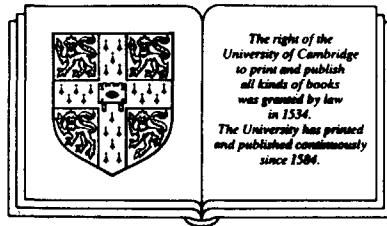


T. S. ELIOT AND
INDIC TRADITIONS
A Study in Poetry and Belief

CLEO McNELLY KEARNS



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CONTENTS



Preface	vii
Acknowledgments	xiv
List of abbreviations	xvii
PART I. SOURCES AND TRADITIONS	
1. Tradition and the individual reader	3
Surrender and recovery	4
Metaphysics and wisdom	13
Texts and teachers	21
2. Hindu traditions	30
Vedas and Upanishads	30
Shankara and Paul Deussen	44
The <i>Bhagavad Gita</i>	49
Patanjali and James Woods	57
3. Buddhist traditions	67
Henry Clarke Warren and the Pali canon	69
Masaharu Anesaki and Mahayana Buddhism	76
PART II. COMMUNITIES OF INTERPRETATION	
4. Philosophical issues	87
Realism and idealism	88
Josiah Royce and the Upanishads	96
Bradley, Vedanta, and Nagarjuna	103
Bertrand Russell and the New Realism	110
<i>Knowledge and Experience</i> as an ars poetica	117
5. Religious points of view	131
William James and counterconversions	140
Babbitt, More, and the need for roots	143

Contents

Roger Vittoz and meditation	152
The Anglican Middle Way	157
6. Literary influences	160
The Oriental Renaissance	161
The American sublime	166
The anxieties of influence	171
Whitman	178
Yeats	185
PART III. METAPHYSICS AND WISDOM	
7. Metaphysics in <i>The Waste Land</i>	195
The reader as Parsival	197
Memory and desire	201
Tiresias: ego or Seer	205
Phlebas: the meditation on death	210
Repeating the rain mantra	212
From DA to Damyata	219
<i>Sovegna vos</i>	224
8. Wisdom in <i>Four Quartets</i>	230
Critique of immediate experience: "Burnt Norton"	232
Raid on the inarticulate: "East Coker"	239
What Krishna meant: "The Dry Salvages"	245
The simplicity of wisdom: "Little Gidding"	254
Works cited	267
Index	277

TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL READER



You don't really criticize any author to whom you have never surrendered yourself. Even just the bewildering minute counts; you have to give yourself up, and then recover yourself, and the third moment is having something to say, before you have wholly forgotten both surrender and recovery.

T. S. ELIOT

Philosophy is difficult unless we discipline our minds for it; the full appreciation of poetry is difficult for those who have not trained their sensibility by years of attentive reading. But devotional reading is the most difficult of all, because it requires an application, not only of the mind, not only of the sensibility, but of the whole being.

T. S. ELIOT

MANY OF THE familiar techniques of modernism, particularly in the hands of Pound, Eliot, and Marianne Moore, serve not only to create fragmented, discontinuous, and disruptive poems but to include in them actual traces of the activity of reading. Through the incorporation of what look like study notes, glosses, and miscellaneous quotations and through the systematic deflection of attention from the work at hand to other texts, these poets accentuate reading as a process that is essential – perhaps more essential than romantic sensibility or eighteenth-century taste – to the composition and reception of poetry. Not since the metaphysicals have there been poets as determinedly erudite and as determined to make their erudition felt. “I shall have to learn a little greek to keep up with this,” Pound announced in the *Cantos*, “but so will you, drratt you.”

In terms of Eliot's work, Pound might as well have said Sanskrit

Sources and Traditions

or Pali. Eliot's way of reading distant languages and literatures, however, like his way of writing poetry, was less idiosyncratic than Pound's and less fraught with the pleasures and perils of autodidacticism. Throughout his life, Eliot tried to read, as he tried to write, in constant relation to a received tradition of learning and interpretation, a tradition shaped by the academy and by the urban culture of his time as well as by his personal interests. To accomplish this kind of reading meant, for him, the deliberate cultivation of a certain sympathy toward his sources, but it meant also the counterbalancing of that sympathy with a thorough command of the learning and scholarship through which they had been interpreted. To trace his path through what he once referred to as the "mazes" of Indic philosophy and religion, then, and to understand the marks that journey left on his work, we must first see something of the way Eliot approached his reading and of the contexts, political, intellectual, and institutional, in which he first encountered the classic Indian texts.

