

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON AN ENGLISH POET

T. S. ELIOT: LANGUAGE, SINCERITY
AND THE SELF¹

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I

IT is perhaps not enlightening to elicit a set of propositions from a poet's work and present them as his 'beliefs'. And if it is not enlightening this will not be because it is always difficult to make such inferences, but because beliefs do not enter into poetry in the same way that they enter into philosophy and religion. To say that is not exactly to utter a commonplace, since we are no longer agreed upon an aesthetic theory that will distinguish between beliefs and assertions as they exist in art and as they exist elsewhere. Yet it was T. S. Eliot's own view that poetry offered not thought but its emotional equivalent, and that it was Shakespeare's business 'to express the greatest emotional intensity of his time, based on whatever his time happened to think'.² In this lecture I shall be talking about the self as it is explored in Eliot's poetry; but to find the echo, or trace of philosophical ideas in the verse cannot be an end in itself. An idea of the self does enter centrally into Eliot's poetry, and it carries with it the weight of a whole philosophical tradition; but it depends upon a strictly poetic exploration of experience. By 'a strictly poetic exploration of experience' I mean an exploration of experience that is at the same time the exploration of the possibilities of language, so that the possibilities of what can be believed, even in a philosophical or religious sense, will finally be connected to what the poet can find to say.

In *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* we certainly find the traces of a philosophical theory of the self. The opening lines are as memorable as those of any poem in the language:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky,
Like a patient etherised upon a table;

¹ I am grateful to Roger Scruton for helpful criticism and suggestions.

² 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca'.

But who is the 'you' and who the 'I'? One critic has quite confidently asserted that the 'you' is the woman whom Prufrock loves. This assumes that the poem is more or less like a Browning dramatic monologue, with a speaker whose character is revealed as the poem progresses. (In *My Last Duchess*, for instance, we learn that the Duke who is speaking—a man of consummate vanity, a sort of Renaissance Gilbert Osmund—has somehow procured the death of his wife, and is now relating the story to the very person through whom he is negotiating a new marriage.) But *Prufrock* is not at all like a Browning dramatic monologue, and there is no other person to whom Prufrock addresses himself. We do indeed have a sense of a fragmentation of personality, and of a consciousness with uncertain boundaries. There is the self of Prufrock that is merely self-conscious:

(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!)

This self is merely self-conscious in the sense that it is unable to present an identity which validates experience. Self-consciousness in Prufrock goes with no self-knowledge, since there is no self-will ('Should I, after tea and cakes and ices, / Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?'). He sees himself from the outside, as it were, as the subject of speculation on the part of others, having no identity that is achieved from within. The self of Prufrock is constantly overwhelmed by its impressions and images, since it can give them no meaning that is its own. His experiences come to him as though they were the experiences of another man, lacking the imprint of an active self; so the self constantly dissolves into its impressions—and indeed bears the closest possible resemblance to the picture of the self, as a bundle of impressions, that we find in the empiricist philosophy of Hume. One might say that Prufrock does not possess his experience but is possessed by it—the yellow fog, the lonely men in shirtsleeves leaning out of windows—and is incapable either of action or of organizing his impressions into significance:

To have squeezed the universe into a ball
 To roll it towards some overwhelming question
 To say: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
 Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all' . . .

It is a central Idealist doctrine that the self is not a substance, in which experiences and thoughts somehow 'inhere'. In that respect the Idealist tradition is in agreement with Hume. But Idealism, unlike Hume, does not dissolve the self into a bundle of impressions. Rather it reconstitutes it as an activity, an activity of 'self-realization' in which to be a self is seen as an achievement rather than as a given fact. The self (to use the language of Hegel and Sartre) is a way of being *in* the world, not a way of being *for* the world. According to some thinkers (for instance, F. H. Bradley) the self is achieved when an active unity is created amongst sensations, thoughts, and feelings. The Prufrock who is self-conscious, and who cannot compel his kaleidoscopic impressions into a unity, is defeated in his attempt to be a self. He thus does not exist *in* the world but *for* the world. His self-consciousness is no more than a sense of what he is in the eyes of others.

But in *Prufrock* we are not presented with the predicament of an individual. Prufrock tries several different styles of language in order to try and construct a sense of himself. The most diffident seem closest to reality, but furthest from giving a secure sense of the self. The most confident are the least sincere and collapse the most completely. It is interesting that when Eliot wanted to define the quality of Dryden's use of language, he did so by contrasting him with Swinburne. Whereas Swinburne's poetry is all suggestion and no denotation, Dryden's verse 'states immensely, but its suggestive power is almost nothing'. And talking again of Swinburne, he wrote: 'Language in a healthy state presents the object, is so close to the object that the two are identified. They are identified in the verse of Swinburne solely because the object has ceased to exist, because the meaning is merely the hallucination of meaning, because language, uprooted, has adapted itself to an independent life of atmospheric nourishment.'¹ Yet it is clear the Prufrock's language has more in common with Swinburne than it has with Dryden. Prufrock regularly resorts to what one critic² calls 'the authorised sonorities of the best English verse *circa* 1870'; and he does this in order to evoke a poignancy that is in excess of anything that can actually be grasped in his situation:

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;

¹ 'Swinburne as Poet'.

² Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet*, p. 6.

Here the plangencies produced by control of sound and rhythm give an illusion of meaningfulness in excess of meaning. The best example of course is a couplet the grandiloquence of which is almost entirely a matter of its control of sound.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.¹

The speaker cannot say just what he means, but he invests his own situation, which he cannot define, with all the grandeur of Victorian eloquence. Even the most blank observations are invested by a control of sound and rhythm with a suggestion of significance: 'And sawdust restaurants with oyster shells'.

But Prufrock is not entirely immersed in a world of words, or in reminiscence of a worn-out poetical fashion. Irony enters in the contrast between his general sense of the poignancy of his situation and his plans—slightly deranged in their increasing precision—to do something about it:

I grow old . . . I grow old . . .
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

The world Prufrock inhabits is one of on the one hand sharp, particular sensations—'Arms that are braceleted and white and bare / (But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)', and on the other muffled echoes of poetic rhetoric.

Twice the rhetoric becomes eloquence; first, in the Hamlet section (the only lines that Pound thought would be immediately popular) where Prufrock, nagging at the fact that he is not the Prince, manages to suggest that that is a cause of sorrow in lines of rhythmic expansiveness that modulate wonderfully into the closing 'Almost, at times, the fool'. The second time is where the closing lines of the poem evoke another self, the buried, sexual self that might be able to tell her all:

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.

