
Upanishadic Perceptions in T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Drama

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It is now common knowledge that, in his poetry and drama, T.S. Eliot was influenced by Indian philosophy.¹ Nor is it difficult to illustrate the explicit use Eliot makes of Indian philosophy in his poetry and drama: he specifically recalls the Buddha's Fire Sermon in the third section of *The Waste Land* and consciously brings the Buddha and St. Augustine together at the very core of the poem; he makes an equally incontrovertible appeal to the thunder of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* in the final portion of *The Waste Land*; he alludes pointedly to the lotus, a symbol of the ultimate reality in Hindu-Buddhist thought, in *Burnt Norton*; he epitomizes the teachings of Krishna in the third poem of *The Dry Salvages*; at the climax, he even incorporates an almost literal translation of a passage (Chapter 8, verse 5) from the *Gita*; and, in Act II of *The Cocktail Party*, he echoes the death-bed exhortation of the Buddha in the words of Sir Harcourt-Reilly: "Work out your salvation with diligence." Such explicit references cannot be regarded as mere window-dressing or dismissed as sheer exoticism because of the context in which they occur; they must be understood as indispensable parts of organic wholes. Moreover, they strongly suggest the implicit use Eliot makes of Indian philosophical themes and symbols in his poetry and drama.

Poetry, religion, and philosophy are no doubt quite distinct from each other in theory and may have different purposes; but, in practice, they often coalesce. Poetry, for example, may embody powerful feelings in a unique form, and yet carry both religious and philosophical overtones. Moreover, at their profoundest and deepest levels, poetry, religion, and philosophy spring out certain intense perceptions, which evolve into complex visions with a cosmic significance. We may, therefore, penetrate the works of a philosophical poet like Eliot by means of the keen perceptions underlying his poetry. By juxtaposing these insights with those of the Upanishads,² we may not only perceive their deep influence on Eliot's *Weltanschauung*, but also gain some understanding of his vision of the human condition.

A dominant perception that runs through the principal Upanishads is that of the twin selves—one active and worldly, the other contemplative and spiritual—of a human being. It is most eloquently expressed in the *Mundaka*, *Svetasvatara*, and

Maitri Upanishads³ via the symbolism of the two birds on the self-same tree of life: one bird acts, while other looks on; one devours the fruits, sweet and sour, on the lower branches, while the other watches and waits at the top-most branch. Eventually, through repeated craving and suffering, the lower bird perceives that its struggles have all taken place in the shadowy world of appearances within time, recognizes its identity with the higher bird and becomes at one with its divine reality. Obviously, the lower bird represents the ephemeral self which, led astray by its ego, entangles itself in earthly desires, vain pursuits, and futile possessions, and becomes subject to *maya* or the bewildering appearances of the world while the higher bird stands for the eternal self which remains established in *sat-chit-ananda* (Truth-Knowledge-Bliss), the reality beyond appearances, the noumenon beyond phenomena. The notion of the dual selves haunts much of Eliot's poetry and drama.

All the major poems of Eliot from *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915) to *Four Quartets* (1930) focus on the gropings of the finite and transient human self in "a wilderness of mirrors" for the infinite and the eternal self. Prufrock finds himself split in half, simultaneously enacting the roles of "I" and "you," engaging in Hamletian self-inquiry and wrestling with his quixotic impulses. His existence is literally and metaphorically enveloped in a fog of unreality. He is conscious of having wasted his time in futile pursuits of self-gratification, of having measured out his life "with coffee spoons" (*LP* 14). He cannot bring himself to ask his lady "the overwhelming question" (*LP* 15), for that would destroy the comfortable illusion of his ordered world. He yearns to escape from his meaningless crippled existence, but his impulse to freedom lacks focus, so that he takes refuge in his dreamworld of singing mermaids. Prufrock's world, in short, has only an apparent reality, like the "patterns on a screen" (*LP* 16) and when he gropes for words to describe his existential situation or to indicate the nameless something he yearns for, he finds himself helpless and frustrated, reduced to shadowboxing with reality. In the poems that follow *Prufrock*—e.g., *Preludes*, *Gerontion*—suffering (in the forms of loneliness, frustration, and impotence) is often identified with self-indulgence and carnality.

