

FROM LILAC TO LARKSPUR: SELF-REFUTATION IN T. S. ELIOT'S LATER POETRY^(*)

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Abstract: This paper argues that much of Eliot's poetry is unconsciously self-refutational and self-deceived. Our attention is distracted from this by its lyricism and intensely personal poignancy. Disgust at the contemplation of humanity, and self-disgust, underlie Eliot's parodic treatment of life: the horror of the sinfulness of the flesh, which can 'only die'. I argue that, while we cannot ask a poet to give an untruthful report of experience, something is wrong when the creative faculty is given so strongly to expressions of general disgust, over and above Eliot's anti-semitism, misogyny, sexual ambivalence and prurience.

To counterbalance this effect, Eliot posits the ambivalent 'enchantment' of 'death's twilight kingdom', with its promise of redemption from sin, and the enchantment of childhood memories, which he presents as ultimately beguiling and illusory.

But in 'Marina' the quasi-liturgical passage on spiritual death is 'placed' by the effect of the poem as a whole. Similarly, the life and vitality of the sixth section of 'Ash-Wednesday' evokes poetic values which repudiate the author's conscious intentions.

In 'Little Gidding' he recalls 'Things ill done and done to others' harm.' It is the compound ghost who speaks (containing the Eliotic alter-ego), the Brunetto Latini of Canto XV of the *Inferno*. That Eliot is, in a broad sense, sexually – and therefore humanly – maladjusted explains the persistent presence in his work of a condition which 'remains to poison life and obstruct action.' His major critics have been curiously uncritical in this regard.

His exasperation I suggest, is not with the deceptions of humanism but, part-unconsciously, with the self-deceived character of his Christian 'acceptance'. This is poetry of self-appeasement.

Keywords: T. S. Eliot; poetry; self-appeasement

Mistah Kurtz – he dead. ('Heart of Darkness')

Eliot, as is well known, chose Conrad's words for his epigraph to 'The Hollow Men'. He had intended to take his epigraph to 'The Waste Land' from the same source, but Pound dissuaded him.¹ In the end he decided on

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¹ *'The Waste Land': A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, edited and with an introduction by Valerie Eliot, Harcourt, 1971, p. 125.

the now familiar lines from Petronius, no doubt more aptly for the poem as it was finally to appear. That Eliot had found Conrad's dark allegory compelling, however, is an index of something that had already taken root in him well before the long meditative phase of his poetry, which 'The Hollow Men' inaugurates. It was the terrible cry of the dying Kurtz - 'The horror! The horror!' - he had been minded to adopt for the earlier poem: Kurtz the agent, somewhere up-river from a trading station in the Congolese jungle, who had set out filled with idealism but is found by Marlow in a state of degeneration and depravity.

Conrad (or, rather, Marlow) tells us that Kurtz's words had behind them 'the suggestiveness of dreams'² and although Conrad clearly intends his suggestiveness to have universal application, it is worth reminding ourselves that we awake from dreams - and from nightmares; but whether Eliot ever fully awoke from the nightmare - as he conceived it - of life in the flesh ('that which is only living can only die') remains a difficult question. This, he might have said, is in the nature of the human condition - that is, unless one passes from death's dream kingdom to death's twilight kingdom.³

The attraction of Conrad's theme for Eliot is evident even as late as *The Cocktail Party* (1951) where the missionary Celia suffers a horrifying crucifixion at the hands of native tribesmen. In the first productions of the play⁴ Eliot introduced - gratuitously, to all appearances - the suggestion that, mutilated but still alive, Celia was smeared by the natives with a juice attractive to ants, by which she was then consumed. He retained this death in modified form in subsequent editions of the play. (Some have felt that Eliot modelled Celia on his close friend Emily Hale - showing, if so, a characteristic lack of insight, for, as Lyndall Gordon has put it, Emily 'was not given to the extremities of the religious life. She wanted marriage, not immolation.'⁵)

² 'They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares.' *Heart of Darkness*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. Robert Kimbrough, New York & London, 1988, p. 65.

³ Eliot's use of these phrases in the 'The Hollow Men' suggests Dantean sources although the boundaries of the various 'kingdoms' do not seem to be wholly determinate. The 'dream kingdom' is the place of 'lost/Violent souls' but the 'twilight kingdom' (of the 'multifoliate rose') represents hope for 'empty men'.

