon’ as dramatic monologues in the Tennysonian vein.

Tennyson, then, contributed towards Eliot’s poetic vocabulary, and offered a formal model for his use. His outlook on the world is also strongly present in Eliot’s own verse, as we shall see later, but Eliot was not happy to acknowledge this. We find Eliot behaving here in the same fashion he did with Shelley – simultaneously appropriating Tennysonian images and phrases in his poetry whilst reproaching Tennyson in his criticism for exhibiting thoughts equally evident in his own verse. I will now examine how some of Tennyson’s thought finds renewed expression in Eliot’s own work.

### **“I am weary, weary”: The Burdened Self in Tennyson and Eliot**

Eliot’s major critical argument with Tennyson’s poetry, which can be seen in one of his earliest essays, was that there was too much thought in evidence. “Tennyson

and Browning are poets," he wrote in 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921) "and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose."(SE 287) In this essay the Victorian poets are unfavourably compared with the Metaphysicals, especially John Donne, who successfully blended thought and sensory experience in their poetry. Whereas the seventeenth century poets could turn physical sensations into intellectual ones, the Victorians exhibit "the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet."(SE 287) Thought has become divorced from feeling, and poetry retreats from the world into mental abstraction and reverie. In Eliot's view, the poetry loses much of its emotional power as a result, and there are two distinct consequences of this. There is, increasingly, a division between language and content. "While the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude"(SE 288) and the formal qualities of the poem cover an increasingly thin intellectual framework. The other sign of this "dissociation of sensibility" is the rise of the reflective poet who, in his revolt against description, has lapsed into reflection, and seems as a result to be withdrawn from the world as opposed to engaging it. From Eliot's perceived high-point in the seventeenth century, English verse declined along both of these lines, with the briefest of flurries, interestingly, in the guise of the second generation Romantics. This was short-lived, however, as "Keats and Shelley died, and Tennyson and Browning ruminated."(SE 288)<sup>2</sup>

It is strange, then, to note that Tennyson's ruminations should be echoed in Eliot's own verse. Although he makes excessive thought on the part of the poet a hindrance to good poetry, Eliot's early work is replete with characters whose excessive reflection prevents them from finding peace in the world. In this respect, characters like Gerontion and Prufrock can trace their poetic ancestry back to the personae of Tennyson's work. Although Eliot may well employ the form of the dramatic monologue with a trace of irony, the sense of isolation, weariness and doubt, that is so prevalent in Tennyson's early work, can be seen in the poetry that

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<sup>2</sup> The tendency towards rumination in Tennyson's verse was noted among contemporary reviewers. In an 1833 essay, John Stuart Mill wrote that Tennyson "never seems *possessed* by any feeling; no emotion seems ever so strong as to ever have sway, for the time being, over the current of his thoughts." (Cited in Bristow 13)

Eliot was writing around this time.<sup>3</sup> It is significant that these poems appear around the time of the “Metaphysical Poets” essay, in which he attacks Tennyson for giving in to an excess of those very feelings. I believe that, as with his repudiation of Shelley, Eliot is attacking in his criticism someone who influenced his poetry to a considerable extent.

Tennyson was a man always prey to melancholia, the ‘black blood’ that he attributed to his father, which he always feared would drive him to his death. In his poem ‘The Lotos Eaters’, which appeared in 1842, the returning mariners of Homer’s *Odyssey* are waylaid by “the mild-eyed melancholy Lotos-eaters”, who proffer the seeds that induce feelings of inertia and indecision, leading to paralysis of will. The crew, formerly anxious to return home, now question whether their return will bring them peace:

For surely now our household hearths are cold:  
Our sons inherit us: our looks are strange:  
And we should come like ghosts to trouble joy.      (117-19)

Foreseeing that their struggle homeward may not end in happiness, the sailors lapse into inaction, resignedly trying to justify to themselves, or to us as readers, their decision not to go on with their journey:

Let what is broken so remain.  
The Gods are hard to reconcile:  
‘Tis hard to settle order once again.  
There *is* confusion worse than death,  
Trouble on trouble, pain on pain,  
Long labour unto aged breath,  
Sore task to hearts worn out by many wars  
And eyes grown dim with gazing on the pilot-stars. (125-32)