The question of Prufrock's self is the question of what language he can use. And he does not seek a language that will adequately

¹ See Kenner, *ibid.*: 'The closed and open o's, the assonances of *room*, *women*, and *come*, the pointed caesura before the polysyllabic burst of "Michelangelo", weave a context of grandeur within which our feeling about these trivial women determines itself.'

express his predicament. It is only in a language and in a certain tradition of eloquence that Prufrock's situation can be identified. But because the poetic language that he inherits belongs to another world, and to another, grander realm of experience, it does not allow his predicament to be sincerely stated. The 'meanings' that hover on the periphery of Prufrock's experience fail to attach themselves to it, just as he is unable to make his experience genuinely a part of himself. What *Prufrock* is doing is playing with a range of devices for eloquence which in Victorian poetry can create significance, and can sometimes do so independently of what meaning they create. So *Prufrock* is bringing a tradition of poetic expression to bear upon a situation that cannot even be stated—except for some precise and unpoignant particularities ('Is it perfume from a dress / That makes me so digress?'). We might compare this with the way in which Joyce brings the whole history of the language to bear upon the unmomentous events of Bloom's day.

In being a poem about the self *Prufrock* is also a poem about language. The nineteenth century was well aware of the capacity for Tennysonian eloquence to develop into a sheer mimicry of meaning: "'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves / Did gyre and gimble in the wabe. / All mimsy were the borogroves / And the mome rathes outgrabe.' And *Prufrock* employs and dissolves a tradition of eloquence by setting the grandiloquently suggestive against the precisely seen but atomic. The irony is Laforguian rather than Augustan. It does not presuppose an accepted frame of values and of moral rhetoric, the ideal with which the actual may be contrasted. The irony is in the experience itself, as a sense of an objective order that it is impossible (with this shabby equipment) to achieve. Hence the 'ideal' is itself ironized. We can further define the irony as Eliot did metaphysical wit: 'a recognition implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible'.¹ But for Prufrock there is a disproportion between one sensibility, one way of using language, and another. The poem enacts an uncertainty about language, and hence about selfhood. Only an insincere rhetoric can offer to unite Prufrock's impressions, into which his self threatens to dissolve. His uncertainty about what he sees is also an uncertainty about what he is. And each moment of eloquence is self-contained: it suggests a mode of sensibility unconnected with any other.

Prufrock involves the summing up and criticizing of a tradition

¹ 'Andrew Marvell'.

of expression. Its protagonist is divided within himself because he is no longer sincerely within the tradition. We find Eliot saying of Swinburne: 'His language is not, like the language of bad poetry, dead, it is very much alive with [a] singular life of its own. But the language which is more important to us is that which is struggling to digest and express new objects . . . new feelings . . .'¹ The 'new feeling' expressed by *Prufrock* is really a feeling of being able to sum up, manipulate, and indeed abuse a certain poetic language. It is like using the technique of Rembrandt for the purposes of advertising.

An ability to choose a mode of expression, to be both within and outside a poetic tradition may not seem to point to a difficulty of sincerity or of the self. Yet it is precisely *that* moment of dislocation between experience and language that can be seen as crucial: 'Sensibility alters from generation to generation in everybody, whether we will or no; but expression is only altered by a man of genius.'² It is possible for a form of expression to outgrow the thoughts and feelings of an age, to cease struggling 'to digest and express new objects . . . new feelings'. How does one know when this has happened? We may take the analogy of a custom or ceremony: we perhaps become aware that it has lost its meaning when it becomes impossible for people to realize themselves *in* the ceremony, or to see a custom or institution as an expression of themselves, as rendering objective and intelligible their inner states. This may become apparent when, for instance, a ceremony is a self-conscious revival. It is in similar circumstances that we may become aware that language has become detached from what needs to be expressed. It is not that one has independent access to what needs to be expressed; rather the very availability of a tradition of expression, the ease with which it can be used unseriously or incongruously, may suggest that it is exhausted, that it has become a self-enclosed system of words. That is the case with Swinburne.

II. *Sincerity*

Perhaps this can be illuminated if we touch on a theme mentioned in the title: sincerity. Sincerity is an interesting word and a necessary concept. It begins as a moral concept, and refers to what is in a man's power, what he can be held responsible for, that for which he can be praised and blamed.

¹ 'Swinburne as Poet'.

² *Introduction to Johnson's London: A Poem and The Vanity of Human Wishes.*

A man is insincere if he claims to feel what he does not in fact feel, if he pretends to believe what he does not in fact believe, if he promises what he does not intend to perform. And this normally involves a man's being responsible for his sincerity and insincerity. The picture this suggests is of our always knowing what we think, feel, and intend, and choosing whether or not to communicate our thoughts, feelings, and intentions to others. Let us call a certain model of the mind 'Cartesian' (even if in so doing we risk producing a slogan). According to this model, that understanding of sincerity will be central. We know what we feel, and we may choose to communicate it to others. Knowing what we feel, we sometimes search for the right words to correspond to what we already know.

But 'sincerity' is also a term that has been widely used by critics. Matthew Arnold, for instance, talks of 'the accent of high seriousness born of absolute sincerity' that gives Dante's 'criticism of life' its power.¹ And he talks of 'the profound sincerity with which Wordsworth feels his subject' and 'the profoundly sincere and natural character of the subject itself'. And sincerity is an important concept for Ruskin. It is a central notion in I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis. But as these critics use the term it is remote from what we might call its primary, moral use. One critic insists that the poet's interest in his experience is inseparable from his interest in words, and that a poet is 'unusually sensitive, unusually aware, more sincere and more himself than the ordinary man can be'.² A poet's sincerity is a matter of his knowing what he feels; but the condition of his knowing what he feels is that he find a language capable of expressing what he feels. Here 'sincerity' has become something other than a moral matter; it has come to denote a power of imagination, and a mastery of technique, of language. Croce in fact suggests that when 'sincerity' is applied to works of art it has lost all its ethical content and acquired a quite different meaning; it has come to mean simply 'fullness of truth and expression'.³

In fact, these two uses of 'sincerity' point not only to a difference between the moral and the aesthetic, but also to two different pictures of the mind. Broadly speaking the second, 'aesthetic' use is, on what I have been calling the 'Cartesian' model, impossible. I know what I think and feel. I may choose

¹ 'A Study of Poetry'.

² F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry*, p. 13.

³ *Aesthetic*, p. 53.

to express it, and I may or may not have the right words to express what I know. But my *finding* the right words will not at the same time be my acquiring new insight into what I think and feel. My discoveries in language will not also be extensions of self-knowledge; the possibilities of language will not at the same time be the possibilities of experience.