⁴ See E. Martin Browne, *The Sevance Review*, Volume LXXIV, no. 1, Special Issue, Winter 1966, p. 149-50; re-printed in *T. S. Eliot: The Man and his Work*, edited by Allen Tate, Chatto & Windus (1967), Penguin Books edition, 1971, p. 132.

⁵ Lyndall Gordon, *T.S. Eliot: an Imperfect Life*, Norton edition, New York, 2000, p. 399.

The date of the play – well after the completion of the *Quartets* – suggests that Eliot had not, after all, found a resting place there.

The theme ('the horror') - transmuted by Eliot into an intensely personal problem - had been very much in his mind when he was composing the later 'Quartets'. *The Family Reunion* of 1939 contains many echoes and anticipations of the poetry. In Part II, Sc I, Harry says to Violet:

You don't understand me.
You can't understand me. It's not being alone
That is the horror – to be alone with the horror.
What matters is the filthiness. I can clean my skin,
Purify my life, void my mind,
But always the filthiness, that lies a little deeper ...⁶

Harry has (or has he?) – some years before – pushed his wife overboard during an Atlantic crossing: at least, he did nothing to save her (and it must surely have weighed heavily on Eliot's mind that he had recently acceded to his wife Vivienne's incarceration in a mental illness home, where she was to remain until her death in 1947⁷). There is an essential ambivalence about Harry's state of mind, about what 'really' happened; but the relevance is brought out by Harry himself when he says to Charles:

It is not my conscience,
Not my mind, that is diseased, but the world I have to
live in. (Part I, Sc I)

Harry's predicament is clearly Eliot's own. It calls to mind his essay on 'Hamlet' where he enunciates the curious theory of the 'objective correlative'. The play is 'full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light'. Hamlet, Eliot suggests, 'is up against the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother, but that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her. It is thus a feeling which he cannot understand, he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action.'⁸

Whether or not this sheds any light on Hamlet, it certainly sheds some on Eliot. It was D. W. Harding, long ago, who noted that disgust is a

⁶ All quotations from Eliot's poems and plays are taken from the 1966 edition of *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*, Faber & Faber.

⁷ See Carole Seymour-Jones, *Painted Shadow: a Life of Vivienne Eliot*, Constable, 2001, p. 557-569.

⁸ *Selected Essays*, Faber & Faber, 1969, p. 145.

dominant force in Eliot's work.⁹ His treatment of the rural folk of Tudor England in 'East Coker' illustrates the point. They keep

... the rhythm in their dancing
As in their living in the living seasons
The time of the seasons and the constellations
The time of milking and the time of harvest

but what follows is distinctly odd and out of keeping with the allusion a few lines earlier to the 'dignified and commodious sacrament' which is matrimony:

The time of the coupling of man and woman
And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.
Eating and drinking. Dung and death.

'The time of' acts as a feint. The two varieties of sexual 'coupling' are assimilated (but there is nothing of D. H. Lawrence here – though Eliot perhaps supposed otherwise). Both ultimately resolve themselves into 'dung', which completes the animal (indeed, bovine) suggestion. The alliterative coupling, otherwise irrational, of 'dung and death' (cf. 'life and dung'), also works by suggestion: the men and women who eat, drink and copulate 'dance' a ritual 'dance' of decomposition. The stress falls on 'death', at the line end: extinction - which is all that awaits these clod-like people who have not undergone the agony of 'sin and expiation'. Eliot does of course extenuate for his pejorative use of 'coupling', in the 1929 'Dante' essay. Discussing the nature of Dante's boyhood sexual experience on first seeing Beatrice Portinari, as he describes it in the *Vita Nuova* (and introducing an interesting parenthesis), Eliot says: 'A good deal of sentiment has been spilt ... upon idealizing the reciprocal feelings of man and woman ... this sentiment ignoring the fact that the love of man and woman (or for that matter of man and man) is only explained and made reasonable by the higher love, or else is simply the coupling of animals.'¹⁰ (He plainly feels he has behind him too the authority of the burial service: 'dust to dust'.)

