

T.S. ELIOT: INDIAN INFLUENCES AND HIS FAITH

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Abstract

*Thomas Sterns Eliot was an American by birth, but an Englishman by adoption. He grew to become a naturalized British citizen. Eliot's interest in Indian thought came largely through the influence of his teachers at Harvard. The most important influence in Eliot's Harvard days seems to have been Irving Babbitt whose system of thought was based upon the study of the Pali manuscripts, the earliest authentic Buddhist documents. In *The Waste Land* there are two well-known examples of Hindu influence both coming at the end of the poem in the section entitled "What the Thunder Said." At the very end we find the triple use of the word 'shanti' which is both Vedic in origin and Upanishad in content. It pacifies all sorts of anguish, anxiousness, hesitation, doubt of our head and makes us calm. The Christian scheme seemed the only possible scheme which found a place for values which he had to maintain or perish. . . , the belief, for instance, in holy living and holy dying, in sanctity, chastity, humility, austerity. He expressed the discovery of a faith that would last. He felt that modern life was rife with futility and anarchy. It was his interest in the institution of society that led him to see the importance of communal worship, and the significance of religious practice for all nations, as well as for individual souls. He believed that religious ritual would bring solace to mankind.*

Keywords: Agnosticism, Indian Influences, Upanishad, Shanti, Patanjali, Christianity.

Introduction:

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St Louis, Missouri, in 1888. His grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, left New England for St. Louis in 1834. He was a minister of the Unitarian Church. The Eliots were Unitarians, a Protestant sect which apparently originated in Poland and Hungary in the 17th century and reached England in the 18th century. Unlike the Trinitarian sect that believed in Trinity, the Unitarian view believed in the single

personality of God. William Greenleaf Eliot was the strong character of the family. He established a Unitarian Church in St. Louis. He campaigned against slavery. He founded the Washington University in St. Louis. When T.S. Eliot was born, therefore, as the seventh and last child of a 45-year-old mother and a 47-year-old father, he was by all means known as the member of quite an affluent and prominent family.

Eliot was educated at Harvard, the Sorbonne, and Merton College, Oxford. At Oxford he wrote a doctoral thesis on the philosophy of F. H. Bradley. Bradley's Hegelian vision of society had a profound influence over him. Eliot studied Linguistics and Humanities, German, French and English Literature as properly as Comparative Literature. His initial employment was as an assistant editor of the renowned Weekly 'The Egoist'. He became the Editor of 'The Criterion' for a few of years. He was also the Director of 'Faber and Faber', the esteemed Publishing Company for a long period. Like many of his educated contemporaries, Eliot came from a religious and public-spirited background. However, his early poems suggest a bleak and despairing agnosticism, which he gradually overcame after a long and painful struggle. In 1914 he met Ezra Pound, the famous Imagist with whose encouragement and help he started writing poetry. It was at Harvard where he met his guide and mentor Ezra Pound, a well-known modernist poet. Pound encouraged Eliot to expand his writing abilities and publish his work. He was also instrumental in influencing Eliot's decision to settle in England. Pound helped in the publication of his first successful poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." This work, and the other short poems that were published along with it as *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917, profoundly altered the course of English literature. He was also a prolific reviewer and essayist in both literary criticism and technical philosophy. In 1919 he published *Poems*, which contained the poem Gerontion, a meditative interior monologue in blank verse: nothing like this poem had appeared in English literature. In 1922, he published his masterpiece 'The Waste land'. In 1925, arrived 'The Hollow man', in 1927, he composed a religious poem 'The Journey of the Magi' commemorating his religious conversion. In 1930, he published his 'Ariel poems and Ash Wednesday' in 1935. He regarded himself to be "a Classicist in literature, Royalist in Politics and Anglo-Catholic in religion."

Eliot's literary journey can be clearly divided into five main periods. The first is from 1905 to 1909 as a Pupil Poet. The second from 1909 to 1917 as an Urban Poet, third from 1917 to 1925 as a Pessimistic, Gloomy but a very intellectual poet, the fourth period is from 1925 to 1935 as a Religious and Christian poet and the fifth from 1935 to 1943 is a period

that is Religious but devoid of Christian ideals. Eliot received the Nobel Peace Prize for literature in 1948.

