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Eliot's Religious Ritual: From Aestheticism To Transcendence

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If 1927 can be referred to as Eliot's still point of his turning world it is of course not just because it is the exact middle of his life but mainly because it is the year of his baptism in the Church of England. His collection of essays, *The Sacred Wood* is the ultimate example of Eliot's pre-conversion attachment or even devotion to literature. In 'Imperfect Critics', Eliot laments the lack of good critics which forces writers and "the creative artist [...] to spend much of his time and energy in criticism that he might reserve for the perfecting of his proper work: simply because there is no one else to do it." (SW 38) In 'The Possibility of a Poetic Drama' Eliot regrets that art is not taken seriously: "Very few treat art seriously." (SW 58) In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' he emphasises the importance of tradition and what he calls the "historical sense which compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of 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." (SW 40-41) For Eliot, the artist needs to have a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal. In this essay, he also develops what he calls the "Impersonal theory of poetry". At the end of this fundamental essay, Eliot somewhat surprisingly and maybe programmatically concludes with what is almost an apology: "This essay proposes to halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism, and confine itself to such practical conclusions as can be applied by the responsible person interested in poetry." (SW 49) But if Eliot, in *The Sacred Wood*, stops at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism it is probably because, at this point, poetry and art in

general are more important to him than religion or mysticism, despite his constant interest in philosophy, religion and spiritual matters.

Jewel Spears Brooker, in 'Substitutes for Christianity in Eliot' elevates *The Sacred Wood* as a precursor of New Criticism: "That book became a textbook for those who insisted on the autonomy of art, on the self-referential nature of texts, on the irrelevance of belief, or even of life, to art." (Brooker 52) However, in 1928 in the preface to the new edition of *The Sacred Wood*, Eliot without disavowing entirely his essays, refuses to correct or amend them, since, as he explains, his thought has evolved so much in eight years that he would have to change too much of its content. One year earlier, of course, Eliot had officially entered the Church of England and his conversion influenced, without a doubt, his thought and his poetry. Hence, in the preface of the new edition, Eliot argues that poetry should be considered simply as poetry and nothing else, or worse, poetry should be enjoyed as a "superior amusement". He admits that he is now interested in different matters: "the relation of poetry to the spiritual and social life of its time and of other times". Finally, he confesses that if "poetry is not the inculcation of morals" nor "religion or an equivalent of religion" it has nonetheless "something to do with morals, and with religion" which accounts for his preference for Dante over Shakespeare. He therefore accepts his former essays as a good starting point but nothing more or as he puts it "as an introduction to a larger and more difficult subject."

This more "difficult subject" alluded to in the conclusion of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' is, from 1928 onwards, going to be the major focus of his criticism and his poetry. This change of heart or of mind, this reversal, this conversion which is already present in the 1928 preface will now become the "still centre of his turning world", the "axle-tree" of his theory and practice. 'A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry', also written in 1928 is a perfect example of what his theory of art for art sake but also of art as a substitute for religion has evolved into. In this essay written in the form of a dialogue, Eliot uses the persona of two characters, *E* and *B*, both resembling Eliot closely. *E* would be the young Eliot writing his first major poem 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and *B* would be the married man, literary critic who has already written 'Gerontion' and *The Waste Land*, but has just converted to Anglo-Catholicism.

Eliot uses these masks to denounce the attitude of his youth when, following the steps of Mallarmé, he saw the ritual of the Mass as a purely aesthetic theatrical performance. To understand Eliot's journey from aestheticism to religious transcendence we will look at his understanding and use of ritual throughout his poetical and theoretical career.

In 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', Eliot substitutes the Word with an accumulation of words – superficial, mundane and even cruel. In the suffocating atmosphere of tea rooms and haute bourgeoisie salons, Prufrock is condemned to be "pinned and wriggling on the wall" like a butterfly or an insect under observation, like a Christ whose death does not bring redemption. The parallel with Christ is further developed in the absence of meaning of the ritual that Prufrock undergoes:

Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald)
brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet – and here's no great matter (CP 16)

If Prufrock sees himself as a kind of powerless Christ, he confesses that unlike John the Baptist he is no prophet, he has no revelation to make, no path to prepare, no saviour to announce. As Brooker puts it: "Mallarmé had predicted that removing Christ from the altar, the body and the blood from the table, would purge Christian ritual and enable it to survive as a framework for a higher religion based on art." (Brooker 47) But here, it is the self, it is Prufrock himself who is the god "to be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk among whispers". While Eliot uses the Christian ritual almost as if to ridicule it, he seems to realise that nothing successfully replaces the meaning hidden at the core of the ritual. Prufrock, just as Eliot maybe, is entrapped in the superficial codes of society, he is paralysed by the impossibility to escape from his incessant repetitions and meaningless questions.