⁹ 'The verse in this narrative passage [the Dantesque section of 'Little Gidding'], with its regular measure and insistent alliteration, so effective for combining the macabre with the urbane and dreary, is a way to indicate and a way to control the pressure of urgent misery and self-disgust. The motive power of this passage, as of so much of Mr Eliot's earlier poetry, is repulsion.' (*Scrutiny*, Vol XI, no. 3, Spring 1943, p. 217; re-printed in his *Experience into Words*, [1963], Penguin University Books edition, 1974, p. 123.).

¹⁰ *Selected Essays*, p. 274.

Though diction and ethos are very different, the underlying habit of thought is that which created Doris and Sweeney in the 'Fragment of an Agon' in *Sweeney Agonistes*:

Doris: I'd be bored.

Sweeney: You'd be bored.

Birth, and copulation, and death.

Doris: I'd be bored.

Sweeney: You'd be bored.

Birth, and copulation, and death.

That's all the facts when it comes to brass tacks:

Birth, and copulation and death.

I've been born, and once is enough.

The satire can't disguise the truth that the attitudes are Eliot's own. Yet, to a curious extent, Eliot's commentators have accepted him on his own terms, as I point out again later. Mario Praz, for example, introducing his translation of the dialogue into Italian, refers uncritically to 'la fondamentale constatazione della futilità del processo 'nascita - copula - morte' si adagia nelle forme grottesche d'un operetta da *music-hall*'.¹¹ But disgust at the contemplation of humanity, and self-disgust, underlie Eliot's parodic treatment of life: the horror of the sinfulness of the flesh itself, which can 'only die'. Not quite 'only', in one sense, for copulation occupies the interval between birth and death: sinful in itself, it renews the cycle of sin and death. There are no other 'facts'. That which is 'only living' becomes dung. Of course, we cannot ask a poet to give an untruthful report of experience, nor to be free from the vagaries, weaknesses, temperamental inconsistencies and contradictions that afflict us all. But when the creative faculty is given over so strongly to expressions of general disgust, that is, something over and above specific antipathies and personal traits (in Eliot, the thin vein of anti-semitism, the less-than-thin vein of misogyny, his sexual ambivalence and prurience, the suggestion of arrested development) - when this occurs, the question marks thicken in the margin. Human beings, especially *other* human beings, leave a bad taste in Eliot's mouth.

Between the 'Hamlet' essay and *The Family Reunion* comes the essay on Baudelaire (1930), in which Eliot tells us that seeing the sexual act as evil is more dignified than seeing it as 'life-giving'.¹² These two views - sex as 'evil' or

¹¹ *La Terra Desolata, Frammento di un Agone; Marcia Trionfale*, Casa Editrice Sansoni, Florence, 1958, p. 10.

¹² *Selected Essays*, p. 429.

'cheery' - are presented in his characteristic way as exhaustive alternatives. He relished Baudelaire's aphorism: *La volupté unique et suprême de l'amour gît dans la certitude de faire le mal.*¹³

In *The Family Reunion* Agatha speaks to Harry of 'sin and expiation'. It is possible, she says,

that sin may strain and struggle in its dark instinctive
birth, to come to consciousness
And so find expurgation. It is possible
You are the consciousness of your unhappy family,
Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame.
Indeed it is possible. You may learn hereafter,
Moving alone through flames of ice, chosen
To resolve the enchantment under which we suffer. (Part
II, Sc II)

What is this 'enchantment'? Its status, like much in Eliot, is elusive, but it seems to partake both of the enchantment which befalls us in death's twilight kingdom with its promise of redemption from sin – and of course its hint of the idealised woman figured by Dante's Beatrice. The other enchantment – about which Eliot is so ambivalent – and in my view ultimately unsatisfactory because self-refutational – is the enchantment of childhood, something of whose innocence (Eliot presents it as beguiling and illusory) remains with us through adult life and is perhaps least suppressed in our closest relationships. Harry in *The Family Reunion* again:

You bring me news
Of a door that opens at the end of a corridor,
Sunlight and singing (Part I, Sc II)

and again to Mary:

... you seem
Like someone who comes from a very long distance
Or the distant waterfall in the forest,
Inaccessible, half heard,
And I hear your voice as in the silence
Between two storms, one hears the moderate usual noises
In the grass and leaves, of life persisting. (Part I, Sc II)

¹³ *Op cit*, p. 428. The present essay might have taken its starting point from this one of Eliot's. Consider this: 'Baudelaire's morbidity of temperament cannot, of course, be ignored ... We should be misguided if we treated it as an unfortunate ailment which can be discounted or attempted to detach the sound from the unsound in his work. Without the morbidity none of his work would be possible or significant...' (p. 422).