The poem reflects the mariners’ slide into inertia and oblivion. All of the momentum that drives Homer’s sailors from one trial to another disappears, leaving them on the island with no prospect of departure. The striking aspect of this treatment is the way in which the crew talk themselves out of returning via a series of rhetorical arguments. That they are better on the island, soothed into oblivion by

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Langbaum’s book *The Poetry of Experience*. (1957) provides an excellent overview of the connections between Eliot’s monologues and the nineteenth century tradition.

the lotos-seed, is a decision soon reached, and the arguments for this decision are accepted without reservation. If these mariners are ruminating, they are doing so to justify their inaction. The Gods are now invoked as distant from their plight, detached and therefore unapproachable. Life is confusing, with no surety of reward or resolution. Effort may not be enough. In this world-view, inactivity finds justification.

It is interesting that Eliot should criticize Tennyson for giving way to this 'ruminating' when his own poetry echoed some of the sentiments seen above. If we think of Prufrock's deliberations, and his inaction when faced with the world, do we not find in Eliot's early poetry a similar tone of justified resignation? Like Tennyson's mariners, Prufrock talks himself out of uttering his deepest feelings in the drawing room, asking "And should I then presume? / And how should I begin?" Prufrock, by the workings of his mental process, tries to convince us that his resignation is justified by the anticipated lack of any positive end.

The idea of suicide was often at the forefront of Tennyson's mind, and we frequently find him expressing a desire 'not to be' in his poetry. In his study of Tennyson, Ricks notes that "wishing to be dead: the wish – neither simply yielded to, nor simply repudiated – is at the heart of many of Tennyson's best poems." (Ricks, Tennyson, 2) One reason for this is a feeling of general weariness with life, a sense of the inadequacy of everyday existence to offer sufficient grounds for our continued participation. His poem 'Tithonus' relates the story of one who asked for eternal life, but forgot to stipulate that he desired eternal youth and is, as a result, trapped in an eternal old age.<sup>4</sup> Like the sibyl who provides the epigraph of Eliot's The Waste Land, he asks to be allowed to die. The protagonist of Tennyson's 'Mariana' waits in vain for her returning lover, and wishes for her own death in his absence. The house that she resides in is empty and adds to her sense of desolation:

Old faces glimmer'd thro' the doors,  
Old footsteps trod the upper floors,  
Old voices called her from without. (66-8)

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<sup>4</sup> In Greek myth Tithonus was given immortality by his lover Eos (Dawn) but Eos forgot to ask Zeus for eternal youth, leaving Tithonus trapped in eternal old age, becoming "an old shrivelled creature little more than a voice." (Howatson 573) The parallel with Eliot's Cumean Sibyl is strong.

In this image, of one sitting in an empty house, waiting in vain for someone to meet them, we can find a forerunner of Eliot's *Gerontion*, whose "house is a decayed house", and who sits listening to those who shuffle around him, the woman who "keeps the kitchen, makes tea" or "Fräulein von Kelp / Who turned in the hall, one hand on the door". Like Mariana, he waits for someone; in his case it is Christ. There is, however, no sign of Christ's return, and *Gerontion* himself is decaying as he waits, losing sense and passion in inertia to become "a dry brain in a dry season". Both of these people are waiting in vain for someone, and Tennyson expresses perfectly the sense of tiredness that they feel, a sense of 'tedium vitae':

Then, said she, 'I am very dreary,  
He will not come,' she said;  
She wept, 'I am aweary, aweary,  
Oh God, that I were dead!' (81-4)

The repetition of the elongated "aweary" adds to the prevailing sense of ennui and vacancy. It is, in Ricks's words, the expression of "a life which is no life, and which waits for death." (Ricks, *Tennyson*, 45)<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, 'Mariana' takes as its epigraph a line from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, a play that also provides the epigraph for 'Gerontion'.