Themes in Eliot's Poetry

Eliot's poetry projects two main themes; Firstly, the theme of Redemption and the chance of Spiritual Rebirth and secondly, his notion on Time. Eliot thought that practically nothing material is subject to destruction. Every little thing is subject to change and undergoes transformation under the influence of Time. In *Ash Wednesday*, he wrote, "Redeem the Time, Redeem the unread vision in the higher dream". In 'Elder Statesman', he wrote, "It is worthwhile dying, to come across out what existence is". In 'Brunt Norton', his study on Patanjali was echoed when he wrote, "Time present and time previous Are the two possibly existing in time future? And time future contained in time past If all time is eternally current All time is unredeemable."

Indian Influences

In 1933 T. S. Eliot wrote that the great philosophers of India "make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys." It was quite an unexpected remark from a man who was devoted to defend the European tradition and had studied under Bertrand Russell, Josiah Royce, R. G. Collingwood, Harold Joachim, and Henri Bergson. This statement of his clearly indicates his high opinion of Indian thinkers. Eliot was certainly well-placed to make this comparative evaluation. The evidence of his extensive Indian scholarship lies in his graduate notebooks and essays, where we find that he practiced the Devanaagari script. His work for Russell and the others was influenced by his Asian studies and his later poetry, criticism, social essays, and perhaps even his religious conversion depended on this early work.

In 'A song for Simons' Eliot's turn to eastern philosophy is evident when he writes, "I am tired with my personal life and the lives of individuals after me, I am dying in my individual death and the death of individuals right after me. Allow the servant depart Possessing observed thy salvation. The lines are immediate echo of Brihadaranyaka Upanishad where we find the Shloka: 'Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata Shanti, Shanti, Shanti'. The first Da means 'Give'; the second 'Da' means 'Sympathize' and the third 'Da' means 'Control'. In the Upanishad context, the meaning is symbolic. It appears from the bulk of *The Waste Land* that the poet was terribly moved by the chaotic world-order

created by the World War I,—the result of 'modern millions live alone'. To escape from this lamentable situation, he turns to the wisdom of India.

Eliot's teachers at Harvard, namely Irving Babbitt, Charles Lanman, and James Woods are largely responsible for his interest in Indian thought. The most important influence in Eliot's Harvard days was Irving Babbitt whose system of thought was based upon the study of the Pali manuscripts, the earliest authentic Buddhist documents. In Babbitt, Eliot found not merely a tutor, but a man who directed his interests in such a way that the marks of that direction are evident in his works. After studying for one year in Paris which was the center for Sanskrit studies, Eliot, returned to Harvard in September 1911 where he studied ancient Hindu literature and scriptures for two years under the guidance of Charles Lanman. He dedicated himself to the reading of Patanjali's Yoga-Sutras under the guidance of James Woods. The influence of the Oriental Philosophy of The Geeta, the Upanishads, and the Buddhist Philosophy is evident in his poetry.

'Shanti, Shanti, Shanti', the ending words of all the supreme terms are rooted in the Vedas and the summary of all the Upanishads. Swami Dayananda in the Shanti Prakashan, a part of his famous guide 'Sanskar Bidhi' expresses that the uttering of this word 'Shanti' three times, presents a peaceful calmness to our head. It pacifies all sorts of anguish, anxiousness, hesitation, doubt of our head and makes us calm and tranquil ;"Calm of mind, all passions spent". The proper utterances of these terms give calmness of thoughts filled with power. And this calmness combined with power provides a serene pleasure. Shanti, Shanti, Shanti is the European equivalent of the phrase Amen. In European idea, Time is Linear and so it has a beginning and a finish. So Time is not infinite. But in the Indian concept, Time is Circular or Cyclical. It is contemplated as short-term Time, a symbol of death and decay; and Eternal Time Mahakaal, the symbol of Salvation of the Soul. In Eliot's Burnt Norton, East Coker, Dry Salvages and Little Gidding, we discover a relation between short-term time with that of eternal time. Like Patanjali, Eliot also considered that the only way to totally free oneself from the clutches of Time is, to attain Salvation, meditation, penance and Yoga ought to be performed.

