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T. S. Eliot and the crisis of meaning

by John Valentine

Summary

The poet T. S. Eliot offers us a way of experiencing and interpreting the interplay of our personal and social worlds: 'Understanding begins in the sensibility'.¹ Through the evocation of memory and desire, he shows us that the pathway to Christian faith can actually be through the breaking down of the familiar and trusted, opening us up to an experience of the love of God that has always been present to us, even if we were unaware of it. For all of us – whether or not we love poetry, and whether or not we see the world through the eyes of Christian faith – Eliot offers us a fruitful and holistic way of thinking about our world.

Introduction

T. S. Eliot worked for many years in London, including for the foreign department of Lloyd's Bank in the City and for the publishers Faber and Faber in the centre of the city. He wrote evocatively of what it is like to commute into work, to be carried along by the river of workers or to travel in the strange world of London's underground system. If you happen to be reading this paper while hanging from a strap on the Central or Piccadilly lines, or cheek by jowl on the number 17 bus, then Eliot would have had the same experience about 90 years ago. In many ways, he is the poet of modern life, the prophet of the contemporary city. He gives voice to the questions of what it feels like to be an individual in a vast and impersonal culture.

Three reasons to engage with Eliot

Chances are we encountered Eliot in the show *Cats* or inflicted on us at school, where – frankly – he did not make much sense. If we know more of him, it may be in connection with allegations of anti-Semitism, or as a voice of elegiac and nostalgic conservatism speaking loudly over the cacophony of the increasing diversity of cultures that was changing London and the world even when he was writing. Or maybe we have come across some of his Christian verse, like 'Journey of the Magi', 'Ash-Wednesday', or *Four Quartets*, read in church services and been struck by the power of what he had to say and how he said it.

But why consider an American poet of the last century in a Cambridge Paper? The case is three-fold. First of all, Eliot helps us understand the subterranean in our lives and our culture. He understood what it *feels* like to be human and to be caught in cultural currents that seem to be defining our world, whether we agree with them or not. Eliot was a poet of the individual sensibility, but increasingly he came to reach for and to articulate a vision of how humanity works together – how culture and society can be shaped (for good or ill) by ideas, feelings and beliefs. He knew how these things could be manufactured and manipulated, how world-views could be constructed through the power of language, through illusions, verbal sleight of hand, a tone of voice. Eliot helps us see how and why irony, suspicion and cynicism can infect the soul and make human community something stultifying to personal and collective flourishing. Eliot constructs and decodes how your world works, and what it feels like to expose it. And he reaches courageously for antidotes of something strong and true and beautiful and still that makes modern life possible even in the middle of such conditions.

The second reason is that Eliot shows us a pathway to Christian faith for someone of sensibility, rationality and profound scepticism. Eliot's own life was marked by extraordinary emotional suffering. His formative years saw the First World War. The first half of his adult life was shaped and defined by his unhappy marriage to Vivien, who suffered mental illness and with whom Eliot found he could not live

¹ In the preface to David Jones's epic poem *In Parenthesis* (1937) written in 1961, quoted in Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot: A Life*, Simon & Schuster, 1984, p.332.

emotionally. He was a complex man, deeply private, filled with self-doubts. Having grown up in a Unitarian New England family in St. Louis, Missouri, he made a long and careful journey to a profound Anglo-Catholic Christian faith. His conversion to Christ was a secret affair, involving clandestine meetings in woods with assorted clerics and Christian friends, and a private Confirmation service in the chapel of the Bishop of Oxford, but his convictions were public and forcefully expressed. For those for whom faith comes slowly and painfully, Eliot's courageous move from despair and cynicism and a deep sense that nothing can be known, to a place of serenity, of having a place to stand in the world, is both moving and instructive. Eliot was a public Christian intellectual at a time when society was finding faith less and less credible. He still speaks cogently and with emotional and imaginative sense to our times.

And the third reason is that he is quite simply an astoundingly good poet. He remade poetry for the modern age, and what he does with language and form has rarely if ever been surpassed. To stop and read the top Eliot poems is to experience something extraordinary, that will not admit of the shallow but speaks for a world that is coherent and true and beautiful, even in what Eliot saw as the wreckage of contemporary life.

The poems

Rather than the whole corpus of Eliot's poetry, I shall look at *The Waste Land*² and *Four Quartets*,³ themselves long and complex poems.

The Waste Land was published in 1922 and propelled Eliot to being considered the premier poet of his day. It is a poem of profound fragmentation and unease, of fear and breakdown. It is a potent mixture of the everyday, the normal and the simple as well as the abstruse, the alien and the seemingly unconnected. The language is, for the most part, straightforward and even conversational, and so are the images, but the overwhelming sense of fragmentation makes meaning hard to register.