Tennyson's poetry was indeed ruminative, but Eliot's complaint against it might stem from a desire to conceal his deeper sense of affinity with its content and concerns. Tennyson may stand accused of thinking too much, of being too reflective and giving too much rein to his own melancholy thoughts instead of reacting to and participating in the world around him, but given the excessive thoughtfulness of Eliot's early personae this may be a trait that Eliot saw in his own work in equal measure. The desire for death and sense of spiritual vacuity found in many of Tennyson's works may have struck a chord with the modernist mind, coming to terms as it was with the carnage of the Great War and the seeming insignificance of the individual in the midst of the modern industrial society. Eliot's detached young men can be seen as enacting Tennysonian routines of doubt,

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<sup>5</sup> Reviewing the poem in 1831, W. J. Fox wrote Mariana has only one feeling, "the variation of which is only by different degrees of acuteness and intensity in the misery it produces, and again and again we feel, before its repetition, the coming of the melancholy burden." (Cited in Ricks, *Tennyson*, 46)

resignation and self-justification. Eliot's critical repudiation of the Victorian master may alert us to another of his attempts to attack in his criticism one who he found himself echoing in his poetry to an uncomfortable extent.

### **Dante and Tennyson**

Many of Eliot's critical pronouncements on other poets are made in the course of a comparison with another figure, who serves to highlight good or bad points in the poet under consideration. Dante was always Eliot's poetic touchstone, and in the same way that he sometimes reads Shelley's poetry through a Dantean filter, we can see him using the Italian master to draw attention to deficiencies in the work of Tennyson. Tennyson is invoked in the 1929 Dante essay, which compares his poem 'Ulysses' with the meeting between Dante and the spirit of Ulysses in *Inferno* XXVI.

Dante's Ulysses is a proud spirit, and when his final voyage ends, as divine will decreed it must, with the sinking of his ship, his death at sea is regarded as a fate worthy of his status. In comparison, Tennyson's Ulysses does not, within the poem, actually leave the shore and set out to sea. We find, in Ricks's words, "a dragging sense of inertia, of *ennui*, strangely matched [...] with the vocabulary of adventure and enterprise." (Ricks, *Tennyson*, 124) Although there is stirring rhetoric in his call to his sailors, we may also detect a trace of repressed resignation, a too forceful expression of the will to do something that draws attention back to his essential inertia. In Eliot's first volume, the use of words like 'would' and 'should' signifies not decisive intent, but the speaker's wistful expression of something he would like to do. J. Alfred Prufrock is a good example of this trait, as is the speaker of 'La Figlia Che Piange' who wants his stylised tableau to stand in for a painful parting:

So I would have had him leave,  
So I would have had her stand and grieve,

Whether the speaker *would have* had this state or not, it is not what actually happened, and the expression of will lacks the force to make it more than a personal

wish to do something. Forceful rhetoric, in Eliot as in Tennyson, often alerts us to the *absence* of will.

Tennyson's poem opens with that 'ruminatio'n that Eliot criticized in 'The Metaphysical Poets'. Ulysses expresses disaffection with his current state:

It little profits that an idle king,  
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,  
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole  
Unequal laws unto a savage race,  
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me. (1-5)

In these opening lines, everything is wrong in the world around Ulysses. His country is barren (and void of interest after his travels), his wife is old, his populace savage and bestial in their habits, and largely ignorant of him. In the face of this situation, Ulysses himself has sunk into idleness, the unequal laws that he doles out evidence of his waning interest in his homeland.

The desire to travel therefore offers a remedy for his condition. Looking back on his past adventures, Ulysses remembers a time when he drank "life to the lees", facing danger in the company of his trusted crew. His fame was earned by stirring actions; his name known to many until he sees himself "a part of all that I have met". Faced with the achievements and adventures of his past, his present is empty:

How dull it is to pause, to make an end,  
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!  
As tho' to breathe were life. (22-4)

Like Tithonus, Ulysses seems destined for an eternal old age, with all of his best deeds behind him. In Tennysonian fashion, he feels the ennui of "life piled on life". In response to this he perceives the need to act again, to attempt to justify one's existence in a return to the fray, to redeem one hour "from that eternal silence" into which he can feel himself drifting.

