

The Poetics of Transition in T. S. Eliot's

"Ash-Wednesday"

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Abstract:

T. S. Eliot is one of the important founders of the modernist movement in literature, a cutting-edge poet of the first order. After his 1927 conversion to Anglicanism, he began calling himself a conservative, royal, and a classicist.

"Ash Wednesday" is the first long poem written by him after his conversion. It deals with the struggle that ensues when one who has lacked faith acquires it. It is richly but ambiguously allusive, and deals with the aspiration to move from spiritual barrenness to hope for human salvation.

"Ash Wednesday" not only struggles with an approach to faith but with an approach to a language capable of expressing it. Eliot's style is different from that that predates his conversion. This poem and the poems that followed have a more casual, melodic, and contemplative method, which marks a transition in Eliot's poetics.

With "Ash-Wednesday" (1930) one comes to grips with T. Eliot's own Vita Nuova in poetic career. In this poem the Biblical and the literary legacy, which has been textually assimilated in his earlier poetry, retains now its genuine suggestiveness in both form and content. With Eliot this choice seems to be explicable according to George Williamson who argues that this change in the Eliotic poetics "belongs to a search for a new form for a new content."¹ It is worth noticing that Eliot, who is the adherent of the religious and literary European traditions, is found now to be re-shaping earlier themes for these to be co-opted by

his new sensibility. Hence Williamson sees that this new sensibility initiates an expression to the new areas of experience, or continue something already existed.

This transition is also due to the poet's intellectual conversion; it might be ascribed to the poet's conversion to the Anglican Church in June 1927. Hence, "Ash-Wednesday" bespeaks this alteration poetically, contemporary as it is. This religious conversion necessitates Eliot's overt treatment of Christian themes with an air of religiosity and apocalyptic bearings. Laurie J. MacDiarmid tends to see the consequences of this conversion in terms more emphatic than those of Williamson. Thus says she:

His [Eliot] 1927 conversion ... is a definitive shift in his epistemological speculations, and thus in his art. This move is the culmination of a long process of private speculation, image making, indirection and ambivalence.²

"Ash-Wednesday" thus launches the departure, in Eliot's middle poetry, from the analytical treatment of Biblical as well as other symbols as part of the general poetic process to the unitary and referential handling of these themes and symbols. Here D. E. S. Maxwell argues that the symbolism of death experienced before the advent of the new spiritual life is transmuted from the fertility myths in the earlier poetry into the Christian rebirth in the middle poetry.³ This transposition of the symbols from the heathen ground to the Christian soil entails a change in the poet's symbolic code, and presupposes handling Christian themes with a Christian character. This also goes along with Nancy Duval Hargrove who puts forwards that Eliot's middle poetry initiates the way out from Inferno toward renewal and rebirth, and that this new orientation in choosing contents shows the change in symbolism.⁴ To sum up, these symbols are now put in a referential frame; the frame of the Anglo-Catholic affiliation.

This conversion and transition in the Eliotic poetics is anticipated by "Gerontion" and "The Hollow Men" in which the poetic Persona seems to be growing sick of his sojourn in his *via obscura*, of his getting old and bored and confused in the city of the dreadful night, of being horrified in the Dantesque inferno. He is now aspiring to, or, negotiating the potential of him passing the purgatorial passage toward the celestial city (paradise), to the Augustinian city of