Many of these ideas, endowed with an evocative and luminous beauty which Eliot's reputation as a Modernist often occludes, are resumed at the close of 'Little Gidding', where he tells us that at the end of our exploring we shall pass through 'the unknown, remembered gate' (Agatha had said that we do not – in ordinary human terms, it is implied – 'return to the door through which we did not pass'¹⁴ that is 'the door we never opened/Into the rose garden' of 'Burnt Norton'). There – in 'Little Gidding' - Eliot remembers

The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree

and

the stillness between two waves of the sea.

There too are the reminiscences from 'The Dry Salvages' of being 'lost in a shaft of sunlight', of

the wild thyme unseen, or
the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all

and of the children in 'Burnt Norton' 'hidden excitedly, containing laughter', and of the New Hampshire orchard 'between the blossom- and the fruit-time'.¹⁵

No-one has set the background to this dimension in Eliot – it is plainly fundamental – better than Lyndall Gordon in her *T.S.Eliot: an Imperfect Life*:

Eliot was to return again and again to the Cape Ann shore and sea for scenes of crisis and revelation in his poetry. To the Cape Ann summers of his youth he owed his model, drawn from the Gloucester fisherman, of a sailor 'faring forward' on the thin edge of mortality. His imagination fastened too, on the still pool and the light-filled water that recurred in his poetry as a tantalizing memory of unspeakable bliss.¹⁶

¹⁴ 'We do not pass twice through the same door/Or return to the door through which we did not pass.' *Family Reunion*, Part II, Sc. II.

¹⁵ A tribute to Pound: 'And from the apple, maelid,/Through all the wood, and the leaves are full of voices,/A-whisper, and the clouds bowe over the lake,/And there are gods upon them ...' (Canto III, 'A Draft of XXX Cantos', 1930, in *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, New Directions edition, New York, 1970, p. 11.)

¹⁶ *T.S.Eliot: an Imperfect Life*, Norton edition, New York, 2000, p. 13.

But one must surely part company with the book's closing peroration: 'Denied perfection, he lived to perpetuate its possibility for other lives.'¹⁷ 'No', one answers – 'he didn't and couldn't have done that.' 'Imperfection' is in the nature of human livingness, and what 'perfection' might be is beyond our experience. Which means beyond our ability to conceptualise, even with the help of Dante. No 'world of time beyond me' will reveal it, and though we may have intimations of immortality – 'hints and guesses' – our lives are lived in time. Eliot's poetry, and all that it tells us of experience, temporal and spiritual, is born of the flesh and created in time. This is not irreconcilable – though Eliot seems to have found it so and to have invoked certain forms of severe Christian doctrine in support – with a recognition that we come out of and return into the unknown.

Gordon mentions the beautiful 'Ariel' poem 'Marina' and the power of 'redemptive' love it evokes.¹⁸ But 'redemptive' concedes something to an Eliot who, for once, isn't there. The force of the Senecan epigraph and the quasi-liturgical passage on spiritual death are in a sense 'placed' by the effect of the poem taken as a whole. Eliot said the theme was paternity¹⁹ but this is hardly so. Marina, it is true, is the daughter in *Pericles*, discovered again by her father who believed her irrecoverably lost. But the theme is, rather, intense human love and the vindication of belief in human possibility. The spiritual dimension of the poem is thus incarnate – it does not call on any doctrinal support; and the suggestion of 'grace' ('this grace dissolved in place') sits easily in the human context. There are too the enchanted associations of childhood, the 'Whispers and small laughter between leaves and hurrying feet.' Its spirit is far removed from the 'dung and death' of the later 'East Coker'. It is free from the ironically expressed distaste which so often marks, and mars, his work: a release from his habitual 'redemptive' mode and its attitudes of penitence and submission. The wonderful evocation of the approach to the rocks and woods of the coast of Maine not only reminds us of Eliot's own youthful prowess as a sailor but of the hopefulness and courage of the early settlers.