SURRENDER AND RECOVERY

No pattern is more persistent in Eliot's reflections on reading and criticism than his description of their fundamental movement as one of "surrender and recovery." He uses a similar phrase, "surrender and gain," to refer to his experience of confession and absolution when he joined the Anglican communion in 1927,¹ and these formulations occur again in other contexts, especially when he is speaking of encounters with texts. "You don't really criticize any author to whom you have never surrendered yourself," he writes in a letter to Stephen Spender in 1935. "Even just the bewildering minute counts; you have to give yourself up, and then recover yourself, and the third moment is having something to say, before you have wholly forgotten both surrender and recovery" (Spender, "Remembering" 55-6).² Of course, he adds, the "self

1 In a letter to William Force Stead, 15 March 1928, now in the Beinecke Library, Yale University.

2 See Frank Kermode's comments on this letter and on Eliot's concept of "surrender" in his introduction to *Selected Prose*. Kermode points to the connection between the phrase "bewildering minute" used here and a similar phrase in a passage from Middleton that Eliot cites in *Selected Essays*.

Tradition and the Individual Reader

recovered” is never quite the same as the self “before it was given,” and this crucial qualification raises a number of problems. Nevertheless, without some surrender of the self to the text and without a corresponding moment of regained equilibrium and extension into the activity of interpretation, a reading is neither effective nor complete.

This pattern of “surrender and recovery” is particularly clear when Eliot speaks of the experience of reading poetry. In his remarks on Dante, he says:

The experience of a poem is the experience both of a moment and of a lifetime. It is very much like our intenser experiences of other human beings. There is a first, or an early moment which is unique, of shock and surprise, even of terror (*Ego dominus tuus*); a moment which can never be forgotten, but which is never repeated integrally; and yet which would become destitute of significance if it did not survive in a larger whole of experience; which survives inside a deeper and a calmer feeling. (SE 250-1)

There is a danger in this encounter, a “terror” that is inseparable from its seriousness. What *The Waste Land* calls “The awful daring of a moment’s surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract” can be either a seduction and betrayal or an enrichment, and neither is guaranteed in advance. Nevertheless, in reading, as in personal relationships, the risks involved must at some point be undertaken, for, as the poem asserts:

By this, and this only, we have existed
Which is not to be found in our obituaries
Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider
Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor
In our empty rooms (V)

When it comes to reading poetry that involves not only literary sensibility but some engagement with philosophy and religion, Eliot translates the pattern of surrender and gain into the terms “identification and detachment.” Identification in reading implies for him a kind of Coleridgean suspending of disbelief, and detachment a moment of recovery or recuperation. Eliot notes that in the

Sources and Traditions

case of texts whose belief system he does not share, he first tries especially hard to experience the former – identification or surrender. He tries, that is, to put himself “in the position of a believer.” In the case of texts whose belief system he does share, he is more conscious of the opposite effort. Then the identification is presupposed, and the emphasis must be on a regained distance. In any case, he concludes, the movement of identification

is only one of the two movements of my critical activity: the second movement is to detach myself again and to regard the poem from outside the belief. If the poem is remote from my own beliefs, then the effort of which I am the more conscious is the effort of identification: if the poem is very close to my own beliefs, the effort of which I am more conscious is the effort of detachment. (OPP 262)

These two “efforts” correspond to the movement of surrender and recovery Eliot describes to Spender.

The principle expressed both in the letter and in this passage is not simply mechanical. As Eliot points out, the “self recovered” after the effort of surrender or identification is not a self untouched or unaltered by that experience, nor is the detachment a simple reaffirmation of a previously held position. In reading philosophical poetry, for instance, Eliot insists that a certain submission, an apprehension on the pulse, is more important at first than a discursive estimate of the line of argument. “A philosophical theory which has entered into poetry is established, for its truth or falsity in one sense ceases to matter, and its truth in another sense is proved” (SE 248). To apprehend that “truth in another sense,” however, is to undergo a change, even a physiological change, in sensibility. Indeed, through poetry a philosophical idea can become “almost a physical modification” (SW 163). Once this modification has taken place, there is no going back to the earlier state, and even a retrospective judgment of that state in familiar terms is impossible to make, for neither the self nor the philosophy is the same.

