

The Devotee's Spirituality in T. S. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*

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Abstract

Eliot's religious obsession is so obvious in his poem *Ash Wednesday* where he views the advances of the souls towards God and the quest for spiritual perfection by a process of neglecting desire as a holy quest to attain spiritual peace. The poet or the devotee has to pass through a long journey to achieve that level of perfection. In *Ash Wednesday*, Eliot seems to be greatly affected by Dante and his *Divine Comedy* as far as the spiritual journey and the quest for salvation are concerned. To reach that level of perfection, Eliot's journey in *Ash Wednesday* is divided into six parts. Each part shows a new level of ascent in the poet's spiritual vision which escalates from temptation, sin, redemption, and ends up with salvation.

Keywords: Ash Wednesday, Dante, Devotee, Divine Comedy, Eliot, Spirituality

روحانية المتعبّد في قصيدة تي.اس. اليوت "أربعاء الرماد"

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الخلاصة

يُظهر "اليوت" هوسه الديني بوضوح في قصيدته "أربعاء الرماد"، إذ ينظر إلى مسيرة النفس نحو الله وسعيها نحو التكامل الروحي من خلال التخلي عن الرغبات، باعتباره مسعىً مقدساً لبلوغ السلام الروحي. فعلى الشاعر أو المتعبّد أن يخوض رحلة طويلة لبلوغ هذا المستوى من الكمال. ويبدو أنّ "اليوت" في "أربعاء الرماد" متأثر بشدّة بدانتي وملحمته "الكوميديا الإلهية" فيما يتعلق بالرحلة الروحية والسعي للخلاص. وللوصول إلى هذا المستوى من الكمال، ينقسم مسار اليوت في "أربعاء الرماد" إلى ستة أجزاء. يُظهر كل جزء مستوى جديداً من الارتقاء في رؤية الشاعر الروحية، بدءاً من الإغراء، مروراً بالخطيئة، ثم الفداء، وصولاً إلى الخلاص .

الكلمات المفتاحية: اربعاء الرماد، دانتي، المتعبّد، الكوميديا الإلهية، اليوت، الروحانية

"Spirituality can release blocks, lead you to ideas, and make your life artful. Sometimes when we pray for guidance; we are guided in unexpected way"

Julia Cameron

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) has adopted the Anglo-Catholic faith of England in 1917. *Ash Wednesday* was written after his embracing the new faith. It is a poem of six parts published in a single volume in 1930. The title *Ash Wednesday* refers to the first day of the month of Lent- the period of prayers, fasting and penance, when according to tradition, Christ fasted for forty days in the desert, where he was tempted by the devil but with no result. During this period, a Christian has repented for his past actions and made an effort to walk on the spiritual path. As it was the condition with this Christian, Eliot in this poem, repents for his past sins and resolves to turn away from the world and to walk on the path of spirituality. Each part in this poem is indicating a step on the spiritual plane. The poem begins with a renunciation of blessed face and voice of his beloved and is ultimately followed by a vision of a spiritual birth presided over by Virgin Mary. In between are the steps of spiritual stair and the scenes in the garden where the lady in white appears glorified. (Drew, 98) In short, *Ash Wednesday* is an account of man's spiritual quest with all the struggles of human soul and the overcoming of the handles that lie on the way.

Apart from being a religious poem, *Ash Wednesday* can be viewed as a combination of two levels: personal and impersonal. It is personal in the sense that that it reflects the feelings and the moods of the poet and the struggle he has to go through to rise higher on the spiritual plane. Yet, it is impersonal or objective in the way it presents the struggle of any devotee or spiritual seeker on his way to divinity. Hence, the "I" of the poem refers to every human being who attempts to attain redemption and thus, the emotional intensity of the poem is not only an individual but also a universal one. (Kenner, 226)

What is so amazing in Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* is the aspect of mystical enlightenment of the poet, affected by two theological spiritual productions of the Spanish Catholic Mystic poet St. John of the Cross (1542-1591); *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul* published by sixteenth century. Eliot alludes to these two works showing that the advances of the souls towards

God and spiritual perfection by a process of negating desire and the poet has to pass through a dark night so as to attain that level of perfection.

Structurally, *Ash Wednesday* is divided into six parts. Each part shows a new level of ascent in the poet's spiritual vision. Part I is about Renunciation. The poet in this part 'hopes' to turn away from the sins of the world and to abandon worldly desires. His mind is awakened by the realization of his loss; the capacity for response has been so exhausted; "thus, here is the vain pose of a Titan too young to be weary of strife, but weary of it nevertheless" (Tate, 133):

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn
Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope
I no longer strive to strive towards such things
(Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)
Why should I mourn
The vanished power of the usual reign?