God, leaving Carthage (the unreal city) once and forever. With "Ash-Wednesday" Eliot's poetic and life journey suffers a change from the observations of the physicality and the sordidness of the modern world to the spirituality of the inner realms of the self. Hence, with this poem the mystical journey is yet to begin to be later culminated in *The Four Quartets*. This Journey has its genesis in Prufrock's social journey, Gerontion's historical journey, and, Maxwell adds, the modern journey in *The Waste Land* which is envisioned in terms of the original journey to the Grail Chapel.⁵ The traveller or pilgrim in the earlier poems is now beginning to see the intimations of the light at the end of the dark tunnel. Here it is apt to say that Eliot, very much honest to his Dantesque affiliation, draws upon Dante's structural as well as spiritual element of *Divina Commedia* in his poetics of the journey. In this poetics one may conceive of the progress of the typical Eliotic persona in terms of Dante himself in his work; "Dante will have to descend through Hell and then climb up through Purgatory to Heaven and the abode of the blessed spirits."⁶ Within the scope of Eliot's opus, "Ash-Wednesday" is thus deemed to be the poet's Purgatorio that intermediates the inferno of *The Waste Land* and the paradiso of *The Four Quartets*. Moreover, in Eliot's purgatory one can easily trace the continuity of imagery as well as the thematic bearings of the earlier poems, which indicates a development rather than a departure or a clear-cut break. These bearings are but "These matters that with myself I too much discuss / Too much explain."⁷

These matters imply the speaker's awareness of the fallen state of man's world, or as the old man in "Gerontion" puts it: "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" And again "Ash-Wednesday" responds to this questioning by trying to reconcile the schizophrenic binary oppositions separated by all these *Between*s in "The Hollow Men":

Between the idea

And the reality

Between the motion

And the act

Falls the Shadow

Between the conception

And the creation

Between the emotion

And the response

Falls the Shadow

Between the desire

And the spasm

Between the potency

And existence

Between the essence

And the descent

Falls the Shadow

The kinship between this falling shadow and the falling down of the London Bridge of *The Waste Land* is not hard to grasp. "Ash-Wednesday" is an attempt to build up this falling Shadow/Bridge into an entity that transcendently assimilates all these oppositions of man's being.

Yet, in the process, and due to its purgatorial status, the poem creates its own hiatus in which it negotiates reconciliation under the judging as well as the merciful eyes already met with in "The Hollow Men". This hiatus is one symptom of the ramifications of conversion experience. Here F. B. Pinion's pronouncement might give this point its due:

His [Eliot's] commitment was an act of faith, and faith implies uncertainty; to this extent he remained agnostic. His subsequent poetry emphasises almost insuperable difficulty of attaining a sense of unity with God, that intersection of timeless with time which he calls incarnation.⁸

The reconciliation of the above binary oppositions is now conceived of in terms of the incarnation of the time and the timeless which is now the poet's cardinal concern. Still, the agnostic element is unravelled through the poet's "personal narrative of recognition, acknowledgement, and change by a speaker who has already affirmed a faith but who needs to understand the human or existential dimensions of belief."⁹ This agnostic tone is self-consciously revealed in the opening lines of the poem:

Because I do not hope to turn again

Because I do not hope

Because I do not hope to turn

This agnosticism is registering the poet's voice as caught between "the old dispensation" and the new dispensation in the context of his newly gained Christian belief. The idea of transition is also checked in the poet's lamenting somehow the old state of things:

Why should I mourn

The vanished power of the usual reign?

Here it seems that the speaker's voice in "Gerontion" is incorporated within the speaker's voice in "Ash-Wednesday". The obsession with the idea of "The one veritable transitory power" betrays the poet's Augustinian affiliation as is delineated in *Confessions*. The poet moves to the consideration of the notion of time, and the question of self-consciousness and selflessness and the tension between these. The poet wants to surpass the self-conscious historical moment of his predicament as well expressed in "Gerontion" to the selfless infinite to meet the divine, but he deeply feels that he is restrained by the trappings of the here and now:

Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place
I rejoice that things are as they are

So, the notion of returning and not returning is depicted in temporal and spatial facets as the speaker is arrested in his purgatorial standstill. He is self-conscious (which is the case of the modern poet's mentality), yet he wants to be rid of this self-consciousness to gain selflessness in order for him to construct "a renewed subjectivity, now fully aware of its fateful encounter with the divine spirit."¹⁰

The issue of the new subjectivity has also to do with the identity of the newly converted poet and his mastery of his artistic tools as a Christian poet. For now he has nothing to do but to rejoice at things as they are; that is, the experience of conversion and the transition in his poetics that are responsible for his identity in the making; "I rejoice, having to construct something / Upon which to rejoice." This transition in the poet's subjectivity and poetics fixes the poet much more still in self-consciousness, yet for awhile he succumbs to selflessness: "Teach us to care and not to care / Teach us to sit still." Here the poet's self-conscious, self-centred voice is commingled in the collective voice, in the polyphony of the praying voices. Hence for him to construct his poetic voice afresh he has to have it purified in the supplication of prayer.