There is, then, a strong vein of self-refutation running through Eliot's poetry. It is compellingly exemplified in the sixth section of 'Ash-Wednesday':

¹⁷ *Op cit*, p. 536.

¹⁸ *Op cit*, p. 12.

¹⁹ Letter to E. McKnight Kauffer, July 1930. Eliot refers to 'a criss-cross' of allusion as between the experiences of *Pericles* and *Hercules*. See correspondence in the library of Magdalene College, Cambridge.

(Bless me father) though I do not wish to wish these things
 From the wide window towards the granite shore
 The white sails still fly seaward, seaward flying
 Unbroken wings

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
 The cry of quail and the whirling plover

The opening words are from the Confessional but the beauty and poignancy of the poetry, the intensity of its power of association – the wide window, the white sails, the 'lost' lilac, the 'unbroken' wings (in contrast equally with the 'broken Coriolanus' of 'The Waste Land' and with 'the broken king' of 'Little Gidding'), the intensity of longing (these are much more than conventional reminiscences) – all this makes the poem a refutation of his avowed, and avowedly Christian, intention to repel the temptations they figure. He plainly associates the 'lost lilac' with 'the usual reign' of 'Ash-Wednesday' I – not hoping, as he says there, 'to turn again'; but so strongly positive are the counter-suggestions of 'unbroken wings' and the other poetic values, that he succeeds instead in repudiating his declared belief. (His disparaging way with the word 'usual' occurs again in the 'usual pastimes' of 'The Dry Salvages', and the 'usual noises' of *The Family Reunion*.)

The 'lilac' which is 'lost' is one the most potent examples of Eliot's associative process. Unlike the hyacinth, which has more complex associations, it calls up almost invariably those things in his gravitational field which stand for human love, longing and affection. Despite his (self-defensive?) aversion from Whitman,²⁰ no subsequent American poet could use the word without full consciousness of its import: love of country, of loss and grief. He may at some stage too have encountered Amy Lowell's poem, 'Lilacs' (1920):

May is lilac here in New England ...
 May is much sun through small leaves,
 May is soft earth,
 And apple blossoms,
 And windows open to a South Wind.
 May is full light wind of lilac ...²¹

²⁰ Introduction to *Selected Poems of Ezra Pound* (1928): 'I did not read Whitman till much later in life, and had to conquer an aversion to his form, as well as to much of his matter ...'

And there was the memory (a ‘sentimental sunset’, Eliot called it) of Jean Verdenal coming across the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris in the late afternoon waving a branch of lilac.²² In ‘Ash-Wednesday’ III

Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown,
Lilac and brown hair

here associated with ‘enchanted maytime’. It was the cruelty of April to have bred ‘lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/Memory and desire’.

The associations of New England took more complex form in Eliot than in Lowell (or Frost). Going along with the glamour of boyhood holidays on the Massachusetts coast was the Puritan inheritance associated with the long line of Eliot patriarchs in the New World, all imbued with a profound sense of the reality of sin, which Eliot inherited. His grandfather, as is widely known, moved towards the particular form of individualistic theology represented by Unitarianism; but ultimately Eliot would find a replacement for all forms of dissenting worship and for the eastern philosophies of religion and mysticism which had mildly interested him in his youth. His need for order, tradition and hierarchy would translate to a need for doctrine, sacrament and liturgy. By 1927 the experimental poet and arch-modernist had adopted a High Church position within the Anglican communion and would remain there. The lilac would be replaced by the larkspur – the ‘blue of Mary’s colour’.²³

Eliot was a tormented soul. In the finest part of ‘Little Gidding’ he evokes ‘the spirit unappeased and peregrine’, recalling ‘Things ill done and done to others’ harm’, when

...fools’ approval stings, and honour stains.
From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.

²¹ *Selected Poems of Amy Lowell*, edited by Melissa Bradshaw and Adrienne Munich, Rutgers University Press, 2002, p. 77-80.

²² In ‘A Commentary’, *The Criterion*, Vol XIII, No. LII, April 1934, p. 452.