(Eliot, *Ash Wednesday*, I, 1-8)

The first step on the spiritual path is that of the introspection and self-analysis. Eliot here recollects his past; he is now "an aged eagle", the worldly desires are no more of use to him. The glory of youth has vanished away, love, for instance, brings only a temporary inspiration and ends up with nothing. It fades away like "trees flower, and springs flow, for there is nothing again" (II, l. 15)

Turning to God means renunciation of worldly desires, achievements and commitments. The poet even has to give up his love for his "blessed lady" and to "renounce the voice" of his beloved so as to aspire his spiritual connection with God:

And pray to God to have mercy upon us
And pray that I may forget
These matters that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain
Because I do not hope to turn again

Let these words answer
For what is done, not to be done again
May the judgment not be too heavy upon us. (I, l. 26-33)

The devotee, who represents the poet himself, prays for God's mercy for indulging himself in different worldly affairs. As a matter of fact, Eliot's words have a mystical connotation that can be elevated to the level of a theological sermon, headed to himself and to humanity as a whole. He regrets the matters that have worried him as he always tried to find answers for unanswerable issues. He prays that God's judgment may "not be too heavy upon us". Eliot realizes the futility of the wings of power that Man rejoices at for, as age progresses, these wings become useless and no longer strong to fly with:

Because these wings are no longer wings to fly
But merely vans to beat the air
The air which is now thoroughly small and dry
Smaller and dryer than the will
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still. (I, l. 34-9)

Ironically, the wings of power can only beat the air that is smaller and dryer than the human will. This means that without will, man has no power. This power can only be attained by faith; the faith in God whom Eliot appeals to lead him to care for the spiritual aspects and not for worldly desires to: "Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death \ Pray for us now and at the hour of our death" (I, l, 40-1)

Eliot's renunciation develops into a death of physical self in the second part of the poem which takes the form of a vision or a dream as a result of the renunciation of the devotee's own flesh. Eliot here proposes for certain philosophy: human bodies carry with it the original sin of Adam which in turn represents an obstacle in the progress of the soul and confines its relation to God. Hence; the destruction of this physical entity becomes a necessity.

According to old fertility myths such destruction of the body is essential before its rebirth. As such, Eliot presents us to the image of "three white leopards" that eat away the body of the devotee as the agents of purification and purgation (Kenner, 224):

Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree
In the cool of the day, having fed to satiety
On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained
In the hollow round of my skull. And God said
Shall these bones live? shall these
Bones live? (II, l. 42-47)

The bones of the devotee will be scattered and infused with a new life through the blessings and the grace of the lady who stands for Virgin Mary who is also described as "the rose of the garden", a description used by Dante to describe Virgin Mary. The renunciation of the flesh brought about a new life in the marrow that was in these dead and dry bones and now it shines by the Lady's bless who is transformed from a "single rose" into a "garden". (Maxwell, 44-45) The destruction of the body is necessary to compensate the devotee's past deeds; especially those are related to sensuality. Moreover, even the concept of love is altered from a passionate love to a divine passion where all love ends:

The greater torment
Of love satisfied
End of the endless
Journey to no end
Conclusion of all that
Is inconclusible
Speech without word and
Word of no speech
Grace to the Mother
For the Garden
Where all love ends. (II, l. 78-88)

Where all loves end, love begins. Actually, these lines represent the spiritual and mystical journey made by the poet to attain heavenly grace; yet, he "has to journey further, higher still, for an even stronger grasp of the Eternal." (Kwan-Terry, 137) At the same time, this whole part, as it is the condition of the poem itself, mixes personal symbolism and prophetic vision since there are allusions from the Bible taken from the thirty-seventh chapter of Ezekiel when the prophet behold in a vision a valley full of scattered bones, and the vision of Isaiah of the wilderness and of the desert that shall bloom as a rose: (Lall, p. 108)

Under a juniper-tree the bones sang, scattered and shining
We are glad to be scattered, we did little good to each other,
Under a tree in the cool of the day, with the blessing of sand,
Forgetting themselves and each other, united
In the quiet of the desert. This is the land which ye
Shall divide by lot. And neither division nor unity
Matters. This is the land. We have our inheritance. (II, l. 89-95)

Quite different from the image of the woman presented in *The Waste Land* as the sensual, lusty woman, Eliot in *Ash Wednesday* presents a new type of woman; the woman who is the source of grace and spiritual love. The "Lady in the white gown" becomes the garden where "all love ends" at the end of this endless journey that represent after all the terminal point of all that is inconclusive. (Kenner, 231-2)