The other view goes as follows: an experience is essentially constituted by its expression both in action and in symbols; that is how we identify the experience both for others who may observe us and for ourselves. The possibilities of thought and action may determine the possibilities of experience. The sharp distinction between active and passive, between experience and will, becomes untenable. The forms of language, and the institutions through which self-knowledge is achieved are not unessential adjuncts to our private feelings: they determine what these feelings are to be. My ability to know my experience, in the sense of my ability to give it a meaning that derives from myself and which asserts its connection with my own self-identity—in short, my ability to be in possession of my experience and not merely possessed by it—this ability will be inseparable from my mastery of a form of expression. In particular, it will not bear an accidental relation to my mastery of language, and to my ability to use words to express what I feel. My interest in my experience will be inseparable from my interest in words. This corresponds, broadly speaking, with central tenets in philosophical Idealism.

These are philosophical doctrines, but they have their bearing upon how we might envisage a poet's task. The 'Cartesian' picture makes the task mysterious, even impossible. It becomes unclear why a poet might want to re-establish lines of communication with a literary past, indeed, why he might see his task as essentially one of finding a language for the present, or of purifying 'the dialect of the tribe'. The self is a substance, simple and unitary; my finding a language is not at the same time a finding of my *self*. The anti-Cartesian view can be expressed purely through philosophical argument—as Wittgenstein expresses it. Yet it can also be understood more informally. We might say that language is the most fundamental form of membership of a human community. One's use of language defines the self not only as something individual but also as something universal, and as part of an historic continuity. 'Cartesianism' not only isolates the individual, but also makes his use of language extrinsic to his

real being. Therefore the poet, in searching for the right words, is never doing anything more than just that—looking for words. In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' Eliot suggested that the historical sense was indispensable to 'anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year'. The historical sense involves a perception 'not only of the pastness of the past but of its presence', a sense that 'the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order'.

This points to something central to Eliot's understanding of the poet and his relation to language. The historical sense is what enables a poet to re-create a tradition: and the important thing is that it has to be *re-created*. It is not there as an inert, objective fact. Only the poet, and not the literary historian can discover what space there is waiting to be filled by *Prufrock*, and what connections with the literary past can be established in order to fill it. 'Tradition cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it with great labour.' The great labour does not consist in acquiring a great body of knowledge: 'Some can absorb knowledge, the more tardy must sweat for it. Shakespeare acquired more essential history from Plutarch than most men could from the whole British Museum.' Essential history involves a labour of selection, and that auditory imagination that can send 'tentacular roots' down into what is 'primitive'. Eliot talks of the 'mind of Europe' and says that it is a 'mind which changes . . . (and) this change is a development that abandons nothing *en route* . . .'. It would accord with Idealist thinking that as the self is achieved only in outward expression, and cannot exist as a mere Humean bundle of impressions or ideas, so the consciousness of an age cannot exist as a mere collection of individual thoughts and experiences, but only as an outward manifestation, a realization of the self-identity of the age in art and institutions. The consciousness of an age, the mind of Europe are not exactly metaphors—they are not more 'constructions' than is the self. But how do we *know* what can be thought and felt? The central criterion is what can be expressed, what is the language of the time. The man of genius is the man who can see through the superficial features of an age to something essential. If he is a poet he will find language for the mind of his own time: 'Sensibility alters from generation to generation in everybody, whether we will or no; but expression is only altered by a man of genius.'

As the expressive possibilities of an age create the consciousness of the age, so it may be possible for the expressive potential of different ages to come together (as it were) to create an impersonal consciousness that transcends the superficial differences. As the 'man of genius' penetrates to the heart of his age, is at the centre of its consciousness, and is able to find the language to body forth its consciousness, so the poet seeks to re-view the artistic past, bringing the essential present into relation with the essential past. The past becomes 'simultaneous with the present'. To see Jonson as a contemporary 'does not so much require the power of putting ourselves into seventeenth century London as it requires the power of seeing Jonson in our London'.¹

III. *The Wasteland*

The Wasteland sets fragmentariness of experience against a postulated ideal unity. The opening lines, with their allusion to Chaucer's *Prologue* and (probably) to the late Latin poem *Pervigilium Veneris*, enact an awareness of 'the mind of Europe and of our own country':

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

But the mind of Europe soon disintegrates into a series of highly specific recollections—it becomes the mind of *Mittel Europa* with some very personal memories:

Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in sunlight into the Hofgarten,
And drank coffee and talked for an hour.
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.
And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke's,
My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.

The theme of spring, handled by the common European literary tradition has become the private recollections of minds that recollect experiences. From then on the 'heap of images' reflects, indifferently, the mind of Europe, the painful and sentimental memories of various women, helpless in the face

¹ 'Ben Jonson'.

of their recollected experiences, and a need to fit fragments of the European artistic and religious tradition into some sort of order.

We could say that in *The Wasteland* the mind of Europe, a mind more important than one's own private mind, is 'now very nearly exhausted by the effort to stay interested in its own contents'.¹ Yet in the poem that mind is in fact very interested in its own contents. The intense *interest* in the present is what prevents *The Wasteland's* being a poem of exhaustion or disillusion. Sappho's evening hour that brings what bright dawn had scattered, the sheep, the goat, the child to its mother² really does bring also the typist home at teatime 'clears her breakfast, lights / Her stove, and lays out food in tins'. The allusion to Sappho both vivifies the scene and presents an ironic contrast. The intensity of the scene of the typist's seduction arises from the fact that this moment of evening is full of resonance, a fundamental human experience that needs to be captured. Sappho captured it and therefore the allusion to Sappho does not merely produce an ironic contrast, but also captures the deep meaning of the episode which escaped the participants, and is acknowledged only in the voice of Tiresias. Similarly the description of the modern Cleopatra in 'A Game of Chess' is not simply contrasted with the Shakespearean original. The transformation of a magnificence that was meant to be viewed by the multitudes on the adjacent wharves into a claustrophobic richness—infinite riches in a little room—which can only be stared at ('Staring forms / Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed') is a conversion of public magnificence into something rich and strange. Something else that is rich and strange is the modern, neurasthenic personality of the lady—a transmutation of Cleopatra's 'infinite variety'.³

The contrast between a 'realistic' present, and a past constructed from past literature *dramatizes* the present, and gives it all the meaning it could have. Eliot is doing what he had learned from the French symbolists—investing the imagery of modern life with the greatest possible intensity. In *The Wasteland*

¹ Kenner, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

² And probably, since the poem was an epithalamion, 'Even so tonight bring thou home the bride to the bridegroom' would be the continuation.