²³ ‘Ash-Wednesday’ IV. In reply to an enquirer, in 1932, Eliot wrote: ‘... perhaps the simplest account that I can give is to say that I was brought up as a Unitarian of the New England variety; that for many years I was without any definite religious faith, or without any at all; that in 1927 I was baptised and confirmed into the Church of England; and that I am associated with what is called the Catholic movement in that church, as represented by Viscount Halifax and the English Church Union. I accordingly believe in the Creeds, the invocation of the Blessed Virgin and the Saints, the Sacrament of Penance, etc.’ (Letter to Sister Mary James, 6th December 1932, Eliot Collection, Sawyer Free Library, Gloucester, MA.)

It is of course the compound ghost who speaks: the Brunetto Latini of Canto XV of the *Inferno*, but containing the Eliotic alter-ego. The spirit of Arnaut Daniel too is present by allusion: 'refining fire', the closing words of *Purgatorio* XXXVI.

Helen Gardner tells us 'we are not to identify this 'familiar compound ghost' with Dante or with any other single poet.'²⁴ Yes, but Eliot's guilt undoubtedly has a focus - or foci (and we are not invited to make the identification with Dante but with Brunetto). Eliot will certainly have understood that Brunetto and his troop of spirits are in hell on account of their perversion, meaning, in Dante's time, homosexuality and paedophilia - and perhaps more general deviant tendencies in relation to authority and order.²⁵

I am not, of course, suggesting anything like a direct parallel, though Eliot's sexuality may well have been a more complex matter than has been commonly assumed.²⁶ But that he is, in a broad sense of the adverb, sexually - and therefore humanly - maladjusted explains the persistent presence in his work of a condition that he 'cannot objectify' and which therefore 'remains to poison life and obstruct action.' His exasperation *au fond* is not, perhaps, with the futilities (as he saw them) of humanism but, part-unconsciously, with his inability to resolve a profoundly complex psycho-sexual ambivalence, and with the self-deceived character of his Christian 'acceptance'. (In the 'Dante' essay he had said, somewhat esoterically, that 'Acceptance is more important than anything that can be called belief.'²⁷) Dante provided Eliot with a framework for 'order' and self-suppression. The idea of a disciplined progression towards faith - intimated in 'Ash-Wednesday' - is clearly of

²⁴ *The Art of T. S. Eliot*, Faber & Faber (1949), 1968 edition, p. 179.

²⁵ See footnotes to Canto XV in H. F. Cary's translation, *The Vision; or Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise of Dante Alighieri*, (1844) which refer to 'those who have done violence to nature' and 'the frequency of the crime among those who abused the opportunities which the education of youth afforded them.' Eliot's Temple Classics edition (J. A. Carlyle's translation edited by Hermann Oelsner) echoes Cary in the note to the preceding canto: 'He is then led by Virgil ... to the edge of the Third Round, or ring, of the Seventh Circle. It is the place appointed for the punishment of those who have done violence against ... Nature.' A general note on Dante's Hell explains the Aristotelian divisions of reprehensible actions, which include 'Incontinence', being 'all wrong action due to the inadequate control of natural appetites' and 'Bestiality', resulting from 'morbid states in which what is naturally repulsive becomes attractive.' (*The Inferno of Dante Alighieri*, J. M. Dent, London, 1915.) The damned, writes Eliot, in the 'Dante' essay, 'writhe in the torment of their own perpetually perverted nature.'

²⁶ See John Peter, 'A New Interpretation of *The Waste Land*', *Essays in Criticism*, Vol 2, No. iii, July 1952, p. 242. The essay was not reprinted and was not included in, or was removed from, bound editions of the periodical on instructions from Eliot's solicitors.

²⁷ *Selected Essays*, p. 277.

Dantean origin. (It has perhaps its counterpart in Eliot's private life between his two marriages, which assumed a penitential character.)