After delegating power to his son, Telemachus, Ulysses tries to rally his crew for their final voyage. He asserts that something may yet be accomplished in old age:

Death closes all: but something ere the end,  
 Some work of noble note, may yet be done,  
 Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods. (51-3)

Tennyson's Ulysses acts knowingly against a backdrop of death. Although telling his crew that "'Tis not too late to seek a newer world", he acknowledges a desire to "sail beyond the sunset, and the baths / Of all the western stars, until I die". In other words, he wishes to exceed the limits on human movement that Greeks believed were marked by the Pillars of Hercules – that pair of rocks believed to denote the geographical end of the earth, the point beyond which man was forbidden to venture. He remains, however, prepared to admit that this journey may end in death:

It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:  
 It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,  
 And see the great Achilles, whom we knew. (62-4)

Achilles, of course, is long dead – slain outside the walls of Troy. Any reunion with him will entail Ulysses' death, and this lends a mournful air to his closing address to his crew:

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'  
 We are not now that strength which in old days  
 Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;  
 One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
 Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. (65-70)

This is a statement of both action and resignation. In affirming his desire to return to the sea, Ulysses is simultaneously admitting that his life may be nearing its end. There is a degree of self-consciousness in him that is lacking in Dante's assertive shade, whose actions did not knowingly lead to his own demise, but were motivated from an ongoing desire to live. Eliot sees this self-consciousness as a shortcoming on Tennyson's part:

The story of Ulysses, as told by Dante, reads like a straightforward piece of romance, a well-told seaman's yarn; Tennyson's Ulysses is primarily a very self-conscious poet. (SE 250)

Tennyson's Ulysses, like the personae of his other poems, is thinking about everything through the prism of his self-consciousness. Dante's Ulysses acts without thought to the consequences. Whereas Dante's Ulysses recounts the tale of his final voyage and death, however, Tennyson's only offers arguments for the necessity of the voyage and attempts to convince us of the validity of his actions. Within the poem, he does not *go* anywhere, and in this sense he is a very Tennysonian figure.

For Eliot, Dante's portrayal of Ulysses is superior to Tennyson's in that he gives the hero a place within a divine order. The essay on Dante was written after Eliot's admission into the Church of England. His regard for Dante therefore partly reflects his acceptance that there is a guiding hand behind the spiritual framework of the Divine Comedy, which legitimates infernal torment and makes other suffering purgatorial. In Tennyson he found the ennui and weariness that combine to generate inertia, but no firm evidence of action. There is too much self-consciousness, too much thought about possible consequences to make this hero truly alive. Dante's Ulysses is damned for his actions; Tennyson's figure is debating the possibility of action, and as such ruminates to no immediate effect. As Jay concludes:

The problem with Tennyson's 'Ulysses', following from its verbal self-consciousness, is precisely its inability to 'fare forth' from morbidity and melancholy to the askesis that promises redemption. (Jay 111)

Writing at the time of his conversion, Eliot attacks Tennyson for an excessive preoccupation with self-consciousness. Aware that he had previously echoed Tennysonian thought in some of his earlier poems, Eliot now uses the Christian Dante to oppose the 'ruminative' Tennyson, seeing the Victorian poet's preoccupation with the self to be spiritually restrictive. The past influence, once again, must be criticised for not conforming to the new ideal. As with Shelley, however, Eliot was able, as his faith matured, to return to Tennyson and locate within his precursor's doubt the traces of a faith that he could admire. He does this, significantly, by writing on Tennyson's most explicitly religious poem, In Memoriam.

### ***In Memoriam: Tennyson's Christian Doubt?***

Eliot's essay 'In Memoriam' was written as the introduction for a volume of Tennyson's poems in 1936, and marks a distinct change in Eliot's response to Tennyson's poetry. As Kristian Smidt notes, the essay is "more full of laudatory superlatives than anything he wrote on the Metaphysicals." (Thormählen 195) I believe we can read this later response as one informed by Eliot's faith, and see him re-valuing Tennyson in the same fashion that he re-appraised Shelley in later years.