In devotional reading in particular, surrender takes on, for Eliot, a special importance. In undertaking such reading – and he is here speaking explicitly of texts outside as well as within the reader’s own system of belief – he insists that we give up not only personal idiosyncrasies but other motives as well. These include the quest,

Tradition and the Individual Reader

inextricable from literary or philosophical reading per se, for power and knowledge. As Eliot puts it, in devotional reading:

We have to abandon some of our usual motives for reading. We must surrender the Love of Power – whether over others, or over ourselves, or over the material world. We must abandon even the love of Knowledge. . . . What these writers aim at, in their various idioms, in whatever language or in terms of whatever religion, is the Love of God. They gave their lives to this, and their destination is not one which we can reach any quicker than they did or without the same tireless activity and tireless passivity. (TM 12)

Even though he is here speaking of a special case, the phrase “tireless activity and tireless passivity” epitomizes Eliot’s view of reading in general, a view in which surrender and gain complement one another in a kind of reciprocal interaction even though we think of them separately.³

Indic philosophy and religion occupy, for Eliot, a special, almost definitive place in this view of reading as surrender and recovery. His remarks on identification and detachment occur in the late essay “Goethe as Sage” and are undertaken in the context of a discussion of his way of reading the Buddhist Nikayas and the *Bhagavad Gita*. The lifelong importance of those texts as catalysts for a certain kind of reading is indicated again in a very late, retrospective comment in his pamphlet *George Herbert* (1962). Here he returns to a problem that he often addressed but never, he says, resolved to his own satisfaction: the general relation of poetry to belief. He still has no definitive answer, but readers will miss a great deal, he says, if they do not actively seek out reading in which belief must be suspended, a special effort of surrender made. He himself is “very thankful,” he goes on, “for having had the opportunity to study the *Bhagavad Gita* and the religious and philosophical beliefs, so different from [my] own, with which the *Bhagavad Gita* is informed” (23–4). This tribute to a lasting influence is clearly based on the challenge Indic texts offer as occasions for surrender and gain, not simply on their capacity for confirming or denying a priori beliefs.

Because Eliot sees the *Bhagavad Gita*, in particular, as a devotional

3 On this point see Michaels (“Reading” 827–49) and Trotter (1–9).

Sources and Traditions

poem, indeed as second only to the *Divine Comedy* among devotional poems in any tradition (SE 258), it is no surprise that these remarks were made in an essay on Herbert, nor is it unreasonable to conclude from them that repeated reading of the *Gita*, with no doubt repeated attempts at “identification and detachment,” were important to Eliot even after his decision to work within a tradition of Christian orthodox belief. Confirmation of this view comes from Eliot’s preface to G. Wilson Knight’s *The Wheel of Fire* (1930), where he speaks with almost equal appreciation of his pleasure in a Christian and Catholic philosophy in poetry and “alternatively” in an Epicurean or Upanishadic one. Here again, this pleasure is linked to an activity of critical reading, for Eliot wishes to make the analogy between the necessary surrender, however provisional, to some particular philosophy and the equally necessary surrender, again usually provisional, to some particular interpretation in the apprehension of a work of art (xvii).

Both in Eliot’s poetry and in his prose, the process of surrender and recovery in writing and reading is often made to seem largely a private activity, as private as sexual or religious experience, analogies to which his language constantly draws attention. It cannot be always subjected, this process, to the prying of “lean solicitors,” foraging under broken seals in our empty rooms. At times, however, surrender and gain, the systole and diastole of identification and detachment, have a communal and even a public dimension. Among other things, pursued properly and under the right conditions, they can bring different individuals, each beginning from a different perspective, toward a point they may never quite reach but where their two experiences will “correspond” (OPP 263). At this point, this moment of hypothetical correspondence, is born the possibility of a third point of view. Ideally, this third point of view will comprehend the subjective response of both and help them to compose their differences. The result will be the formation of what Eliot’s early teacher Josiah Royce called a “community of interpretation” and Eliot himself a “tradition.”

In “The Function of Criticism,” Eliot makes clear that this movement from personal surrender to flexible consensus is all that makes fruitful literary criticism possible. Without a willingness to forgo the merely personal and individual response, to come into relation with the wider community of interpretation, we have even in criticism only “a Sunday park of contending and contentious orators”

Tradition and the Individual Reader

who promulgate a discourse the “violence and extremity” of which suggests that the critic “owes his livelihood to . . . his opposition to other critics.” (Either that or, perhaps more culpably, to “some trifling oddities of his own with which he contrives to season the opinions which men already hold, and which out of vanity or sloth they prefer to maintain” [SE 14].) With that willingness, however, a genuine community and a more generous style of interpretation are possible.