Not surprisingly, Eliot remains unilluminating on the issues in his later essay, 'What Dante Means to Me', saying only that he wished 'to present to the mind of the reader a parallel, by means of contrast, between the Inferno and the Purgatorio, which Dante visited, and a hallucinated scene after an air raid.'²⁸ He concentrates instead on the technical problem of finding a suitable form in English blank verse for Dante's *terza rima*. (In the poem itself, he demonstrates astonishing technical skill in handling the metre; indeed, extreme discipline in technique marks his poetry in general.) But the earlier and more celebrated essay stresses (questionably, and again shedding more light on himself than on Dante) that Dante teaches us 'to look to *death* for what life cannot give.'²⁹

Eliot's major critics (Leavis excepted) have been curiously inattentive or acquiescent in this regard. Gardner is a case in point; so too is the late Derek Traversi, who discusses this section in terms of 'the *reality* of old age' – an oddly inconsequential view, aside from the fact that Eliot was in his early fifties when composing the poem.³⁰ Even a more astute commentator, the late Hugh Kenner, offers little more than a conventional gloss on the air-raid section. (Of 'Ash-Wednesday' VI, he summarises the effect merely as a 'tension of implicit delusion' – the 'delusion', that is, for Eliot, of the humanly normative.³¹ The long-running 'Reader's Guide' says, almost comically: 'In short, the lusts of nature are renewed.'³²) A more recent distinguished Eliot scholar, Ronald Schuchard, concludes that the "parallel between Eliot's and Dante's encounters with their dead masters lies in the purgatorial realization that the poet cannot seek redemption or immortality in art."³³ It is hard to see

²⁸ *To Criticize the Critic* (1965), Faber & Faber, 1978 edition, p. 128-129.

²⁹ *Selected Essays*, p. 275 (my italics).

³⁰ *T. S. Eliot: the Longer Poems*, The Bodley Head, 1976, p. 194.

³¹ *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (1959), Methuen, 1965 edition, p. 227 and p. 273-275.

³² George Williamson, *A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot* (1955), Thames and Hudson, 1967, p. 183.

³³ *Eliot's Dark Angel*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 189. Schuchard also perpetuates the frequent indiscriminating association of Yeats with the 'familiar compound ghost'. To the extent that Yeats may be present, it must surely be for implicit admonition only, rather than on account of any admiration Eliot felt for him, or any temptations he figured (unless perhaps at a deep unconscious level). Neither his sensuality (as man and poet) nor his lifelong addiction to mysticism can have recommended him to Eliot – indeed one feels they probably repulsed him. Likewise the paraphernalia of hieratic art in the Byzantium poems and elsewhere. Eliot's generous-toned obituary tribute doesn't unsay this. 'The two poets are radically unlike. ('I do not dissimulate the fact that there are aspects of Yeats's thought and feeling which to myself are unsympathetic.' First Annual Yeats Lecture, 1940, in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, edited by Frank Kermode, Harcourt, 1975, p. 257.)

(one ventures, respectfully) what sense can be made of this, even if one takes it to represent Eliot's own view. What status can be ascribed to 'art' conceived independently of the creativity (itself not self-created) by which we apprehend such sense of 'immortality' as we may experience?

This, then, is poetry of self-appeasement: an only half-conscious testimony to self-refutation and contradiction in his creative work – the poetry at its best asserting so strongly (that is, irresistibly and affirmatively) a life and vitality which counter the author's conscious intentions. These disturbances vanish with the figure who fades on the blowing of the horn. For shortly afterwards, Eliot presents us – highly characteristically - with the stark choice of 'pyre or pyre/To be redeemed from fire by fire.'

At his best he remains a great poet: the finest in English in the twentieth century. The 'unconscious, half-conscious' self-refutations which his poems so often embody heighten our sense of this. A superlative lyric poet – which he is not always sufficiently credited with being; not a suppressed Romantic sensibility (as Donald Davie suggested³⁴). It is a classical lyricism of clean, sunlit lines. A great poet of intellectual meditation also. Whatever one's reservations (which must surely be many and deep), he continues to speak to us and to the elusive 'human condition'. 'Of your charity, pray for the repose of the soul of Thomas Stearns Eliot, poet.' The words, from the liturgy, are inscribed on his memorial plaque in St Michael's church, East Coker. In the air-raided section of 'Little Gidding' he places himself consciously, like an artist leaving a signature on his canvas, in the lineage of Western literature and culture through the allusion and tribute to Virgil and Dante. It would perhaps be lacking in charity to question the rightness of his doing so.

³⁴ *Modernist Essays: Yeats, Pound, Eliot*, Carcanet, 2004, p. 171.