Such end cannot be gained without ascending the steps of the spiritual mansion and this fact is directly communicated in the third part of the poem which is majorly concerned with the struggle with evil. This struggle takes place between the devotee and the forces of evil or as they called in the poem "the devils of stairs" (Sen & Chopra, 228-9) Here there is an allusion taken from

Dante and the way he climbed the three steps of purgatory. These stairs are sincerity, contrition and love:

The lowest stair was marble white so smooth
And polish'd, that therein my mirror'd form
Distinct I saw. The next of hue more dark
Than sablest grain, a rough and singed block,
Crack'd lengthwise and across. The third, that lay
Massy above, seem'd porphyry, that flam'd
Red as the life-blood spouting from a vein.
On this God's angel either foot sustain'd,
Upon the threshold seated, which appear'd
A rock of diamond.

(Dante, *The Divine Comedy*: Purgatory, Canto IX, p. 152)

By the white step Dante means the distinctness with which the conscience of the penitent reflects his offences, by the burnt and cracked one, his contrition on, their account; and by that of porphyry, the fervour with which he resolves on the future pursuit of piety and virtue. Dante's three "holy stairs" are thus completely different from Eliot's stairs in *Ash Wednesday*. In Eliot's the stairs become the three stairs of evil that take diverse forms and the devotee is to overcome all these evils. The first form of evil is the form of the Spirit of Doubt, disguises itself under the treacherous face of hope and despair (Drew, pp. 101-2):

At the first turning of the second stair
I turned and saw below
The same shape twisted on the banister
Under the vapour in the fetid air
Struggling with the devil of the stairs who wears
The deceitful face of hope and of despair.

(Eliot, *Ash Wednesday*, III, l. 96-101)

The second form of evil is the Spirit of Darkness. The stair is dark, damp, and broken up like the dirty mouth of an old man or the toothed gullet of a shark:

At the second turning of the second stair
I left them twisting, turning below;
There were no more faces and the stair was dark,
Damp, jagged, like an old man's mouth drivelling, beyond repair,
Or the toothed gullet of an aged shark. (III, l. 102-6)

At the first turning of the third stair, the evil takes the form of the Spirit of Sex. The devotee becomes a subject of temptation of:

The broadbacked figure drest in blue and green
Enchanted the maytime with an antique flute.
Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown,
Lilac and brown hair;
Distraction, music of the flute, stops and steps of the mind over the
third stair,
Fading, fading; strength beyond hope and despair
Climbing the third stair.

(III, l.110-16)

The devotee or the poet has to face this voluptuous passion instigated inside him once he sees the image of this woman. He seems as tormented between his yearning for the joys of the world, which he has renounced, and the need to adequate faith in God and his grace to overcome the forces of evil in all its different forms of temptation. Since he has such a faith in God, it becomes possible for him to overcome these demons. This state ends up with the attainment of the devotee of God's bless.

The fourth part which is concerned with the divine vision shows a divine dream. The poet has now a vision of a lady in "Mary's colour". This vision of the poet of the lady is the same vision of Dante which is related to 'high dream' of his Beatrice in *The Divine Comedy* (Kwan-Terry, 133). Like Beatrice, the blessed lady is both a real woman and a heavenly being. She is dressed in many colours; the violet of penance, the green of hope, the white of purity and the blue of celestial things. This human woman is raised to a spiritual level on

which her sexuality is blended with her spirituality: "when this lady talks of trivial things, she is a real woman, when she redeems human suffering, she is a divine lady. Under the influence of this lady, the desert turns into a garden and fountains throw up springs of water" (Sen & Chopra, p. 229). Such dream or vision is really inspiring and makes the poet eager to die. He forgets the memories of his past youth and his love becomes sacred and holy as he describes the lady in Mary's colours:

Who walked between the violet and the violet
Who walked between
The various ranks of varied green
Going in white and blue, in Mary's colour,
Talking of trivial things
In ignorance and knowledge of eternal dolour
Who moved among the others as they walked,
Who then made strong the fountains and made fresh the springs

Made cool the dry rock and made firm the sand
In blue of larkspur, blue of Mary's colour, (IV, l. 120-9)