The first step in the poet's religious and poetic conversion is to stave off the phantasmagoria of the old faces and voices; "I renounce the blessed face / And renounce the voice". He wants to convert as well as to concert the material out of which his previous experiences and poetry was composed; the old themes and the old imagery. This renunciation does not go or prosper without being sustained by the poet's drawing upon parallel experiences of conversion. Eliot again and again confirms his Dantesque ties as he appropriates Dante's lore in *Vita Nuova*. These ties are clearly shown in the second part of the poem. After refuting the

tempting lady's face and voice, he addresses his new "Lady" and appeals for her to help him gain purification and new identity:

Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree

In the cool of the day, having fed to satiety

On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained

In the hollow round of my skull.

In keeping with the notion of the transition of Eliot's themes and images, one might as well refer back to "Gerontion". In this poem "The tiger [that] springs in the new year," and "Us he devours" suggests the allusion to Christ and the unfulfilled hope of salvation. In "Ash Wednesday," and after the old poetic persona has been devoured, he is now being dismembered and digested and the remaining white bones are waiting to be brought back to the new life. It is worth noticing that the three leopards mentioned here are echoing Dante's three beasts in Inferno and the three spotted leopard in Purgatorio: this process of renewal is guaranteed only through the agency of the Lady whose presence from now on saturates the poem's texture and poetics.

Despite the fact that this lady is a Dantesque legacy, yet she does not cut a very clear figure in the poem. F. O. Matthiessen comments on the figure of the lady by saying that

as a result of the way in which she is described in distinct definite images and yet left at the same time indefinite and suggestive, she can stand at once as Beatrice or saint or the virgin herself, as well as being an idealized beautiful woman.¹¹

She is the counterpart of the images of the women in Eliot's early poetry: the dilettantish women who unknowingly talk about the master painter's art in "Prufrock"; the tempting old lady in "Portrait of a Lady"; the hyacinth girl, Madame Sosostriis, the Lady of the Rocks, the solitary and exhausted Cleopatra-like Lady, Lil, and the violated girl in *The Waste Land*. Unlike these hellish versions, the Lady in Eliot's transitional abode is introduced as a harbinger of hope and redemption. "Ash-Wednesday," James Torrens posits, "is Eliot's version of the Beatrice story, wound in with the way of renunciation which he was learning from St. John of the Cross

and the whole mystical-ascetic tradition."¹² The "Lady of silences" in the poem is also a reminder of the "Multifoliate rose," the bringer of hope in "The Hollow Men," as well as "the Hyacinth girl" who is swaddled with silence in the "Hyacinth garden" in *The Waste Land*. This silent lady, this rose garden where all love meets is being appealed for to address the poet in his purgatory and help him pass to paradise:

End of the endless

Journey of no end

Conclusion of all that

Is inconclusible

Speech without word and

Word of no speech

In the third part of the poem, the poet's endless journey towards paradise is yet to be conveyed by the stair image, which is another recurrent Dantesque-Eliotic motif. The stair image can also be traced back to Prufrock's hesitant descending to meet the chattering women in his inferno-like world, and to the ascent to the mountains in *The Waste Land* where the poetic persona is met with what the thunder said. Like the image of the Lady, the stair image in this poem has an unquestionably mystical twist. The turnings of the stair take us to the tribulations of the opening lines of the poem. Here again one is presented with the image of a man ascending and standing every now and then at every turning and constantly looking down at the comforts and pleasures which he has left behind. "At the first turning of the second stair," the persona turns to see himself a devil farther down on the stairs. "At the second turning" the stair is dark and damp beyond repair. "At the first turning of the third stair" he looks upon the pastoral temptations of Pan, "The broadbacked figure drest in green." Symbolically this means that the poet is doing his hardest to work out his spiritual salvation.