³ The phrase 'rich and strange' had a continuing resonance for Eliot. Cf. the poem omitted from *The Wasteland* 'Full Fathom Five Your Bleistein Lies', which contains the lines: 'Lower than the wharf rats dive / Though he suffers a sea change / Still expensive, rich and strange.'

we are certainly presented with a gap between experience and an ideal version of it, or between the sharply observed vignettes of modern life, and an eloquent version of them that fits them into a tradition, making them intelligible as well as vivid. In fact, this eloquent version of them makes them intelligible only because we see how far short of the ideal they fall. The language that seeks to capture the *essence* of these experiences, so giving them an identity which would make it possible for the person who suffers them to 'possess' them—that language persistently moves away from the experiences, and shows them as inadequate to their postulated meaning, just as the meaning is inadequate to them. So the neurasthenic woman is set against Cleopatra; the blankness of the typist after her seduction is set against St. Augustine's sense of sin; and Madame Sosostris with her Tarot pack is a withered version of the already withered Sybil with the leaves on which she wrote her revelations. These contrasts do not issue in a moralistic judgement: they express a characteristically modern consciousness. It is characteristically modern to think of the self as free to enter into any one of a large variety of forms of life. The past can be treated as a mythology which gives form to the present. In the non-Cartesian tradition, in which I am locating Eliot's poetry, the self is *both* something here and now, a centre of impressions, and something that stretches out through time, has a history. That we need to have such a sense of the self as stretching out through time has been expressed philosophically by the self's being described as a 'concrete universal'. A self cannot exist merely as an abstract idea. A man does not realize a self simply by accompanying his experience with the *idea* of a self, however elaborate that idea may be. The idea, as abstract, is a mere 'he', where what is needed is an 'I'. (This is what Kant refers to as the 'transcendental unity of apperception'.) Conversely, a self which is merely 'concrete'—a mere Humean bundle of atomic impressions—is not a self. ('And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke's, / My cousin's, he took me out on a sled, / And I was frightened. He said, Marie, / Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.') The self is truly such only if it is conscious of itself as persisting through time, forming intentions for the future, feeling regret about the past. My being thus in possession of myself is not a matter of my having theoretical knowledge, but more like practical knowledge, a consciousness of the persistence of the soul through time. And here again we may

invoke the 'discovery' of tradition: Tradition must always be rediscovered, for it involves the constant translation of abstract or historical knowledge into felt experience, or of sensibility into expression.

The Wasteland enacts and dramatizes this construction of the self. In its movements from the simply experienced but unpossessed present to versions of the same experience from the literary, religious, and political past it dramatizes the very process of imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order *in* reality.¹ Eliot presents this possibility as the only thing it can be for the modern mind—the mythologizing of experience. Subjective experience is rendered objective only by being held momentarily against a tradition of expression that can be experimented with or recapitulated, but not confidently possessed. And the situation of *The Wasteland* is one in which the necessary completion of experience has a mythological remoteness from it. The unity, or wholeness of experience which Eliot's notion of tradition (of writing with the whole of European literature in one's bones, from Homer to the present day) implies, and the unity or wholeness of experience, defined as a unity between language and object, which is a goal in Idealist thought, is in *The Wasteland* a series of gestures towards a pattern underlying the culture itself. The underlying pattern of the poem is given in the vegetation myths; and the Frazerian theory is that these vegetation ceremonies, differing as they do from each other, all have an underlying unity. One could say that Frazer helps create the characteristic myth of the present, and tries to redeem the fragmented experience of modern man by proposing a mythical unity for it. Frazer believed that there is a single form to all redemption myths, and tried to express what it was in anthropological terms. And the past has only a mythological relation to the present in the poem; the death of the past is its transmutation into myth.

A way of further exploring the same point comes if we reflect upon the following: the most influential modern view of art, deriving from Hegel, sees it as essentially the objectifying of the subjective. Hence art redeems the individual from the private; by finding an expression for something that is already universal. In art the universal is expressed in concrete form. With this idea will go the notion that any gap between actual, lived experience and its ideal, expressed form will involve

¹ Cf. the concluding sentence of *Poetry and Drama*.

anguish. (Collingwood sees the act of expression as lightening the burden of the emotions of ordinary life.) And it is a characteristic of modern writing to produce irony through a contrast between experience as it is in fact expressed, and a significance in the experience that is 'there' but cannot be seized by the characters. In other words, the *universal* is there in the work of art, the *concrete* in the individual experience represented, so that the artistic task becomes that of bringing universal and concrete together, to present this experience as bodying forth this meaning. It is often only through a certain kind of irony that this can be done—the irony of Joyce in *Dubliners* and *Ulysses* for instance, where what you might call the ideal form of the experience is revealed through an ironic contrast. The feeling, not fully grasped by the characters, must be described and identified in the light of this ideal form, which it vividly suggests precisely in the moment of falling short. Thus irony here becomes a mode not of criticism but of acceptance. Similarly the artist's task in dealing with the past, may be to evoke from it some such universal or prototype, so that it can convey a meaning, even when it is brought to bear upon experiences that are peculiarly modern. We always find that the truly creative artist of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is able in this way to transform the material he receives from the past, whereas the academic poet typically leaves it in archaic form. Wagner, for instance, who is the characteristic 'modern', is always guided by a sense of how a form, an image can be found for modern experience. When he takes a legend or myth from the past he does so *entirely* in order to express and sum up modern experience. *Parsifal* is concerned with how to express the idea of renunciation as an experience for modern man; and a legend which is naïve and outward-looking is transformed into an evocation of neurasthenic eroticism.

This is precisely what we find in *The Wasteland*: the objective experiments in 'points of view' are constantly set against intensely personal, subjective feeling. So the mythological potency of hyacinths and sacred groves is broken in upon by the almost unbearably painful reminiscences of the (obscurely betrayed) girl in the hyacinth garden: the mystical mingles with the sexual. Sappho's evening hour brings a particular typist home for a particular seduction. This contrast between the sharp poignancies of particular experience and any received form that might console it is *The Wasteland's* version of modern consciousness.

The *Vita Nuova* of Dante was always an important work for Eliot, and Dante's description of the love he felt for Beatrice when he saw her at the age of nine seems to have had a special significance for him. Eliot insists upon the actuality of the experience: ' . . . the type of sexual experience which Dante describes as occurring to him at the age of nine is by no means impossible or unique. My only doubt (in which I found myself confirmed by a distinguished psychologist) is whether it could have taken place so *late* in life as the age of nine years.' The significance for Eliot of the episode is that Dante in recalling the experience gives it a meaning that it could not have had for him at the time:

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, which vigorous realists have been concerned to denounce: this sentiment ignoring the fact that the love of man and woman (or for that matter of man and man) is only explained and made reasonable by the higher love, or else is simply the coupling of animals.¹

'Or else is simply the coupling of animals.' We see in that remark much that alarms some readers of Eliot: it seems to dismiss so much. What in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature is meant to be swept into that dismissive reference to 'sentiment' that has been 'spilt'? These words must be a stumbling block to some. Yet I suggest that they are seriously intended, relate to his central concerns, and point to what is central to *Four Quartets*. We might secularize Eliot's words, and say that a reference to 'final causes' might be taken to include that illumination by a tradition of expression that can save the moments of sensation, sheer emotion from being the painful things they are in *The Wasteland*. It is, indeed, the sheer fact of there being no 'reflection' in this sense that makes them painful. And a revealing example of modern man's not seeing in terms of final causes, and so producing a recollection that is a parodic re-enactment of Dante and Beatrice comes in *Dans Le Restaurant*

¹ 'Dante'.

where a waiter confidentially describes his earliest sexual experience, when they were seven, but were interrupted by a dog and stopped half way through: "It is a pity." "But then", replies the diner in whom he has been confiding, "you have your lust."