When he came to discussing In Memoriam itself, Eliot made a crucial distinction between Tennyson's feelings in the poem and the interpretation of the work by its initial audience, which via successive critical interpretations had become the accepted reading:

It happens now and then that a poet by some strange accident expresses the mood of his generation, at the same time that he is expressing a mood of his own which is quite remote from that of his generation. This is not a question of insincerity: there is an amalgam of yielding and opposition below the level of consciousness. (SE 334)

Given Eliot's own attempts to distance himself from readings of The Waste Land that sought to make the poem a testament to post-war disillusion, we can see him feeling a sense of affinity with Tennyson in this respect. Whereas Tennyson's readers wanted to view In Memoriam as an attempt to locate Christian faith in his grief over Hallam's death, Eliot believes its author was expressing a deeper sense of religious doubt. Whereas the public Tennyson "consistently asserted a convinced, if somewhat sketchy, Christian belief" Eliot believes the private man was "very much more interesting and tragic" (SE 334). Prey to melancholia and uncertainty, Tennyson wants to believe in his dead friend's immortality, but cannot reconcile this with his own view of the world, and his doubt as to the providence of God:

He was desperately anxious to hold the faith of the believer, without being very clear about what he wanted to believe: he was capable of illumination which he was incapable of understanding. (SE 334)

Eliot sees behind In Memoriam a man who knows that he wants to believe, but can only construct his belief over a framework of doubt, trying, in the words of 'Ash-Wednesday' to "construct something / Upon which to rejoice". The opening stanza of Tennyson's poem captures that blend of assertion and uncertainty that Eliot singles out for attention:

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,  
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,  
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,  
Believing where we cannot prove: (1-4)

To prove something "by faith alone" can imply either that the faith is strong enough to make further proof unnecessary *or* that the faith is not that strong, and stands 'alone', as the later contrast with what can be proven illustrates. In his invocation of God, Tennyson has given way to his fundamental doubt in God's existence and providence:

Thou wilt not leave us in the dust:  
Thou madest man, he knows not why,  
He thinks he was not born to die;  
And thou hast made him: thou art just. (9-12)

The syntax in this stanza, like that of Eliot's 'Ash-Wednesday', is complex, and can support an assertion of God's divine scheme or draw our attention back onto man's doubt, *thinking* that he was not born to die, and *thinking* that God has made him for some other end. In reading Tennyson's great poem, Eliot discards the Victorian belief that it asserts Christianity for a reading of it as an expression of doubt and, at the same time, an expression of the desire to believe, which is not, in itself, the same as belief. In Eliot's view, Tennyson, through this expression of his doubt, is actually making a step towards God. From the viewpoint of negative theology, which Eliot employed a great deal, most notably in 'East Coker', the point at which we admit the limitations of our own knowledge is the starting point on our route to divine understanding. "In order to arrive at what you do not know / You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance." In order to attain a transcendent viewpoint we must realise the inadequacy of our own:

Forgive these wild and wandering cries,  
 Confusions of a wasted youth;  
 Forgive them where they fail in truth,  
 And in thy wisdom make me wise. (41-4)

In these lines, we may hear an echo of the conclusion of 'Ash-Wednesday', where Eliot asks that he may be led from his sense of wavering faith to a deeper understanding: "Suffer me not to be separated / And let my cry come unto Thee."

In Memoriam is a poem of over 130 sections, and is surely the most comprehensive instance of Tennyson's tendency for 'rumination' as he ponders his own life without his friend and, simultaneously, the possibility of an overall order of things within which Hallam's death could have meaning. Eliot, however, does not in this later essay attack the poem for its detachment from the outside world and preoccupation with the self, even though he finds Tennyson's desire in the poem to not always be directed at a divine end:

His desire for immortality never is quite the desire for Eternal Life; his concern is for the loss of man rather than for the gain of God. (SE 334)

The Tennyson who wrote In Memoriam was, in Eliot's view, a Christian poet, but not for the reasons accredited to him by his contemporary audience. The poem evidences, for Eliot, a desire to believe rather than a belief itself. The meditation on divine matters is focused on reviving an earthly attachment rather than taking in a greater scheme. Tennyson's contemporaries "may have been in taken by it, but I don't think that Tennyson himself was, quite: his feelings were more honest than his mind."(SE 336)