Crucial to the proper functioning of this community or tradition is, for Eliot, the notion of some truth “outside of ourselves.” Only the shock of contact with what we believe to be genuinely other can accomplish the fruitful and necessary destabilization involved in any real surrender and the quality of the consensus established in any genuine recovery. In spite of the problems it raises, Eliot is bent on saving the notion of truth, at least as a possibility, and saving with it that sense of release from the hermeneutic circle, the epistemological trap, that occurs when we touch and seek to know something beyond our ken. Whatever its ultimate disposition, the hypothesis that there is “something out there” is vital both to the individual quest for truth and to its communal pursuit. As Eliot puts it in “The Function of Criticism”:

For the kinds of critical work which we have admitted, there is the possibility of co-operative activity, with the further possibility of arriving at something outside of ourselves, which may provisionally be called truth. (SE 22)

When it comes to the ontological status of that truth “outside of ourselves,” Eliot is both cautious and suave. In “The Function of Criticism” he is willing to leave it at a remark that seems deliberately careless and arbitrary but that has behind it, in fact, the whole weight of his argument elsewhere. “If you find you have to imagine it as outside, then it is outside,” he there asserts (SE 15). As in many of Eliot’s more magisterial pronouncements, loopholes are carefully built into this statement, but it represents nothing if not a considered position. To its logical and psychological necessity Eliot constantly draws attention, not only in his early philosophical treatise, *Knowledge and Experience*, but in his poetry as well. That “truth outside of ourselves” is the overwhelming question Prufrock evades; it is hidden within the voice of the thunder in *The Waste*

Sources and Traditions

Land, and it is indicated, if only indirectly, by the "unimaginable zero summer" about which the collective speaker in "Little Gidding" inquires. Toward it the process of surrender and gain moves, even when it cannot attain or comprehend its goal.

Eliot is well aware that this view of reading as a process of surrender and recovery has its dark side. His essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," for instance, substitutes in a slightly different context, the word "self-sacrifice" for the word "surrender," speaks categorically of a necessary "extinction" of personality (this formulation has Buddhist overtones), and even mentions the danger of a kind of "amputation" (SE 17). Referring in one instance to F. H. Bradley's view of the relation between personal and divine wills, Eliot remarked specifically on the "dangerous" direction in which the notion of the surrender of personal identity and individual will might be pushed, the direction of "diminishing the value and dignity of the individual" by abasement before the idol of a particular "Church or a State" (SE 402).

To avoid this danger, individual and community must come into a genuine and fruitful relationship, a process, in reading as in personal friendships or the constitution of society, dependent as much on wisdom, invention, and taste as on definition, abstract argument, or dogma. To exaggerate this movement in either direction, toward self-immolation on the one side or toward the imposition of a purely external order on the other, would be to cripple the very strength one intends to foster.

At times Eliot himself enacted the dangers both of an excessive sacrifice and of an all too violent attempt at recuperation. In *After Strange Gods*, for instance, he clearly diminishes the "value and dignity of the individual" in his own case as well as in that of others by implying that the moment of creativity, of invention, in writing or reading in modern literature is diseased and that it requires drastic, indeed violent, correctives to be whole again. At the moment of writing, Eliot asserts painfully, "one is what one is, and the damage of a lifetime, and of having been born into an unsettled society, cannot be repaired at the moment of composition" (ASG 26). The only remedy for this damage is the extreme rigor of collective censorship, this to be undertaken by a dubiously defined literary polity in the service of an equally dubiously defined Christian orthodoxy. The resulting process is described in terms reminiscent of the Inquisition, a caricature of the living, inventive,

Tradition and the Individual Reader

tradition-making activity of critical reading Eliot elsewhere describes.