IV. *Four Quartets*

It is what we have been calling a 'Cartesian' notion that the inner life can be complete in itself independently of its outward expression. But if we take the opposing view, that the self is created in our commerce with the world both practically and through expression, then one's sense of oneself will be intimately related to a sense of one's place in the world. Pure experience, purely personal feeling will be intrinsically incomplete, defective, even painful or debased. It ceases to be defective only when it is completed by reflection, or by being taken into something that imposes order upon it—for instance, a cultural tradition, a religious tradition, or a continuing community (e.g. Little Gidding). One's sense of oneself may involve one's finding order in the world. In that case man's culture is not an accidental feature of the human world, something external in which he finds himself imprisoned—unless it has ceased to be a 'live tradition'.¹ In *The Wasteland* Eliot uses a mythographer, Frazer, who postulated an objective, inclusive pattern that underlies the fragmentary, over-personal experience of modern man. The opening lines of *The Wasteland* point to something that is anterior even to the common European literary tradition that celebrates spring. If we start from the Cartesian soul we are led further and further back through a series of literary and cultural reminiscences, in which the self becomes fragmented, and finally to a primitive, pre-literary myth that is entirely and reductively impersonal. And a similar effect can be traced to Freud, the other great myth-maker of the age, and one of the influences that makes the poem possible. The effect of the Freudian model of the mind is to dissolve the sense of a stable, unitary self. With different parts of the mind playing different (and conflicting) roles, with different desires and different intentions, the personality comes to seem like a series of archaeological layers. Frazer thinks that we gain a deeper, more complete knowledge of self by seeing modern man in relation to a primitive model. Freud believes

¹ Pound, *Canto LXXXXI*.

that self-knowledge, and hence integration, comes through a reconciliation of the present self with a past self. We re-live the past and hence cease to be prisoners of it.

The symbol of modern man's search for an identity must be his search for a language. Man is above all a language-user, and his linguistic capacities are the condition for all his expressive activities. For language to be liberating it must be language that expresses him in the present and is not a mere reminiscence of the past (for tradition must be acquired by great labour), and it must at the same time restore vital links with the past (the mind of Europe and our own country). The search for a language that shows continuities and yet is living will be at the centre of the search for a whole range of correlates that will allow for wholeness of human expression, and hence for sincerity. This wholeness will be a sense of self-identity, of being in possession of experience. That is why it is of a piece with sincerity, since without this sense of self-identity a self is not fully achieved. If the self is to be regarded as in some sense an achievement, then sincerity must also be an achievement. That is why each of the *Quartets* contains a section of meditation on Language. Language here is the type of all forms of expression, forms through which an historical continuity can be realized, or in which fragmentation is most dramatically revealed. It is in such historical continuity that the self is a true universal, not as an abstract idea, but as a form of practical knowledge.

The question of the self arises in *Four Quartets* in another way: we feel that this is very much personal poetry. One recent critic says that the self presented in the poems is 'very much a "case"'. D. W. Harding speaks of the 'pressure of urgent misery and self-disgust' that is controlled in the *terza rima* passage in *Little Gidding* ('In the uncertain hour before morning / Near the ending of interminable night'). We do indeed feel that such emotions are faced and 'controlled' in the poem; no one can doubt their presence, and no one can doubt that the acceptance that comes at the close of *Little Gidding* is at least partly the acceptance of exhaustion. So perhaps the 'pressure of urgent misery and self-disgust' is the personal element in the poem. The future promised by the 'familiar compound ghost' in *Little Gidding* evokes the most inward agonies of an individual:

First, the cold friction of expiring sense
Without enchantment, offering no promise
But bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit
As body and soul begin to fall asunder.

Second, the conscious impotence of rage
 At human folly, and the laceration
 Of laughter at what ceases to amuse.
 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.

The 'rending pain' of the past is an experience of an individual, having that nightmare-like intensity, that suggestion of a guilty secret, that is suggested by the lines in *The Wasteland* about 'That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / 'Has it begun to sprout . . . O keep the dog far hence'. And the voice in the poems is sometimes a ruminating, uncertain one, not entirely unrelated to Prufrock's. The *starting* points of the poems are the strongly personal feelings of regret and remorse; and from these arises the desire to redeem time, the striving for the impersonal, and the attempt to master language. The universal self comes from history, involves an awareness of oneself as persisting through time, of regretting and hoping. But to find the self in history must also mean finding a community with the language of the past. Not every way of discovering the past is adequate or amounts to a sense of community. There is the merely nostalgic, uncreative reminiscence, either in the form of romantic reaction (following an 'antique drum') or of artistic pastiche ('A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion'). That is why tradition must be discovery: the past must be created out of the present, just as the present is knowable only through being brought into relation with the past. The self which tries merely to re-live the past in its own idioms and with its own sense of itself does not cease to be merely here and now.

In moving from a purely 'personal' experience to explore an ideal version of the experience, *Four Quartets* does not evolve a set of doctrines, or assert belief. Rather it gives the sensory equivalent of certain ideas; any pattern in experience that is suggested is shown by how it is *felt*. The 'sincerity' of the exploration of the poems is a matter of a felt order. In these poems the personal basis is twice the poet's own history, or family history (in *East Coker* and *The Dry Salvages*). In all the poems something impersonal—perhaps a religious tradition, or the recollection of a society that existed in a particular place, but partook of a universal set of beliefs—is set against the personal.

And we can say that this reflects the fundamental concern of the poem: What, finally, gives meaning to the personal, to personal history? And what is the relation between the simply immediate and that which is reflected upon and taken into a larger whole? The poem does not contain an abstract—and in that sense, philosophical—*exploration* of this question, but rather presents the emotional basis upon which it might come to be asked. The ‘timeless moment’ in *Burnt Norton* for instance is not presented as an intellectual speculation (although it is preceded by lines of rumination—‘Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past’—that *look* like intellectual speculation.) It has an emotional origin, which is the recall of childhood from an adult point of view. The pain of recall is all the more intense in that it is recognized as both impossible and still longed for. It is given in the dream-like image (reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland*):

Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden.