We must ask, then, why Eliot does not criticize Tennyson for writing a poem that gives free rein to the ruminative traits that Eliot had previously mirrored in his own verse and attacked in his criticism. In Memoriam displays in places the same sense of isolation and world-weariness that can be found in Tennyson's other poetry, as this passage, quoted by Eliot in his essay, illustrates:

Dark house, by which once more I stand  
 Here in the long, unlovely street,

Doors, where my heart was used to beat  
So quickly, waiting for a hand,

A hand that can be clasp'd no more –  
Behold me, for I cannot sleep,  
And like a guilty thing I creep  
At earliest morning to the door.

He is not here; but far away  
The noise of life begins again,  
And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain  
On the bald street breaks the blank day. (Part VII)

Tennyson evokes here his awful sense of life going on without Hallam and at the same time not going on for *him*. The world pays no heed to his friend's absence, but to him the street is "bald" and the day is "blank". Life has no content, and no meaning can be found. We may hear in these lines echoes of Tithonus, or of Mariana – "he cometh not [...] I wish that I were dead". In Eliot's poetry there is a similar sense of life as an empty round of diversion stretched over our sense of nothingness. The imagery in Tennyson's lines may anticipate Eliot's 'Preludes', with their vision of the city streets, but the tone calls to mind Prufrock's wandering, or the narrator of 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night', who walks the deserted streets and returns home before daybreak to prepare for another day of emptiness:

'Memory!  
You have the key, [...]  
Put your shoes at the door, sleep, prepare for life.'

The last twist of the knife.

This vision of the "bald street" was later to be re-worked in Eliot's poetry in the second part of 'Little Gidding', when Eliot meets not Hallam's ghost, but the "familiar compound ghost" who offers advice on how one's life may be refined from "sin and error" in order to attain divine blessing.<sup>6</sup> In this later meeting, Tennyson's street is both evoked and transcended:

The day was breaking. In the disfigured street  
He left me, with a kind of valediction,

<sup>6</sup> James Longenbach explores the various textual echoes in this section of 'Little Gidding' in his essay "Mature poets steal": Eliot's allusive practice.' (Moody, Companion, 176-88)

And faded on the blowing of the horn.

The street remains bleak, but in this moment of parting there is a sense of something gained as opposed to something lost. The ghost has offered Eliot the solution to his isolated state, and his departure is not accompanied by a sense of increased loneliness, as in Tennyson's lines, but with the resolution to press onward and attain spiritual renewal.

I believe that Eliot was able, in 1936, to write favourably of Tennyson because he himself had moved on from the Tennysonian viewpoint in his life. His early poems had reiterated themes and concerns found throughout Tennyson's work – the sense of isolation, of ennui, of weariness, the desire to retreat from the struggle like the lotos-eaters and then seek to justify that withdrawal by imagining the world to be ranged against us and there to be no overall spiritual order to give meaning to our actions. By the time he came to write his 1936 essay, Eliot had the stability of his Christian faith which gave a sense of meaning to what he had previously found confusing. Life is not an empty round of activity without purpose: we must seek the understanding that will enable us to view things from a divine perspective. In this respect, Tennyson's expression of doubt is valid because it expresses, simultaneously, the desire to believe in something:

In Memoriam can, I think, justly be called a religious poem, but for another reason than that which made it seem religious to his contemporaries. It is not religious because of the quality of its faith, but because of the quality of its doubt. Its faith is a poor thing, but its doubt is a very intense experience. In Memoriam is a poem of despair, but of despair of a religious kind.  
(SE 336)

Eliot, from his Christian viewpoint, can regard Tennyson's poem as one that expresses the will to believe, and this is a step en route to religious understanding. What had previously been regarded as 'ruminantion' can now be seen as an expression of the awareness of something, without the full understanding that gives meaning to those thoughts. Tennysonian 'doubt' is thus absorbed into a divine order, and seen to have been part of a sincere search rather than an indulgence of personal concerns. Once the thought in Tennyson's poetry has been worked into

Eliot's Christian order, there is no longer a need to criticize the verse for its expression of feelings uncomfortably close to Eliot's own.

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