Something of this darkness, as well as of a more benign view of writing and reading, is implied when Eliot turns, in the same lectures, to an account of his own early exposure to Indic philosophy and religion:

Two years spent in the study of Sanskrit under Charles Lanman, and a year in the mazes of Patanjali's metaphysics under the guidance of James Woods, left me in a state of enlightened mystification. A good half of the effort of understanding what the Indian philosophers were after – and their subtleties make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys – lay in trying to erase from my mind all the categories and kinds of distinction common to European philosophy from the time of the Greeks. My previous and concomitant study of European philosophy was hardly better than an obstacle. And I came to the conclusion – seeing also that the “influence” of Brahmin and Buddhist thought upon Europe, as in Schopenhauer, Hartmann, and Deussen, had largely been through romantic misunderstanding – that my only hope of really penetrating to the heart of that mystery would lie in forgetting how to think and feel as an American or a European: which, for practical as well as sentimental reasons, I did not wish to do. (ASG 34)

This passage is sometimes taken as an index of the relatively dillettante and brief nature of Eliot's interest in Indic philosophy, but in fact it is quite the opposite, a statement in which a strong and continuing attraction is met with serious recognition. Eliot's withdrawal from further study at the professional level is motivated not only by a fear of loss of identity but by a perfectly proper and correct estimation of the intellectual and emotional demands of that study.

Neither is a superficial response. Even the fear of loss is not entirely without foundation. Eliot knows that to read Indic texts as they ask to be read is to be changed and that in this change lies a danger as well as a release. To make of them, for instance, an excuse either for the abrogation of one's responsibility to the terms and distinctions of one's own culture or for complacency within

Sources and Traditions

those terms is to lose one's bearings completely and to betray their wisdom as well as one's own. It is to undergo a kind of "deracination" or seduction rather than a genuine surrender to the other. Indeed, such a facile approach will inevitably preempt the very space in which genuine surrender may occur. Eliot had seen these dangers clearly in his old teacher Irving Babbitt, who, as he pointed out elsewhere, knew "too many religions and philosophies . . . too thoroughly" ever to "give himself" completely to any one of them (SE 428).⁴

These remarks do not imply that the opposite decision, the decision to give oneself completely to Indic texts and to undertake deliberately to "forget," insofar as this is possible, how to think and feel as an American or European, is either impossible or unethical. Eliot's reasons for opting differently are "practical and sentimental" rather than based on abstract principle. Nevertheless, there hovers over this much later account of an earlier moment in his reading some of the distress and dismay that infect Eliot's views in the rest of *After Strange Gods*. When he allows himself to sound as if he were defining submission to the influence of Indic philosophy as a loss of all distinctions, a kind of demonic possession, and as if he intended to warn us against the infinite seductions of "going native," Eliot is surely very far from the mark at which he elsewhere aims. Curiously, these lectures enact the very dangers they purport to call attention to, providing an example of exactly what happens when one allows the process of reading and writing to be governed by personal phobia rather than by a willing surrender to a given text and a genuine sense of what can be recovered from it in the making of a tradition. Their "violence and extremity" are sufficient warning, if warning is needed, against the perversions or "amputations" of measuring individual response only against external and externally defined values and norms.

Even here, however, in the midst of one of his most jaundiced and disordered texts, Eliot testifies to the importance of Indic philosophy and religion in his reading and writing life. He speaks of their "heart," their "mystery," and their "hope," and he makes it clear that their appeal goes far deeper than the mazes of logic chopping or romantic allure. These and other remarks indicate that

4 Eliot held the same reservations about Pound, that other close friend and cosmopolitan disciple of Confucius.

Tradition and the Individual Reader

Eliot's identification with and detachment from these texts was not a single occurrence, but part of a lifelong process of surrender and gain. Their influence was one he received with "tireless activity and tireless passivity," and they were the catalysts for some of his finest work, from *The Waste Land* through the plays to *Four Quartets*.

METAPHYSICS AND WISDOM

The pattern of surrender and recovery in Eliot's reading is complemented by another pattern, a movement backward and forward between what we may call, on the one hand, metaphysical and, on the other, wisdom modes of reading and writing. The philosophical studies of Eliot's youth are largely metaphysical in cast, and his early poetry, too, is metaphysical in both the literary and philosophical senses. (These senses are not, perhaps, as distinct as one might imagine.) Later, he emerges from these mazes of speculative logic and inquiry into the relative simplicity and openness of his mature style. This emergence is not, however, merely stylistic, but arises from a new appreciation, in both Eliot's reading and his writing life, of what he called Holy Wisdom or Sophia. As Eliot comes to value and to wish to render this quality in his own work, he draws increasingly on a revisionary rereading of poets apparently antithetical to his earlier stance, poets such as Goethe, Whitman, and Yeats. Wisdom, however, though at all times the ultimate goal of Eliot's poetry, is not a goal that can be reached without detours and the willingness to be lost, for a while, in the tangled bypaths of metaphysics.