But the longing for what presents itself almost illusionistically as a *present* possibility is immediately turned into something spoken of, recalled and certainly dead:

My words echo
Thus in your mind.
But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know.

The moment in the rose-garden is thus both present in that it is longed for, and beyond recapture. The past is presented not as an object of speculation, but of regret, and later remorse and guilt.¹

And the present in the poems is the mechanical, the hurried; it is composed of ‘intense’ ‘rending’ ‘burning’ moments. The present is sometimes expressed as fire (an image taken from Heraclitus, suggesting that the present is constant flux), a fire that burns as well as purifies. Indeed the burning present is, in the Dantean passage in *Little Gidding*, almost a burning embarrassment:

Then fool’s approval stings, and honour stains.
From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit

¹ Cf. *The Family Reunion*.

Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire
Where you must move in measure like a dancer.

The time that might be 'eternally present' is also a time of burning shame, and of the 'agony' which 'abides'.

In his distinguished critique of *Four Quartets* F. R. Leavis suggests that in registering his recoil from mechanistic determinism Eliot denies life's essential creativity. He says also that there is in Eliot a 'lack of courage in the face of life' and that 'the profoundest and completest sincerity, that which characterises the work of the greatest writers, is . . . impossible for him'.¹ Indeed, confidence in the self and the courage and sincerity that might simply be based upon it are precisely the values that are explored and questioned in *Four Quartets*. We see how Dr. Leavis's view has, despite all of Eliot's qualified presentations of the sincere and the courageous, an intuitive plausibility. The concept of eternity that the poems generate often does seem to be something that stands over against life, and that reduces life to 'appetency' and 'metalled ways'. So one might be moved to agree that there is a reduction of 'that which is only living' to something less than human, and that the spiritual and eternal deny the living.

Dr. Leavis is also right to connect 'courage in the face of life' with the completest sincerity. I have already tried to suggest that sincerity and the activity of expression must ultimately be regarded as a kind of achievement, an achievement best described (as the Idealists described it) in terms of a notion of Self. Yet we must also see that the conditions for such achievement, its possibility—and in particular its possibility for modern man—is very much Eliot's preoccupation in the *Quartets*. The poems regularly start with a particular experience or memory—the moment in the garden, childhood memories of the Mississippi–Missouri and the Massachusetts coast—which is then treated as the starting-point for reflection. The reflection does not issue in argument or assertion, but in the finding of abstract analogies—philosophical or religious—for the primary experience. These reflections regularly return to the experiences from which they start, suggesting that meaning may be revealed ('And approach to the meaning restores the experience / In a different form, beyond any meaning / We can assign to happiness.') They give an indication of what an experience might be like were it not *just* an impression, but

¹ *The Living Principle*, p. 189.

rather the experience of an achieved and continuous person. So the childhood moments are both preserved—since they are not different experiences—and at the same time transformed—since they are recognized in reflection as an initial experience of what is intrinsically enduring. Dante's procedure in the *Vita Nuova*—of describing the experience of childhood in terms that are not available to a child—is reaffirmed. That is why we might wish to reject the view that the poems make statements or doctrinal assertions, or express philosophical theories. The meaning of the general statements derives from the original experiences which they transform. 'Sincerity' here means that responsible search for a language that will bring the experience into the experience of a community. It involves the search for an objective self which can possess and give meaning to experience. As Eliot presents the theme, the search for meaning is inseparable from a kind of responsibility—responsibility not in the sense in which Dr. Leavis understands it, but in the sense of a re-creation of private experience in objective form. In particular it involves the re-creation of links with institutions and with a community, and the consequent transformation of experience through the 'sense' of history. This outward movement, from private to public, which is essential if the private is to become fully intelligible, is not only a kind of responsibility, but also, in the *Quartets*, a preparation for love.

If the idea to which the *Quartets* move is Love, it is elicited with the most elaborate indirection. Images of stillness are set against movement (e.g. the centre of the wheel and the rim), suggesting Love as undesiring, and the Unmoved Mover. The notion of Love is dependent upon the rejection and depreciation of desire; and desire is itself reduced to 'movement', and therefore to something mechanical, the appetency of metallated ways, that which is 'only living' and can only die. In this way is developed the set of oppositions, between movement and stillness, desire and Love, the fleeting moment and art (or the 'pattern'), experience and knowledge, time and eternity. There is no doubt that the way the poet builds up the oppositions between desire (and all that that suggests of 'that which is only living') and Love, time and eternity devalues one term as against another. It is clear also that this is his way of reformulating a traditional religious position—the Way of Negation. (And it also enables him, incidentally, to bring together Eastern and Western asceticism to much the same effect as he did in *The Wasteland*. In the notes to that poem he says that 'the collocation

of these two representatives of eastern and western asceticism . . . is not an accident'.) To explore Love (as that term is used in the *Quartets*) is to explore fundamental conditions of the self. And the starting-points for this exploration in personal experience—the timeless moments—are of ambiguous significance. They are deceptive, a childlike desire for 'our first world', opposed to reality:

And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
 And the lotus rose quietly, quietly,
 The surface glittered out of the heart of light,
 And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
 Then a cloud passed and the pool was empty.
 Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,
 Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.
 Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
 Cannot bear very much reality.

In contrasting Love (which is stillness) with the 'movement' of desire, the poet is approaching an idea that has usually been given a religious significance. Love is always an approach to God, even when what is loved is here and now ('Quick, now, here, now . . .'). Of course, since Eliot does not make any such statement, despite the frequent allusions to Christian tradition (e.g. St. John of the Cross) through which it has been expressed, it is impossible to say that the poems present that or any other Christian thought as *doctrine*. Yet the movement and imagery of the poem is inseparable from religious concepts; and without an understanding of religious concepts, and without an understanding of religion, we may doubt that *Little Gidding* would even be intelligible. The poet is therefore faced with the problem of what religious poetry can be. *Four Quartets* is not devotional verse. Its not being devotional verse means that it does not cultivate interests and attitudes separate from those of the rest of life. To call *Four Quartets* 'religious poetry' is certainly to refer to their radical exploration of experience and of personal value, combined with their taking for granted certain religious doctrines. However, the beliefs themselves are not what is expressed or even explored in the poetry: rather is it the consequences for our sense of human value of holding these beliefs. We are brought back, in fact, to Eliot's stated view that poetry expresses the emotional equivalent of thought, and that belief in poetry is a different thing from belief in philosophy or religion.¹

¹ 'In truth neither Shakespeare nor Dante did any real thinking—that

The problem of writing a poetry of religious belief is really no different from that of finding the language of one's time. This is, indeed, warranted by Eliot's remark that the poet must express the greatest possible intensity of his time based on whatever his time happens to believe. It is not the beliefs themselves that present the difficulty, but the finding of language that will carry the accent, resonance—what Frege called 'tone'—that surrounds and gives confidence to what may be affirmed. (It is ignorance of that basic truth that has led the Anglican and Roman Churches to the absurd conclusion that particular beliefs themselves are stumbling-blocks for modern man, and to initiate the dissolution of the whole attitude of belief by their philistine debasements of language and liturgy.) This corresponds to what Eliot called 'feeling', and which he distinguishes from 'emotion', regarding it as attached to words, images, and phrases.¹ It is new *feelings* in this sense that the poet discovers when he discovers new language; and a language which can relate the feelings of the present to those of the past is one which enables the modern mind to be also 'the mind of Europe and of our own country'.