Three years later, in 'Gerontion', Eliot uses again the ritual of the Communion to pervert its meaning, to parody and even denounce a certain pattern reproduced throughout history. The corrupt ceremony of the Eucharist performed by Mr. Silvero and his friends follows the rejection of Christ by the pharisees in the previous stanza. The ritual of the Mass is here depraved like the month of May which should be a sea-

son of resurrection and renewal. Eliot, in 'Gerontion', is lamenting the decline of civilisation and this decline is unresolved by the rituals of the Church which fail to recreate and regenerate when they are seen merely as ritual. The first line of the next stanza "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" encapsulates the failure of the ritual which if it does not bring forgiveness and redemption seems quite irrelevant. 'Gerontion' becomes the epitome of disillusionment but also of physical and spiritual drought as Matthiessen argues:

Eliot can project into the thoughts of Gerontion an expression of one of his most moving, recurrent themes: the horror of a life without faith, its disillusioned weariness of knowledge, its agonized slow drying up of the springs of emotion.(Matthiessen 59)

In *The Waste Land*, in 1922, Eliot starts from the vegetation rites described by Frazer and Weston to create his own ritual, mixing these rites with those of the Christian and Eastern religions. He ends his poem with words taken from a ritual which he then also does in *The Hollow Men* and in *Ash Wednesday*. Eliot calls his first section 'The Burial of the Dead' using thus the name given by The Book of Common Prayer to its order for burials, as though to intimate that his poem is itself a kind of ritual.

If the title of *The Waste Land* is usually considered to have originated in Weston's *Ritual and Romance*, Jacob Korg also establishes a link with Mircea Eliade whose chaos is transformed into cosmos through a ritual of recreation. According to Eliade, all ritual has a divine model, an archetype and men are to repeat what the gods did at the beginning. In *The Waste Land* and particularly in 'The Burial of the Dead', Eliot mourns history which has abandoned the religious ceremonies and rituals of the past which were the only way to regenerate the land and thus to regenerate man. The semblant of peace which is reached or rather wished for at the end of the poem, symbolised by the Sanskrit words repeated three times "shantih shantih shantih", could represent the quest for a renewed ritual, an effective ritual that Eliot has not yet found.

The Hollow Men, published in 1925, is considered by Helen Gardner as a bridge between *The Waste Land* and *Ash Wednesday* because of the ritualistic form of the poem and because of its spiritual quest counteracted by the failure of the religious

ritual expressed in the poem. If *The Waste Land* was a poem of desolation, *The Hollow Men* would be a poem of, what Gardner calls, “extreme defeat”. However, despite the tone of defeat and failure, *The Hollow Men* can be read as a desperate attempt to pray.

Before he publishes *Ash Wednesday* – his first long Christian poem – in 1930, Eliot writes ‘A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry’ in 1928. This essay, along with his preface of the 1928 edition of *The Sacred Wood*, marks the turning point in Eliot’s theory and practice. Before 1927, ritual, as we have seen briefly, is mainly used as a pattern or as evidence of the decline of civilisation that uses rituals with an absence of epiphany, a failure to reach transcendence, an absence of a real redeeming presence. After his conversion, however, ritual becomes inseparable from the hidden meaning at its core. In 1928, Eliot criticises this absence of meaning in rituals in his essay ‘The Humanism of Irving Babbitt’, once again, Eliot is not attacking ritual in itself but its interpretation and lack of spiritual substance:

Any religion, of course, is for ever in danger of petrification into mere ritual and habit, though ritual and habit be essential to religion. It is only renewed and refreshed by an awakening of feeling and fresh devotion, or by the critical reason. (SE 475-476)

But his reversal is even more apparent in ‘A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry’; although the essay is supposed to focus on dramatic poetry, Eliot manages to instill a few drops of his new theory based on his new faith as he uses the two personas of *E* and *B*. After a few remarks on Aristotle and Dryden, *E* who stands for the Eliot of the Prufrock years and whose position is reminiscent of Mallarmé’s, announces that “Our literature is a substitute for religion, and so is our religion.” (SE 32) Later in the dialogue, *E* takes up Mallarmé’s arguments to convince *B* that the Mass is in fact the perfect drama:

I say that the consummation of the drama, the perfect and ideal drama, is to be found in the ceremony of the Mass. (...) drama springs from religious liturgy, and it cannot afford to depart from religious liturgy. (...) And the only dramatic satisfaction that I find now is in a High Mass well performed. Have you not there everything necessary? And indeed, if you consider the ritual of the Church during the cy-

cle of the year, you have the complete drama represented. The Mass is a small drama, having all the unities; but in the Church year you have represented the full drama of creation. (SE 35)

This position is similar to Mallarmé's aesthetic position as defined in 'Catholicisme', an essay taken from *Divagations* in which Mallarmé substitutes art for religion and equates religion to art by comparing a concert or a play to the ritual of the Mass. Mallarmé considers these laic services more humane than the religious ones as the theatrical ritual is devoid of all "sacrificial cannibalism" whilst it can, according to him, confer the audience the same benefits as the Mass. The young T. S. Eliot was strongly influenced by the French symbolists especially Mallarmé and as Brooker noted in *Mastery and Escape*: "From 1909 to 1911, (...) he used Christian ritual as a framework to support his poetry, somewhat in the way that Mallarmé used it." (ME 15) In 'Substitutes for Christianity in Eliot' she develops the connexion between Mallarmé and Eliot:

Mallarmé's aesthetic consists of a reformulation in which the forms and rituals of Catholicism are emptied of Christian content and then appropriated for a new religion of art. Underlying his work is an analogy between art and Catholicism in which the creative act by an artist is analogous to the Passion of Christ and the re-creative act by a reader is analogous to the Christian Mass. Following Mallarmé, Eliot used Christian ritual as an underlying structural metaphor in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and other early poems. But in his post-conversion re-evaluation of aestheticism, he argues that one has no business to use Christian ritual unless he is a Christian. (Brooker 45)

This reversal appears in B's position who does not accept this analogy anymore between art and the ritual of the Mass:

The question is not, whether the Mass is dramatic, but what is the relation of the drama to the Mass? (...) I once knew a man who held the same views that you appear to hold, E. He went to High Mass every Sunday, and was particular to find a church where he considered the Mass efficiently performed. And as I sometimes accompanied him, I can testify that the Mass gave him extreme, I may even say immoderate,

satisfaction. It was almost orgiastic. But when I came to consider his conduct, I realised that he was guilty of a *confusion des genres*. His attention was not on the meaning of the Mass, for he was not a believer but a Bergsonian; it was on the Art of the Mass. His dramatic desires were satisfied by the Mass, precisely because he was not interested in the Mass, but in the drama of it. (SE 35-36)

Here, Eliot criticises openly his former position and condemns Mallarmé's aestheticism by denouncing a theory that takes away the meaning inherent in the ritual of the Mass. He goes further in contradicting his former belief of art as a substitute for religion by admitting that man needs religious faith and that as he said in the preface of the 1928 edition of *The Sacred Wood*, literature should only be an "amusement":

Now what I maintain is, that you have no business to care about the Mass unless you are a believer. (...) We need (...) religious faith. And we also need amusement (...) Literature can be no substitute for religion, not merely because we need religion, but because we need literature as well as religion. And religion is no more a substitute for drama than drama is a substitute for religion. (...) A devout person, in assisting at Mass, is not in the frame of mind of a person attending a drama, for he is *participating* - and that makes all the difference. In participating we are supremely conscious of certain realities, and unconscious of others. (SE 36)

Now that Eliot is a member of the Church of England he puts the emphasis on "participating" in the Mass and not on being a simple observer, a member of the audience at a play, a ballet or a concert. The evolution in Eliot's theory regarding the meaning and the importance of ritual is therefore quite striking, as striking, in fact, as his metamorphosis from being an emblem of modernism and of what I. A. Richards called "the disillusionment of a generation" to his infamous announcement that he was "a classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion".

In the conclusion of his Norton lectures in 1932 and 1933, Eliot famously compares poetry to the rhythm of the drums: « Poetry begins, I dare say, with a savage beating a drum in a jungle, and it retains that essential of percussion and rhythm » (UPUC 148); thus developing a connexion between poetry and ritual, a connexion already established in his definition of the auditory imagination. Indeed, the aim of

the auditory imagination is to penetrate “far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end.” (UPUC 111) This is exactly what the ritual, as Eliade defines it, is supposed to do. These definitions of poetry and of the auditory imagination are certainly among Eliot’s most famous phrases; they both show a new understanding, one could say even a new intimacy with ritual.