The *Preludes* (1917) are unified by images that lend an air of unreality to varied scenes and actors. Nevertheless, they are vaguely conscious of the reality behind the apparent purposelessness of their existence. Instinctively, their aspirations tend heavenward as they strive to free themselves. They are bedeviled by *maya*. Consequently, their struggle upward is blind and seems endless; so, their only hope lies in turning to the notion "of some infinitely gentle/Infinitely suffering thing" (*P* 23), of a compassionate Buddha or Christ figure who can help suffering humanity penetrate the veil of *maya* and attain the reality beyond appearances.

Gerontion is a logical extension of these nameless sufferers. As he squats outside his “decayed house,” an old man driven to “a sleepy corner” (*G* 39) to await his death, his mind is full of memories. He is acutely conscious of the futility of a world in which man stumbles down the “contrived corridors” of history (*G* 38), lured by vanity and deceived by success, reluctant to choose “Christ the tiger” above sensual gratification—the futility of a maze whose center man can no longer find. Gerontion himself cannot reach it. Like his corrupt foreign acquaintances, he must share the centrifugal motion of the damned, “multiply variety / In a wilderness of mirrors” (*G* 38). The unity behind the diversity of these mirror images is hidden from him; *maya* holds him yet in its relentless grip, distorting and concealing reality by its multitudinous appearances.

With the publication of *The Waste Land* (1922), the perception deepens and widens so that suffering born out of self-deception and egotism is seen by Tiresias to be universal, prevalent in the lives of the ancients as well as the moderns, among the heroes and saints of yore as well as among the typists and clerks of the modern world. The modern figure of Gerontion is replaced by the mythological one of Tiresias to unify the diversities of *The Waste Land*.⁴ Tiresias is more shadowy than Gerontion, so that most of the incidents in the poem seem immediate, not recalled, even though they are his memories. The disorganized flow of past events in his consciousness is so vivid and arresting that these events become present. In short, Tiresias relives his memories, as Kurtz does in Conrad’s story, witnessing all his past lives “in every detail of desire, temptation and surrender” (*WL* 3). “What Tiresias sees,” therefore, “is the substance of the poem” (*WL* 78): a collage of images, mystifying statements, and dramatic encounters superimposed by his own mind on the basic substratum of reality.

It is perhaps instructive at this point to quote Sri Ramana Maharishi, one of the greatest modern exponents of the philosophy of non-duality (*advaita vedanta*) on *maya*. Sri Ramana is not an academic theoretician, but a seer, in the living tradition of the Upanishadic sages. He speaks, therefore, simply and clearly, with the authority of one who knows from personal experience:

You see various scenes passing on a cinema screen; fire seems to burn buildings to ashes; water seems to wreck ships; but the screen on which the pictures are projected remains unburnt and dry. Why? Because the pictures are unreal and the screen real. Similarly, reflections pass through a mirror but it is not affected at all by their number and quality.

In the same way, the world is a phenomenon upon the substratum of the single Reality which is not affected by it in any way. Reality is only One...

Being now immersed in the world, you see it as a real world; get beyond it and it will disappear and Reality alone will remain. (Ramana 10)

This might be a summing up of “what Tiresias sees” in *The Waste Land*. He is an uncommon spectator though, unlike most of mankind who are so immersed in the “passing show” that they fail to recognize it as mere appearance. He is conscious that the other characters, their words and deeds, are fused together in his consciousness to form the subject of his reveries: “I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs, / Perceived the scene, foretold all the rest... / And I Tiresias have foresuffered all” (*WL* 68-69). His consciousness may be described in the words of Bradley, which Eliot quoted in his notes to *The Waste Land*: it forms “a circle closed on the outside,” a private world peopled by appearances (*WL* 80). Curiously, he is not only a spectator of the gyrations of life within the maze of his consciousness, but also a participant in the past actions he recalls. He participates as “I Tiresias” in such flashback scenes as the fortunetelling of Madame Sosostriis, the fornication of the typist with the carbuncular young man, and the journey across the desert to where the thunder is heard. Simultaneously, a spectator, he watches himself take part in the “passing show.” He is the dreaming Alice of the Waste Land, who vividly recalls the episodes in which he figured prominently. Throughout the poem, he functions as a chorus, synthesizing and commenting on the actions of all who inhabit his dream, including himself. He perceives that neither the actors nor their deeds partake of the ultimate reality; they are all mere shadows, insubstantial as a dream. He does not use the word *maya* when he sums up these appearances; he prefers the word “unreal.” Thus, London and its crowds have only an apparent existence: “Unreal city / Under the brown fog of a winter noon” (*WL* 62). And because of the turns of the wheel, the ups and downs of history are cyclical. What is true of London is true of “Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/Vienna” (*WL* 73). The Jewish, Greek, and Egyptian civilizations have all declined; presumably, the European civilizations will follow. Those who inhabit these cities, the centers of modern civilization, are all (as the allusion to Baudelaire makes clear) ghosts of former lives, enacting the same roles again and again: “You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!” (*WL* 62).