F.L. Mayo says, 'The Waste Land' is a criticism of life from the Christian, Hindu and Buddhist position of view'. In Buddhist Philosophy, we are advised to achieve 3 phases: Nirvana-Attachment-Detachment—Indifference. And Eliot expresses these in the line "In my starting is my end". And in "The Dry Salvages", he continued— 'You shall not think 'the

previous is finished' or 'the long run is ahead of us.' And do not feel of the fruit of action Fare forward. The only hope, or else despair lie in the choice of pyre or pyre, to be redeemed from fire to fire. The affect of Patanjali is revealed very clearly here. Prof. J. J. Syeen says that these unified sensibilities and feelings are directly linked with The Geeta and Upanishad. Again, in The Cocktail Party, we discover the echo of Patanjali in the following lines: 'I see that my lifestyle was decided extended ago; And that the struggle to escape from it is only make-believe, a pretence that what is, is not, or could be transformed.'

A reading of Eliot's poetry reflects the contribution and influence of the ideas and wisdom of ancient India. Narasimhaiah's opinion of him was, "But for Indian thought and sensibility he would have written altogether different kind of poetry." In 'The Waste Land', Eliot ponders on human destiny which concerns the entire globe, and transcends the man-made barriers of caste and creed, color and sex; of nationality and religion. The inclusion of Hindu religion and thought in The Waste Land constitutes a part of the poet's international outlook.

And yet in the end he gave up the pursuit of Indian religions and philosophies that had made a profound impression on him. The reason can be, as Eliot himself said in his lecture to the University of Virginia that he was not prepared to give up his American and European identity "for practical and sentimental reasons." and also a very important reason was that, in June of 1913 he purchased a copy of F. H. Bradley's Appearance and Reality at the Coop in Harvard Square. From that time on he was thoroughly absorbed in the study of Bradley's philosophy.

Eliot's Faith

Eliot turned to Christianity in 1927. He rejected the Unitarianism of his upbringing, and embraced Anglo-Catholicism, in a public and controversial conversion. He wrote his best-known conversion poem, *Ash Wednesday* the following year. His faith became more widely known with the publication of "Ash Wednesday" in 1930, a poem showing the difficult search for truth:

***"Where shall the word be found, where will the word
Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence"***

Discussing the forces that brought about his entry into the Church of England, Eliot described the decision as a process that occurred "perhaps insensibly, over a long period of time." At least one major factor in Eliot's considerations was as he said "the Christian scheme seemed to me the only one which would work. . . . The Christian scheme seemed the only possible scheme which found a place for values which I must maintain or perish. . . , the belief, for instance, in holy living and holy dying, in sanctity, chastity, humility, austerity." He expressed the discovery of a faith that will last, in the repeated phrase, "Because I do not hope to turn again." Though criticized sharply by the literati for his conversion to Christianity, he continued to express his faith in his poetry. Eliot turned to writing plays in the 1930s and '40s because he believed drama attracts people who unconsciously seek a religion. The year 1935 saw the premiere of *Murder in the Cathedral*, a play based on the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, in which Eliot reiterates that faith can live only if the faithful are ready to die for it. It was followed by *The Family Reunion* in 1939 and *The Cocktail Party* in 1949, his greatest theatrical success. In his plays, he managed to handle complex moral and religious themes while entertaining audiences with farcical plots and keen social satire. B. Rajan asserts that Eliot's poetry is an advance, an inch-by-inch movement up the stairway in which the end is significant because it both remembers and fulfils the beginning. One of the main factors in Eliot's thinking was the intellectual rigor of a religion: "We demand of religion some kind of intellectual satisfaction—both private and social—or we do not want it at all." According to Eliot, "A church is to be judged by its intellectual fruits, by its influence on the sensibility of the most sensitive and on the intellect of the most intelligent, and it must be made real to the eye by monuments of artistic merit." Eliot's own writings following his conversion aimed at this achievement.

Conclusion

Because of Eliot's interest in civilization and society, much of his study was concentrated on religion and ritual. He believed that writing was a way of approaching the great mysteries of human life. Eliot also believed that a lot of the most remarkable achievements of culture had arisen out of discord and disunity. He thought that society in his own age had broken down to a large extent, as expressed in his great modernist poem, *The Waste Land*. Writing after the Great War, he felt that modern life was rife with futility and anarchy. It was his interest in the institution of society that led him to see the importance of communal worship, and the significance of religious practice for all nations, as well as for individual souls.

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