Eliot discusses metaphysical and wisdom modes at many points in his writing, and here again his stress is as much on ways of reading as on essential differences. Samuel Johnson, Eliot points out, declared that in metaphysical poetry "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together," and he distrusted this violence of style. Eliot seeks to rehabilitate this mode and to reverse some of the pejorative connotations Johnson had given it. In his review of Grierson's anthology of the seventeenth-century English metaphysical poets (SE 241-50), Eliot defends their erudition, their difficulty, and in particular the strain they impose on their readers. He goes on to identify a metaphysical mode in modern poetry, linking it to that "dissociation of sensibility" that was to become

Sources and Traditions

one of his most famous turns of phrase, and he stresses the necessity for a certain "agility" in reading in this mode:

It is not a permanent necessity that poets should be interested in philosophy, or in any other subject. We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. (SE 248)

In 1926, in the Clark Lectures, Eliot extends his analysis of metaphysical poetry not only to Donne, Herbert, and Crashaw but to the circle of poets around the young Dante and the French school of Laforgue, Baudelaire, and Corbière.⁵ In extending the boundaries of his discussion, he reaches out to draw on his experience of many studies of meditation and many religious and philosophical works, including, at times explicitly, those Indic treatises whose mazes he resisted, he tells us, when he was younger. As he does so, however, Eliot begins to articulate a more and more critical view both of metaphysics itself and of the kind of difficult, erudite, and ingenious poetry based on it by his predecessors. He associates the metaphysical mode of reading and writing both with some negative developments within Western culture and with a certain adolescence or lack of maturity at the psychological level. It is worth tracing this evolving view for the light it sheds on Eliot's retrospective view of *The Waste Land*, on his projects for further work, and even on his own reception of Indic thought.

The formal definition of metaphysical poetry in the Clark Lectures stresses its reciprocal relation between feeling and thought rather than its capacity to make cohere whatever system or systems of philosophy on which it draws. "I take as metaphysical poetry," Eliot writes, "that in which what is ordinarily apprehensible only

5 Bush discusses the Clark Lectures as a turning point in Eliot's view of poetry and of his own direction as a poet (*Eliot* 81-101). The Clark Lectures have also been treated at some length in Lobb (11-60).

Tradition and the Individual Reader

by thought is brought within the grasp of feeling, or that in which what is ordinarily only felt is transformed into thought without ceasing to be feeling" (CL 10). The resulting "difficulty," however, as he had already argued, is not simply a result of self-indulgence on the poet's part, but a necessity of a state of culture in which philosophy and poetry, language and sensibility have drawn increasingly apart.

The Clark Lectures relate the metaphysical mode to the given state of a civilization and the evolution of its literary language. Eliot stresses what he sees as an increasing "separation with waste" (CL 6) between philosophy and poetry since Descartes and traces its impact on literary language in rather pejorative terms. This separation tended, as time went on, to intensify the slight dislocation of the "sense" of a word from its meaning, to give the choice of words a certain self-consciousness, and to create a certain disjuncture between the material level of the sign and its totality. A given concept was no longer incarnated, as it were, in a given word, with a predictable emotional connotation that was precisely evoked by their link. The change was small but significant, a mere "variation of focus," but as Eliot says (speaking of Gertrude Stein, whom he sees as a kind of metaphysical poet *manqué* and going so far, in a conceit of his own, as to imitate her style):

The focus is shifted, even if ever so little, from sound to sense; from the sound of the word to the sound of the sense of the word, if you like the sense of the sound or the sound of the sense, to the consciousness of the meaning of the word and a pleasure in that sound having that meaning. (CL 4)

The nineteenth century had, in Eliot's analysis, compounded the problems created by this "separation with waste" between philosophy and poetry. Its nihilism, its hypertrophy of epistemological concerns, and its suppression of ontology by psychology, not to mention its indulgences in what Eliot saw as romanticized Buddhism or its mad pursuit of what Paul Elmer More called the "demon of the Absolute," made an extremely difficult climate for literary language. On the one hand were genuinely and deeply felt ethical imperatives and powerful sensual experiences and, on the other, philosophies that denied their reality or their relevance or both. Concepts like "unconscious," "nothingness," "absolute"

Sources and Traditions

could not bring sense and sensibility together, and the Cartesian cogito led directly to the rather comic epistemological despair of Laforgue. (Eliot cites here Laforgue's remark that he was one who "ne croit pas en son moi qu'à moments perdues," which we might translate freely as "did not believe in a self except in his moments of perdition.") Only Baudelaire had been able to hold his own by attempting to make art of the dilemma itself (CL 8).