In the fourth part of the poem the persona now draws near to a vision of the Lady, who is the Virgin Mary that stresses her ignorance and her knowledge, as well as her ability to make

things firm. She walks in a realm "between sleep and walking" as a vision of light. Like Dante's Beatrice, she is veiled, but also silent among the yews, which represent death, as well as sorrow and the church. It is the bird who reminds one of "redeem[ing] the time." It is to redeem "the higher dream," a vision of transcendental matters. This part ends with this "And after this our exile." This exile is the due result of transcendence that cuts off the poetic persona from all his past experiences. This selfsame exile holds true of the poet who has to convert his poetic agency to comply with "The token of the word unheard, unspoken." In the fifth part of the poem, the persona is still waiting to hear the Word/the Logos which is swaddled with silence, and he questions if the Lady will pray for those in need in this dark world with all its terror and denial. In the last part of the poem the Eliotic pilgrim retunes to the world of senses and desire. The poet wakes to the world as "the blind eye creates / The empty forms." The Neo-Platonic vision informing the poem's texture is brought to an end, and one is finally becomes aware of the "brief transit" and of life as "The dreamcrossed twilight between birth and dying." The poet retains his earthly voice in "the lost sea voices." The poet is now departing his poetics of the waste land as he conceives of his version of Beatrice as the "spirit of the river, spirit of the sea," and as he readily loses his voice in the fertilizing word/logos in the act of prayer.

Notes

¹George Williamson, *A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1955), p. 164.

²Laurie J. MacDiarmid, *T. S. Eliot's Civilized Savage: Religious Eroticism and Poetics* (New York & London: Routledge, 2003), p.83.

³D. E. S. Maxwell, *The Poetry of T. S. Eliot* (London: Routledge and Kegan Ltd., 1952), p.145.

⁴Nancy Duval Hargrove, *Landscape as a Symbol in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot* (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 1986), p. 89.

⁵D. E. S. Maxwell, *The Poetry of T.S. Eliot*, p. 113.

⁶Stephen Coote, *T.S. Eliot: The Waste Land* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1985), p. 114.

⁷T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909 – 1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1936). All references to Eliot's verse are to this edition.

⁸F. B. Pinion, *A T. S. Eliot Companion* (London: The Macmillan Press Limited, 1959), p. 36.

⁹John Xiros Cooper, *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 84.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 116.

¹²James Torrens, "Charles Maurras and Eliot's 'New Life'," *PMLA* 89.2 (March, 1974), p. 318.

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خلاصة البحث

يعد ت.س. إليوت احد ابرز المؤسسين لحركة الحدائة في الأدب، وهو شاعر مميز من الطراز الأول. وبعد أن اهتدى إلى العقيدة الانجليكانية ، اخذ يسمي نفسه انجليكانيا محافظا في الدين وملكي الهوى في السياسة وكلاسيا المنزع في الأدب. تعد قصيدته (أربعاء الرماد) من أولى قصائده الطوال التي كتبت بعد تحوله الديني. والتي تتعاطى شعريا مع تجربة التحول هذه. مع غنى وغموض إشاراتها ، ترسم لنا هذه القصيدة تجربة التحول من الخواء الروحي وترصد الأمل في خلاص الإنسان.

تظهر لنا هذه القصيدة ذلك الصراع ليس على صعيد المعنى والمضمون فحسب بل أيضا على صعيد التقنية الشعرية المتمثلة بامتلاك لغة قادرة على نقل تضاعيف تلك التجربة الروحية. وبهذا فان القصيدة ترصد لنا تحولا مصاحبا في شعرية إليوت، إذ إن أسلوب الشاعر في هذه القصيدة والقصائد التي تليها يبدو أكثر تحررا وميلا للنزعة الغنائية التأملية، وعليه فان القصيدة تعد ملمحا مهما في عطاء الشاعر إذ إنها تسجل هذه الانعطافة المهمة في شعره.