In his invocation of the concept of eternity in the *Quartets* Eliot uses the analogy of art:

Words move, music moves
 Only in time; but that which is only living
 Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
 Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
 Can words or music reach
 The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
 Moves perpetually in its stillness.²

But this does not suggest that the 'pattern' art can give to experience, or the pattern language can give is of unambiguous value. 'Words, after speech, reach / Into the silence'. Perhaps this means that although language is the essential means of ordering our feeling, it is accompanied with, reaches out to all those other forms of symbolic human behaviour—including the creation of institutions—that also discipline and render accessible human emotion. Indeed, most human emotion is disciplined by a lived tradition more than by words. The act of speech permanently alters one's vision, one's experience.

was not their job . . . What every poet starts from is his own emotions' ('Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca').

¹ Cf. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'.

² *Burnt Norton* V.

Perhaps also the pattern of words that *have* been spoken ('where prayer has been valid') is something that is *moving*. We are moved by the recollection of the language of others:

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.¹

Speech can express only the present moment ('Quick, now, here, now, always'); but in choosing words one is choosing to align oneself with, or to reject the words or traditions of others. To choose words is also to choose a relation to something communal, and to the past. It is also to reveal and to create one's own consciousness. So to recapture the language of others is to 'sympathize' with their world. The 'pattern' which enables words or music to reach the stillness is necessarily a pattern 'beyond the end you figured', for it may exhibit relations to the past and the future that are hidden.

The language and images that relate us to a community may, in true symbolist fashion, be unpredictable in their ability to reach into the depths of our feeling.² The visit to the country house in Gloucestershire gives an image of time and eternity, adulthood and childhood, regret, love of people whose lives were lived in the past, and who are thought of as invisible parents, or first parents, or simply dignified, benevolent, observing presences:

Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
Round the corner. Through the first gate,
Into our first world, shall we follow
The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.
There they were, dignified, invisible,
Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,
In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air,
And the bird called, in response to
The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery,
And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses
Had the look of flowers that are looked at.

¹ *Little Gidding* 1.

² 'Why, for all of us, out of all that we have seen, heard, felt in a lifetime, do certain images recur charged with emotion, rather than others? . . . an old woman on a German mountain path, six ruffians seen through an open window playing cards at night in a small French railway junction where there was a water mill: such memories may have symbolic value, but of what we cannot tell, for they come to represent the depths into which we cannot peer.'—*The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p. 148.

In his criticism of the *Quartets* Dr. Leavis says: 'There is no acceptable religious position that is not a reinforcement of human responsibility.'¹ He takes these lines from *The Dry Salvages*:

But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint—
No occupation either, but something given
And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,
Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.

He comments: 'What—"given"—to be passively "taken" he attains to apprehending at "the point of intersection" is the pure otherness postulated in Eliot's conception of the supreme Real.' And he goes on: 'In fact, a conception of pure non-human otherness can hardly be a conception; it can be no more than the ghost of one—a mere postulate. The space cleared for the Other by the elimination of all that "human kind" can recognize as life, value and significance is a vacuum: nothing is left to qualify it.'² One understands what Dr. Leavis means by 'human responsibility' and why it makes it impossible for him, in the end, to endorse the 'negative way' of the *Four Quartets*, and therefore its spirituality. One can see the way in which the poems are not a 'reinforcement of human responsibility' if we make a comparison with the Yeats of *Sailing to Byzantium*:

That is no country for old men, The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
—Those dying generations—at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackrel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

Yeats expresses a duality between the fleshly and the spiritual, and, later, a sense of fleshly decay that makes an acceptance of the spiritual necessarily the acceptance of something deathly, mechanical: 'such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make / Of hammered gold and gold enamelling / To keep a drowsy Emperor awake'. But although Yeats establishes a complex relationship between the fleshly and the spiritual, he is confident about the basis of each. The contrast is confident and does not involve

¹ Op. cit., p. 236.

² Op. cit., p. 245.

any exploration that carries him beyond the traditional framework. He accepts the framework in which there is a contrast between the Platonic and anti-Platonic. His disgusted rejection of nature is qualified by the negative way in which he presents the 'artifice of eternity'. The picture of the heart 'sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal' powerfully suggests what it ought to know, and what it desires—the fish, flesh, and fowl that 'commend all summer long / Whatever is begotten, born and dies'. There is no unqualified rejection of the temporal and living in *Sailing to Byzantium*; and the invocation of eternity manifests an attachment to what is not eternal.

The sexual longing in *Sailing to Byzantium* is unassuaged, an unconsolable longing in age for the youth that would allow such desire to be enjoyed. In the framework of the *Quartets* this sensual music (unlike the music and the dance in these poems) is not a meaning but an hallucination of meaning. Looking back on such a desire one can see no pattern, but can only feel despair because it is *past*. Such a past is present in time future, but only as something external, as the pleasure of another being—a self whom one cannot recapture—and not as a satisfaction of the present self.

The spiritual is in *Four Quartets* set much more starkly and blankly against the living than it is in the Yeats. The intersection of the timeless with time involves a response that is purely passive. The notion of humility, so important in the poems ('humility is endless') itself suggests a stark opposition to something equally blank. We might remember Eliot's use of Coriolanus as a figure of pride in *The Wasteland* and in *Coriolan*—the figure who has

No interrogation in his eyes
Or in the hands, quiet over the horse's neck,
And the eyes watchful, waiting, perceiving, indifferent.

The full extent of the poet's questioning of what might be consoling in human experience is shown in the beautiful passage in *East Coker* where he imagines an actual communal life in the past which is in some sense his own past—East Coker being the village of his English ancestors, one of whom was a figure in the beginning of English prose, a Renaissance pioneer. Here Eliot uses his texts with the utmost subtlety. 'In my beginning is my end' involves the main philosophical and religious texts from Heraclitus and St. John of the Cross; it implies the connection of living with dying; and it suggests the possibility

that significance comes from reflection upon 'that which was the beginning'—the past and one's own past. (And it is difficult for the reader not to make the connection also with Eliot's decision to be buried in East Coker, where the monument consists of the first and last lines of the poem meeting in an ellipse.) The whole passage suggests both an attachment to the personal, living world, and an alienation from it:

In that open field
 If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close,
 On a summer midnight, you can hear the music
 Of the weak pipe and the little drum
 And see them dancing around the bonfire
 The association of man and woman
 In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie—
 A dignified and commodious sacrament
 Two and two, necessarye coniunction,
 Holding eache other by the hand or the arm
 Which betokeneth concorde.