Eliot links the problems of metaphysical poetry with those of meditation and traces the origin of the conceit to sermonic rhetoric (mentioning in particular the "conceit" of fire in the Buddha's Fire Sermon, which he had used in a very metaphysical mode in *The Waste Land*). This connection between religious and literary discourses is extended to the link between metaphysical poetry and manuals of meditation. Eliot draws a distinction between the literary effects of austere and restrained systems of meditation like those of Richard of St. Victor, Aquinas, and "the Indic treatises" and the baroque and contorted effects associated with more emotional systems like those of the Spanish mystics, St. John of the Cross, St. Theresa, and St. Ignatius Loyola. The latter substitute one kind of sexual object for another more abstract one, without transforming the nature of the desire itself, and they tend to denigrate the role of the intellect in meditation. As rhapsodists of the ineffable, they contribute to metaphysical poetry an influence not always beneficent in terms of content or style (CL 3).

In the Clark Lectures Eliot is not only, as Ronald Bush has observed, attempting to lay a basis for a new direction in his poetry (*Eliot* 83-6) but also, and necessarily, developing a revisionary view of his own past work. One can hear between the lines, so to speak, Eliot considering whether *The Waste Land* itself, for instance, might not have something of the "magpie" quality of Donne, the epistemological despair of Laforgue, the baroque contortion of style and sensibility Johnson had so clearly seen and rebuked in many seventeenth-century poets. Certainly, like many of its predecessors in the metaphysical tradition, this poem is erudite to a fault, conceited in both senses, and marked by a certain confusion and imbalance, reflecting some "dark material," as Eliot said of Hamlet, that the writer is unable to "contemplate or manipulate into art" (*SE* 124). If it works at all, it works only as Baudelaire's poetry works, by struggling for the clearest possible representation of its own dilemmas. That this is not the whole story or the final word

Tradition and the Individual Reader

on *The Waste Land* is obvious, and Eliot is by no means ready to recant his metaphysical experiments. Nevertheless, his self-criticisms have a point and are the stronger for the weight of reading, literary sensibility, and critical theory that lies behind them.

At its best, Eliot argues, metaphysical poetry overcomes these limitations. It does so through what he calls, in relation to Dante's literary language in particular, the "gift of incarnation" or the "gift of the word made flesh." Dante, he argues, "felt and thought clearly and beyond the ordinary frontiers of the mind" (CL 1), and he was able to embody that feeling and thought in words. Eliot appropriates this term, of course, from his growing interest in Christian doctrine. For Eliot, the doctrine of the Incarnation, like the philosophical doctrines of the post-Cartesian period, has implications for literary language as well as for what he calls Belief. As Kenneth Burke has pointed out, however, theological beliefs are at the same time, whatever their ontological value for individuals, statements about the nature of language (1).

Eliot's most explicit exploration of the implications of the "gift of incarnation" for literary language comes a year after the Clark Lectures in his consideration of the style of Lancelot Andrewes's sermons, a style he contrasts with the more "metaphysical" style, in the pejorative sense, of John Donne. Donne, he argues, had something of the "impure motive," the spurious attraction to language for language's sake, of the "religious spellbinder." He had a touch, for Eliot, of the "flesh-creeper, the sorcerer of emotional orgy." He was by no means an untrained or unlettered man, yet his "experience" was not perfectly controlled, and he "lacked spiritual discipline" (FLA 16). In Andrewes, however, "intellect and sensibility were in harmony." Eliot draws particular attention, in this respect, to Andrewes's seventeen sermons on the Nativity, and it is no accident that these are on the subject of the Incarnation. Their method is an extraordinarily close reading and analysis of words and texts, and they exemplify for Eliot what he means by the "word made flesh." Andrewes can "find the exact meaning and make that meaning live" (FLA 21). Here is no "something else," no "sorcery," or in more recent terms no *supplément*, but an emotion "wholly evoked by the object of contemplation" and "wholly adequate to it."⁶

6 Alan Weinblatt provides an excellent examination of "adequacy" and