As a spectator, Tiresias empathizes, like the Lama in *Kim*, with the sufferings of his fellow beings bound on the wheel. Consequently, he is sensitive to the sufferings of those who inhabit the unreal cities of the world:

What is that sound high in the air
Murmur of maternal lamentation
Who are those hooded hordes swarming
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
Ringed by the flat horizon only... (*WL* 73)

This “ceaseless cry of anguish” mingles with the falling towers of the unreal cities to evoke a nightmarish vision of civilizations in chaos.

Tiresias thus bears witness to the fact of world-appearance or *maya*. Because he has refined his consciousness, he is aware of his bondage to the wheel. He has only a hint of liberation, a tantalizing glimpse into “the heart of light” he once had in the hyacinth garden (*WL* 62), and only his “fragments” at the end—touchstones, to use Matthew Arnold’s phrase, with which to test the stages of his inward progress towards the freedom of *nirvana*. To encourage him on his way, he has the promise of grace: “a damp gust bringing rain” (*WL* 74).

The empty effigies in *The Hollow Men* (1925) are immobilized by despair; prey to selfish desires and deluded by appearances, they not only do not apprehend reality but also avoid working towards it. Unlike Tiresias, they do not have the courage to accept spiritual distress and to strive for the still center of the turning world. Instead, sunk in apathy, they think of themselves as scarecrows among other scarecrows who shuffle despondently round the prickly pear or loiter beside “the tumid river” (*HM* 85) like a throng awaiting the barge of Charon to ferry them to everlasting torment. They are all in “death’s dream kingdom” (*HM* 84) and they must remain “sightless” as long as they are content with their present existence. Moreover, they realize that it is still possible for them to seek love through repentance. It is no child’s play, however, to wake up from the dream and penetrate the façade of appearances to the reality beyond. So, at the end, the hollow men continue to suffer in their cactus land and turn on the wheel, devoid even of the hope for grace.

The protagonist of *Ash Wednesday* is caught in the struggle to detach himself from the temptations of the phenomenal world and to unite himself with the changeless reality of the noumenon; the perception of transience and agony is offset by an awareness of the possibility of rising to a higher sphere of being. In other words, he is vouchsafed a light in the midst of darkness, a sign of grace amidst the delusions of *maya*; he is blessed with a vision of “One who moves in the time between sleep and waking, wearing / White light folded, sheathed about her, folded” (*AW* 94). She is dressed “in white and blue, in Mary’s colour” (*AW* 94), heralding that which is beyond all shifting appearances and desires, and conveying to the protagonist’s soul the possibility of the fusion of the human and the divine. Despite her silent affirmation of the Word, however, the protagonist is plunged into despair, for he is still in “the time of tension between dying and birth” (*AW* 98), subject to the conflict between the values of the flesh and the spirit. He has renounced his desires for “this man’s gift and that man’s scope” (*AW* 89). No longer does he “mourn / The vanished power of the usual reign” (*AW* 89), nor does he “hope to know again / The infirm glory of the positive hour” (*AW* 89). Moreover, he fully realizes the limitations of the phenomenal world:

that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place. (AW 89)

It is all a delusion of “the blind eye” creating “empty forms,” the phantasmagoria of the turning world. Not surprisingly, the protagonist is baffled by the unreality of the forms, the insubstantiality of art as well as memory. He is caught in “the time of tension between dying and birth,” wandering, one might say with Arnold, “between two worlds, one dead / The other powerless to be born.” But, from the depths of his dejection, he miraculously finds strength to pray to the lady of his vision for deliverance:

Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the foundation,
spirit of the garden,
Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still. (AW 98)

In other words, he seeks a compassionate yet detached attitude (caring for others and not caring for the self), an attitude closely associated with the Buddha, who is invariably represented in painting and sculpture as sitting still in the benign lotus posture of meditation. Only a serene and compassionate detachment akin to that of the Buddha, a humble acceptance of the divine will similar to that of the Christ, can enable him to penetrate the “falsehood” of “empty forms”—the illusions which “the blind eye creates”—and go beyond the “unstilled world” to “the centre of the silent Word” (AW 96). Until that detachment and self-surrender are attained, he is under the sway of *maya*.