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.⁴

At one level, the opening is a simple description of spring seeing new plant life. But at another, the reader is aware that the image of the emerging lilacs is serving duty as an image of something much more. The 'dead land' would have been especially strong as an emblem of post-war Europe, and the allusions to 'Memory and desire' would have pinpointed a precise moment of historical consciousness. Perhaps most striking of all is the elegiac tone, the emotional sensibility: the sense of cruelty in nature, the pain involved in the unstoppable momentum of the renewed seasons, expressed by those three present indicative line endings.

The second stanza begins:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. ...

We are in another universe – a wilderness, an existential drama, a world of biblical language and cadence. Where the first stanza was naturalistic, with overheard conversation in a foreign language, with snatches of memory and emotion, this seems rhetorical, an ancient wisdom speaking. And we feel that the

poem itself may be the 'stony rubbish', a 'heap of broken images'. We ask, too, where there might be a root system in this desert, where water may be found in a world of reiterated negatives: 'no shelter ... no relief ... no sound of water'. Three lines further on the verse carries a sense of the portentous and the oracular:

And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

The last stanza of the first part, 'The Burial of the Dead', takes us to the 'Unreal City', where,

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.

We read of real place names ('King William Street ... Saint Mary Woolnoth') but this is a world of the dead, a city where the people flow over a bridge, not a river under it, and where someone with a modern name ("Stetson!") was somehow on the ships at the ancient battle of Mylae. And we are back to the gestating lilacs, and the prospects of new life, unless 'the Dog' (why that capital D?) digs up the corpse first, before a concluding denunciation of complicity (itself a direct quotation from the French poet, Charles Baudelaire): "You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère!"

What connects these 'broken images' is not cognitive but emotional; it is 'Memory and desire'. The poem is enacting what it is talking about. *The Waste Land* is a poem about consciousness (an awareness of what existence feels like) and self-consciousness (an uncomfortable awareness of being someone with these feelings). Eliot wrote in 1961 that 'Understanding begins in the sensibility'.⁵ He referred to the business of poetry as 'the process of transmutation of emotion'.⁶ Writing about Shakespeare, he said: 'Shakespeare, too, was occupied with the struggle – which alone constitutes life for a poet – to transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal'.⁷

This last quotation moves us on though from the merely emotional. Poetry is not simply the expression of a personal emotion by the poet. It is the fashioning, the changing, the alchemising of a personal emotion into something altogether more universal, even objective. Eliot was scathing about poetry solely as personal emotional expression.

In two highly influential concepts, Eliot sought to find form for this universalizing process. In his 1919 essay 'Hamlet' he used the phrase 'the objective correlative'. Poetry and drama is actually looking for something external to an inner, personal emotion on which to hang (and to transmute) that feeling into something much more than an individual emotion. And in his essay of the same year 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', he argued that all great poetry does not stand alone but actually takes its place in the ongoing canon of great European literature. He argues that even though originality is often what is most prized in literature, 'if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously'.⁸ This means that the writing of poetry is far from the expression of personal emotion: 'What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is

5 In the preface to David Jones's epic poem *In Parenthesis* (1937) written in 1961, quoted in Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot: A Life*, Simon & Schuster, 1984, p.332.

6 In the essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, edited by Frank Kermode, Faber & Faber, London, 1975, p.42.

7 In 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', in *Selected Essays*, Faber & Faber, 1999, p.137, quoted by Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice*, Faber & Faber, 1994, p.72.

8 In *Selected Prose*, p.38.

2 *Collected Poems 1909–1962*, Faber & Faber, 1963, pp.61–79.

3 *Collected Poems 1909–1962*, Faber & Faber, 1963, pp.187–223.

4 *The Waste Land*, 'I. The Burial of the Dead'.

a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.⁹

In fact, writing poetry can be described as ‘this process of depersonalization ... It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science’.¹⁰

It is in this light that we must hear the allusions in *The Waste Land*. Eliot is marrying contemporary life with a whole tradition of European literary civilization. The allusions to Dante, to Baudelaire, to Dryden, Chaucer, Shakespeare and many, many more, are what objectify the desperately personal agonies of the individual voices within the poem. They also give a framework, a received way of understanding life, and of providing significance and meaning. As he writes at the very end of *The Waste Land*, ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’, (itself a quotation). He is using the collapsed debris of European civilization (broken to pieces by the Great War, brought into question by psychoanalysis, rendered intensely personal by his own pain and suffering and nervous collapse) in a desperate effort to stop the whole project disintegrating utterly and irrevocably.