In ‘The Social Function of Poetry’, Eliot confirms the relationship between poetry and ritual and emphasises its possible social role: “Poetry is early used in religious rituals, and when we sing a hymn we are still using poetry for a particular social purpose.” (OPP 16) Mircea Eliade considers that poetry is an attempt to re-create language and to invent a new one just like a ritual is supposed to re-enact a beginning. As for W. H. Auden: “A poem is a rite; hence its formal and ritualistic character.” (Auden 58) But Auden, as opposed to Mallarmé, distinguishes poetry from religious rituals. According to him, religious rituals enact a spiritual purification but poetry is not magic, it disenchant and disintoxicates. (Auden 27) Jacob Korg emphasises the physicality of rituals and the “non verbal grammar” that it establishes:

Ritual’s aesthetic appeal rests on the fact that it addresses the senses. Ritual communicates through such physical act as uncovering, uplifting, separating, combining, cutting, and touching, through the objects involved in these movements and the place where they are performed. These generate a non verbal grammar of repetition, contrast, variation, transformation, and other effects that express relationships and gain coherence through the nondiscursive channel of form. Ritual language and ritualizing poetry replicate this coherence verbally. (Korg 11)

As we have seen with Eliot’s pre-conversion poetry, the reconstitution of ritual is not enough to impart the poem with spiritual significance. *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets* are usually recognised as Eliot’s major religious poems because of their themes of purgation, repentance and redemption as well as their ritualistic structure. F. R. Leavis writes that “The rhythm of *Ash Wednesday* has certain qualities of ritual; it produces in a high degree the frame-effect, establishing apart from the world a special

order of experience, dedicated to heartbeat spiritual exercises.” (Leavis 99) F. O. Matthiessen, one of Eliot’s acutest critics, considers that in *Ash Wednesday*:

Eliot has been able to summon up all the resources of his auditory imagination in such a way that the listener can begin to feel the rare force of what is being communicated and to accept the poem as a kind of ritualistic chant, long before his mind is able to give any statement of its meaning. (Matthiessen 115)

The paradox of ritual is that by imitating the natural rhythms of breathing or of the heartbeat and despite being somewhat artificial, constructed and ordered, ritual enables the participants to forget its structure to focus on the aim which is sacred and spiritual. Helen Gardner suggests that the new ritualist style of *Ash Wednesday* is almost unconscious and that it is a direct consequence of Eliot’s conversion:

The change in Mr Eliot’s poetry cannot be discussed without reference to the fact that the author of *Ash Wednesday* is a Christian while the author of *The Waste Land* was not. Nobody can underrate the momentousness for any mature person of acceptance of the Christian Faith, and entry into the communion of the Church, and this change in the content and style of poetry is a very complex one. Behind any such act of choice and affirmation of belief lie obscure experiences which the conscious mind has translated into intellectual formulas and the conscious will has translated into a decisive step. It is in these obscurer regions that the change in the poetry has its origins, not in the conscious act which is equally a result. (Gardner 103)

In *Four Quartets*, Eliot’s ritualist method differs from *Ash Wednesday* which used the rhythms of the liturgy and constant references to the Bible to achieve its purpose. Here, Eliot uses much fewer obvious references to the Bible except for some climaxes where the concept of Incarnation is introduced and then developed as one of his major patterns to reach the stillness and redemption through the Word – the ultimate incarnation. Just after finishing *Four Quartets*, Eliot, in 1942 in an essay entitled ‘The Music of Poetry’, explains the importance of patterns while describing the musical motif created by the association of certain words:

Forms have to be broken and remade: but I believe that any language, so long as it remains the same language, imposes its laws and restrictions and permits its own licence, dictates its own speech rhythms and sound patterns. (OPP 37)

According to Korg, Eliot's interest for motifs and recurrent themes present in music demonstrates a strong connexion with ritual as the poet searches beyond words for a pattern that will help him reach transcendence, exemplified by the stillness or the still point central to *Four Quartets*. For A. D. Moody, if both *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* can be granted the status of rituals that perform "the same basic rite" transforming the temporal world into a permanent pattern, *Four Quartets* "offers itself as a religious rite for the time as the ritual by which a foundering civilisation might be recovered" (Korg 69) whereas in *The Waste Land* the redemption was wished for but not achieved as the ritual was self-centered and not communal. Finally, it is through his new religious and poetic ritual as well as the prosaic passages in *Four Quartets* that Eliot comes to the conclusion that "the poetry does not matter" (CP 198) at the opposite of his earlier theory of art for art sake, at the opposite of Mallarmé and closer to another poet, Auden, whose mystical conversion led to the idea that "catharsis is properly effected, not by works of art, but by religious rites." (Auden 27)

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