But the magical invocation of not just a personal but a communal past—'In that open field, if you do not come too close, if you do not come too close, / On a summer midnight . . .' is not to be taken at its face value. The sense of an actual communal past, so movingly evoked, is also a picture of a civilized, articulate sense of *community* as it was understood by a Renaissance man, to whom the 'pattern' was literally in 'the dance', for whom the image of the dance can really stand for a spiritual and religious order which unites the individual with the communal, and the physical with the spiritual—'The association of man and woman / In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie- / A dignified and commodious sacrament.' On one level it is certainly true that the poet betrays the expectations of the reader by dissolving the social and spiritual vision expressed in the words of Sir Thomas Elyot, resolving a social, cultured vision into mere animal activity, thought of as 'only living' and therefore as having only died:

Round and round the fire
 Leaping through the flames, or joined in circles,
 Rustically solemn or in rustic laughter
 Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes,
 Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth
 Mirth of those long since under earth
 Nourishing the corn. Keeping time,
 Keeping the rhythm in their dancing

As in their living in the living seasons
 The time of seasons and the constellations
 The time of milking and the time of harvest
 The time of coupling of man and woman
 And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling,
 Eating and drinking. Dung and death.

The High Renaissance picture of the 'dance' of human society has been resolved into its primitive elements, into movement, then into animality, and finally into dung and death. But on another level this dissolution of the meaning into its ephemeral moment may be said not to reduce the meaning, but rather to elevate the moment. Where people 'move in measure, like a dancer' the refining fire restores. The refining fire is present among them not because the 'only living' is made 'eternal', but because there is an eternal significance in what these 'only living' creatures do. The significance is revealed in the possibility of describing their movements in the dignified words of Sir Thomas Elyot, words which in their associated thought and institutions embody a meaning beyond the moment to which it seems to be reduced. His words are *achieved* because they stand for an order that has been achieved, and one that is there only because men can see the world in terms of it, can impose a significance through its terms, and so find a pattern where there is otherwise only dung and death.

There is something similar in *The Dry Salvages*: the poem begins with the recall of boyhood memories of the Mississippi-Missouri and of Cape Ann, Massachusetts. These remain very much sea and river, but become also symbols for the growth of the poet's consciousness:

His rhythm was present in the nursery bedroom,
 In the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard,
 In the smell of grapes on the Autumn table,
 And the evening circle in the winter gaslight.

As much as Proust Eliot is finding images for 'the pastness of the past and of its presence'. Again there is the subtlety with which he suggests both a consoling memory, a memory that sees one as by nature part of a human community—'Home is where one starts from'¹—and at the same time suggests something that disturbs and alienates. The presence of the river's rhythm 'in the nursery bedroom' is not at all consoling. And from this sense of the menace of what is pre-human the symbol

¹ *East Coker* V.

of the river is developed. It is what is non-personal in our experience:

The river is within us, the sea is all about us;
 The sea is the land's edge also, the granite
 Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses
 Its hints of an earlier and other creation . . .

The presence of the river in these childhood memories loosens our grip upon them, our sense of personally possessing them. Again something personal dissolves into something inhuman. Childhood is not a point of return, not the 'end'. The poem powerfully challenges any sense we might have that somewhere or some state is 'home' or the 'end'.¹

Conclusion

I began by saying that to elicit a set of abstract propositions from a poet's work and present them as his beliefs might not yield us insight into his poetry. Yet it may seem that with this exploration of the idea of the self in Eliot's verse, that is exactly what I have done.

However, the philosophical ideas about the self that we have been exploring were themselves the product of something more than purely philosophical speculation. Idealism itself, in all its profound influence over art, literature, and politics, cannot adequately be understood if it is thought of simply as the outcome of certain arguments against the empiricists. The picture of the self that I have (with some looseness) been calling 'Cartesian' can itself be regarded as a denial of 'human responsibility'. The simple, abstract substance in which experiences inhere has no intelligible connection with the self that acts and suffers. 'Cartesianism' elicits no intimate connection between the self as consciousness and the self as Will. It can be seen as expressing and giving a warrant to all those individualist philosophies that separate man from history, from culture, from responsibility for what spiritually and intellectually he is.

The Idealists tried to restore to men a responsibility for their own essence. (Marx also in his early writings, influenced by Hegel, did the same.) Their doctrines can certainly be expressed purely philosophically. Hegel, for instance, posits an ideal of a wholeness of experience that has its roots in Kant's doctrine of the 'transcendental unity of apperception'—a sense of the

¹ Cf. Leavis, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

unity of the self that is also a sense of its unity through time. Time is 'the form of the inner sense'. (In the *Paralogisms* of the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant argues that the unity of the self is the very fact of its *sense* of self-identity. The unity of the self arises from our ability to ascribe states to ourselves, to express in speech our ownership of our experiences.) The unity of the self is not simply a state of affairs that can exist independently of one's awareness of it.

Eliot did not, as a poet, set out to express philosophical doctrines. To explore and make explicit these doctrines is simply one way of coming to understand the enormous effort of intelligence with which he explored modern consciousness. (And indeed Idealism was the first philosophy to uphold the notion of being 'modern' as an ideal, as vital to one's ability to make sense of experience.) Eliot's awareness of the difficulty and at the same time necessity of finding a language that would relate us to the past while giving us a precise sense of our distance from it, is an essential part of his poetic genius. To discover a self is not just to receive impressions, but also to find a language that will relate to past and future, and that will express one's necessary community with and necessary separation from the lives of others. It is to 'urge the mind to aftersight and foresight'.

Eliot wrote finely of Blake's poetry: 'It is merely a peculiar honesty, which, in a world too frightened to be honest, is peculiarly terrifying . . . Nothing that can be called morbid or abnormal or perverse, none of the things which exemplify the sickness of an epoch or a fashion, has this quality; only those things which, by some extraordinary labour of simplification, exhibit the essential sickness or strength of the human soul.'

We cannot confidently say that Eliot himself, or Yeats or any poet of the century has achieved that Blakean impersonality of vision. Yet his positing an ideal which no contemporary poet could achieve is (paradoxically) a further sign of his miraculous sense of the possible and impossible. This great poet showed throughout his career a 'peculiar honesty' in his poetry that is indeed disturbing, and is the outcome of a supreme integrity.