Fast forward to *Four Quartets*, published between 1935 and 1942. The world is once again at war. Eliot is separated from Vivien. He is a devout Christian. He is one of the great and good, although struggling still to articulate his vision and to find his voice.

The titles of each poem are expressions from Eliot’s own and his family’s past – images of renewal and exploration. East Coker was the Somerset village from which his ancestors originated before travelling to America in the seventeenth century; The Dry Salvages a constellation of rocks which served as a navigation point off Gloucester harbour, from which he used to sail as a boy on summer holidays in New England; Little Gidding, a religious community in East Anglia. The first of the poems, ‘Burnt Norton’, begins,

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

‘East Coker’ begins, ‘In my beginning is my end.’

The last section of ‘Little Gidding’ begins,
What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from. ...

It is plain that we are in the same territory as *The Waste Land* – Eliot is still ruminating on the relationship of ‘memory and desire’ with the present, and expressing the impact of the past on the present in giving meaning to the present and the future. Some other concerns return. ‘We are born with the dead: I see, they return, and bring us with them’¹¹ – a reworking of the argument of ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’. There is a haunting evocation of commuters travelling by tube to work (‘Eruption of unhealthy souls I Into the faded air’), very much in the same register as the flood of workers across London Bridge into the ‘Unreal City’ of *The Waste Land*.

The techniques are strikingly similar to those of *The Waste Land* – the employment of a constantly allusive second tier of references to images and echoes outside the surface of the poem, which give it both depth and meaning. Yet, here, the allusive world is so much more positive than that of *The Waste Land* – it is the imagery of the rose garden, of exploration, of Eden, of ancient buildings and previous generations that have left legacies. And the diction itself is balanced, less panicky. It is much less personal than *The Waste Land* – there are no conversations overheard, fewer personal pronouns and personal stories, very few personal names.¹² The central reflection on time is built round the

assertion that, ‘If all time is eternally present I All time is unredeemable.’¹³

Here is a man at peace with the passing of time, who does not fear the story ending – time must pass. But time is not all there is – like listening to ‘the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts’ or looking at a Chinese jar ‘in its stillness’,¹⁴ we find that ‘history is a pattern I Of timeless moments’.¹⁵

... So, while the light fails
On a winter’s afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England.¹⁶

It is plain that now ‘the still point of the turning world’¹⁷ is God, who calls in the garden: ‘The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery, I And the unseen eyebeam crossed’¹⁸ (the cross is already present in Eden). There is still pain in life, but it can be seen in a different light, the perspective of the love of God.

Throughout *Four Quartets* the unseen God draws and calls ‘With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling’,¹⁹ and, as with *The Waste Land*, the poem enacts what it describes; what happens beneath the text is as significant as what happens on its surface, only this time it is redemptive.

In an article written in 1940, Eliot wrote:

It is through the science of theology only that we can hope to bring to our own consciousness, and so dispose of, the unconscious assumptions, bias and prejudice which impair social thinking.²⁰

He once tried to describe to Stephen Spender what it is like to pray: ‘to concentrate, to forget self, to attain union with God’.²¹ Prayer and theology alike embody the same impulse that Eliot followed all his life – to discipline emotion and to transmute it into something significant, something universal. Only this time, the ‘objective correlative’ of his feelings was fully able to bear the weight Eliot asked him to bear.

Some final reflections and questions

1. The nature of art and reality

Eliot presents us with a world that, at root, is ordered, even if, on the surface, reality presents as profoundly chaotic. He wrote a review of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in 1923, in which he praised what he called Joyce’s ‘mythical method’ of writing:

In using myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. ... It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.²²

Critics have long felt that Eliot was describing his own method as much as Joyce’s. It reveals a view of the world that is both extremely negative and highly redemptive. Eliot saw the world about him as defined by chaos, by futility, by anarchy. Later in his life, he wrote that ‘Only Christianity helps to reconcile me to life, which is otherwise disgusting’.²³ We may question a viewpoint which sees so little that is good or of value in life and creation, but underneath Christians will recognise the biblical

13 ‘Burnt Norton’, I.

14 ‘Burnt Norton’, V.

15 ‘Little Gidding’, V.

16 Ibid.

17 ‘Burnt Norton’, II.

18 ‘Burnt Norton’, I.

19 ‘Little Gidding’, V.

20 *Christendom*, x, 1940, 103, quoted by Ricks, pp.113–4.

21 Quoted in Ackroyd, p.161.

22 *The Dial*, November 1923. Reprinted in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, edited by Frank Kermode, Faber & Faber, London, 1975, p.175.