According to Eliot, the aged man has the capability to vision and to dream: "We see nothing but dreams, and we have forgotten that seeing visions...was once a more significant, interesting and disciplined kind of dreaming" (Eliot, cited in Drew, 100). In this vision or dream Eliot comes in a close contact with the lady who "bent her head and singed but spoke no word" (IV, l. 143) She now stands between the two yew trees. In other words, she is standing between death and immortality. At her sign, the fountain sprang up and the bird sang a prayer. This has a reference to the spirit of God breathing life in dry bones as mentioned in the Bible, followed by "And after this our exile" (IV, l. 148) which implies that the modern Man has lost his spiritual faith but he can retain it through the grace of God. Only then, life would appear as a mere exile. As such, it is important to view *Ash Wednesday* as "a working out the tension between matter and spirit, between sensual and spiritual bodies...in order to

allow the spirit to contemplate and ascend through the agency of an intercessor, in this case the lady." (Cooper, 83)

The Christian prayer, "And after this our exile", made above transforms the reader to the fifth part which is related to the need for silence, referring to the world and its activities and occupations that prohibit man from listening to the sound and the Word of God. Eliot here alludes to St. John of the Cross concerning the necessity of silence so as man can listen to the word of Almighty. In his *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, St. John advises man to: " put to silence, and leaning upon faith, which alone is the proximate and proportionate means whereby the soul is united with God; for such is the likeness between itself and God that there is no other difference, save that which exists between seeing God and believing in Him." (St. John of the Cross, 110) According to Eliot, modern man cannot hear God's Word. Nobody is keen or listening to the word of God because hearing the word demands a state of silence and a peace of mind. Unfortunately, the world offers none:

Word is unspoken, unheard;
Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,
The Word without a word, the Word within
The world and for the world; (V, l. 151-4)

As no one listens, Christ suffers "O, my people, what have I done unto thee"(V, l. 158). In this part there is an allusion to the crucifixion of Christ when Christ did not even open his mouth before his accusers to defend himself. Silence is one of the essential conditions of spiritual progress. The response to the Word of God can come only from those who seek His grace. Unfortunately, the world is full of sinners and cowards and:

those who walk in darkness
Both in the day time and in the night time
The right time and the right place are not here
No place of grace for those who avoid the face
No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice.
(V, 1.163-7)

The poet appeals to the "veiled sister" who represents Virgin Mary for those who walk in spiritual darkness as there people who either have chosen the spiritual way but turned away from it or those who do not have enough courage to affirm their faith and to be committed to Christianity. Those people need guidance so as to choose between the two ways of life; the secular and the spiritual. Only by the grace of Virgin Mary, those people will be able to listen to the words of God and "the Yew trees pray for those who offend her" (V, l. 178) Ultimately, through the grace of the lady the desert turns into a garden. Those who confess their sins to her earn her grace and enter the path of spiritual fulfillment.

Eliot emphasizes the need for commitment to the spiritual quest which he chooses as a closure of his *Ash Wednesday* in its sixth part which is related to the resignation to God's Will. Remarkably enough, any individual in this world is "Wavering between the profit and the loss"(VI, l. 188) According to Eliot life is only "dream crossed twilight", a transitional phase between "birth and dying". (Drew, 99) The joys of the world are still tormenting the poet, but he asks a total commitment to Christ something which is essential before any progress on the Christian path:

And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices
In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices
And the weak spirit quickens to rebel
For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell
Quickens to recover (VI, l.
195-9)

The poet or the devotee recovers all these worldly temptations defeating them by a firm faith and a total surrender to the "Sea" which stands for the Will of God. He faces this sea, longing to be united with this sea unafraid from the rocks because he is filled with faith. (Maxwell, 148) Artistically, the poem that starts with renunciation of worldly achievements ends up with a spiritual achievement; the sense of loss ends up with gain and salvation as the devotee submits himself to the will of God. Imitating Christ's fasting, the poet fasts from all the joys by putting away the sight of sense and all other distractions that may block his way. In other words, "the blind eye creates\ The empty forms between the ivory gates" (VI, l. 201); blindness is good because it leads to spiritual insight. (Lall, p.109) At the same time, the Divine image opens up the gates of mercy and grace with the result that the poet reaches the spiritual goals merges in the character of the holy sister and mother: " Sister, mother / And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea, / Suffer me not to be separated/ And let my cry come unto Thee." (VI, l. 216-219)

As the poem ends, Eliot attains his self-transcendence. His "struggle to progress from a purely personal experience of contact with the noumenal, the realm that is beyond phenomena and outside the process of time, by entering more fully into the shared world of objects and of time; and by multiplying experiences to pursue the ideal", (Kwan-Terry, 132) on the assumption that "the more unified our knowledge derived from experience, the nearer we come to the total truth." (ibid, 136) Eliot's journey to the Absolute Being develops between doubt, disillusionment, inner darkness, temptation, desire and ends up with redemption, a positive closure for Eliot's spiritual torment.

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