23 In a letter to Paul Elmer More dated ‘Shrove Tuesday, 1928’, quoted in John D. Margolis, *T. S. Eliot’s Intellectual Development 1922–1939*, 1972, p.142, cited by Ricks, p.173.

9 *Selected Prose*, p.40.

10 Ibid, p.40.

11 ‘Little Gidding’, V.

12 As pointed out by Christopher Ricks in *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice*.

world-view here, which reveals to us a world which, whilst created good, is now profoundly disordered, but which God has acted to redeem in Jesus Christ, towards whom all creation is moving and in whom it finds its hope of coherence and freedom.²⁴ Eliot saw his art as a kind of taproot down into this foundational layer of the redemptive act of God. For him there were affinities between the careful construction of a poem and the delicate but ultimately robust sense of coherence in creation: 'Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning',²⁵ as he says in *Four Quartets*.

This presents the journey to faith as more akin to the discovery of a hidden world, rather than the creation of a personal world of virtue. This discovery is a hard road – it is the unflinching examination of life, the refusal to be turned aside by the disappointments of personal experience or to be turned cynical by disillusionment. In this respect, Eliot's epiphany poem 'Journey of the Magi' (1927) is emblematic of his whole corpus: it presents just such a journey – kings travelling to see the newborn Jesus. Gone are the sentimental pictures of childhood cribs, and instead a harsh travelogue of a long winter's journey, and the concluding reflection that this birth felt more like a death, their own. The journey to faith is a kind of dying, a shedding of an old world that is corroded and corroding, but of which we are an inextricable part, in order to break through to the new world – a world that is stronger and truer. Art, he says, can help us do this; and this was his aim.

2. Personality

Eliot was paradoxical in his assertion that poetry worked best when it started with personal experience and individual sensibility, and made of it something objective and universal. His writing, throughout his life, was intensely personal – he wrote constantly out of his own experience, memories and desires, and yet always argued that poetry lapsed into solipsism whenever it focused within. What is extraordinary about his poetry is the power with which he made his own life and feelings an articulation of the mood of a generation; his own struggles were never less than his, but somehow gave voice to what it was like for a whole culture to come to terms with being in a new place at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Eliot gives us a fruitful way of seeing ourselves. He wrote with a great reverence for science (he wrote of art as, in some ways, aspiring to the condition of science), he was a highly intelligent man who thought in early life of becoming a philosopher, yet he came to think that reality could only be grasped through an acknowledgement of the limitations of rationality. He urged that we are primarily sentient beings – we know ourselves and our world truly through sensibility, through feeling, memory, desire. And he showed us ourselves as inseparable from our

cultures; we are never free of the values and thought worlds handed down to us by those who have gone before. Which led him on, increasingly, to a concern for the conscious construction for our descendants of a culture and society that best enabled the kind of life and living that he considered were the height of the Western condition.

Much of what Eliot meant by these things is highly controversial. Arguments about what it is to be a person continue to rage in every discipline. His achievement was to show us to ourselves in all our complexity – both internal and social – and to refuse to allow us the false simplifications of choosing who we want to be. Eliot has been seen as the icon of modernism, but also claimed as the precursor of postmodernism – and repudiated equally in both roles! At the very least, his poetry gives us a thoroughly *felt* view of what it is to be alive as a human being at a time when questions of personhood and personality have never been more hotly contested, nor mattered more.

3. 'We shall not cease from exploration'

At the end of *Four Quartets*, Eliot wrote:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.²⁶

As we find ourselves hanging by the strap on the tube or on the number 17 bus, we find that Eliot has given us other journeys – an inward journey through the power and complexity of our feelings, a social journey through the powerful currents of our culture, and a spiritual journey into the life of God as He interacts with our world. Whatever our personal faith convictions, Eliot's verse speaks powerfully to us and our society because he allows emotion and imagination to be the conduit for a truth that is not pre-eminently cognitive. He will not allow us the convenience of half-truths or theories that give no place to the totality of what it means to be a human being. And his contention – so beautifully, agonizingly and persuasively put – is that only the reality of God is sufficient for the reality of our world and of the fullness of our lives.²⁷

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ For those who wish to follow on from Eliot, Wallace Stevens and Geoffrey Hill cover similar territory and advance Eliot's thinking and practice.

John Valentine, a guest contributor to Cambridge Papers, is the Rector of St George's church in Holborn – just two minutes' walk from where Eliot used to work in Russell Square. He has degrees in English literature and theology.

²⁴ See, for instance, 1 Cor. 8:6 and Col. 1:17.

²⁵ 'Little Gidding', V.

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