This awareness swells in *Four Quartets* (1935–43) into a positive and joyful affirmation of the still point—a transcendent timeless reality represented by Krishna in “The Dry Salvages”—which supersedes all the myriad appearances that lead myopic Arjuna astray in the turning world.

Except for *Four Quartets*, all the major poems of Eliot, from *Prufrock* to *Ash Wednesday*, focus on the finite human consciousness and its gropings in “a wilderness of mirrors” (G 38). These gropings and the accompanying thoughts and feelings all fall, in each poem, within the protagonist’s own circle: a circle, we might say with Bradley, “closed on the outside” (WL 80), constituting a private world of appearances. None of the protagonists in these poems succeeds completely in breaking out of the closed self and apprehending the reality that is. At best, some are vouchsafed tantalizing glimpses of the peace this reality entails. They can only be patient, endure, and await grace in their “unstilled world” (AW 96). In *Four*

Quartets, however, we sense for the first time that the poetic self has achieved at least a partial breakthrough. What has so far been obliquely alluded to as “the heart of the light” (*WL* 62) or the “multifoliate rose” (*HM* 85) or “the centre of the silent Word” (*AW*96) is now precisely defined as “the still point of the turning world” (*BN* 173). Moreover, the peace and freedom that ensue when the human self reaches “the still point” is dwelt on in the paradoxical language of the mystics. Of course, “the turning world” is still very much with us; it has not disappeared from the *Quartets*. But the apprehension of the still point, partial though it may be, seems to have subtly altered the poetic perspective, so that what goes on in the world is viewed not only within the boundaries of time, but also in the light of eternity. The creative word of the poet, like the all-engendering Word of the universe, brings order out of chaos. Consequently, the poet’s efforts to find the word and the Word often appear identical mirror images of each other. The Word is Logos, the complete meaning, the one reality that is, permanent and unchanging. When the Word becomes flesh, however, as in a Christ or a Buddha, it too is subject to the power of *maya* and is assailed by “voices of temptation,” phantasma, and death. The Word has to struggle against “the disconsolate chimera” (*BN* 176) enacting the same conflict that besets the soul of the protagonist in *Ash Wednesday*. Yet, in the eternal perspective, there is only the Word.

Clearly, all human attempts to describe either the still point or the turning world completely involve “the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings” (*EC* 179), since they all take place in the realm of *maya*:

O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant,
The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,
The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,
Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees,
Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the dark.
(*EC* 180)

Since most humans cannot bear very much reality, they continue to dwell in ignorance, deluded by appearances and bound to the wheel, subject to change and suffering. Although there is but one Center, most people live in centers of their own. This darkness of *maya*, however, is not real; it may be vanquished by “the darkness of God”:

As, in a theatre,
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed
With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on
darkness,

And we know that the hills and the trees, the distant panorama
And the bold imposing façade are all being rolled away—
(*EC* 180)

The “bold imposing façade of *maya* vanishes,⁵ and there is no more diversity; there is only the unity of *Brahman*, the one eternal unchanging reality. The still point has absorbed the turning world.⁶

The characters in *Murder in the Cathedral* have different powers of penetration: the murderous Knights, the Chorus of the Women of Canterbury, the Priests, and Becket have distinct conceptions of reality, ranging from the depraved worldliness of the Knights to the deep spirituality of Becket. The characters perform their different functions simultaneously: the Knights sin, the Chorus and the Priests suffer, Becket martyrs himself. This is tragedy under the aspect of eternity, as it may appear to God: the arrogant self-absorption of the Knights, the uncertainty of the Chorus and the Priests, the soul-searching of Becket are all microcosmic. Becket intuitively grasps that the still wheel, as God beholds it, incorporates all the interlocking patterns of action and suffering which most of mankind can only view as flux. He knows that he has to combat deceptive appearances on his way to reality: “End will be simple, sudden, God-given. / Meanwhile the substance of our first act / Will be shadows, and the strife with shadows” (*MC* 246). He is not deflected from his purpose by temptations involving worldly gain. It is only when he is tempted by his own deepest desire for martyrdom that he pauses, unsure of his course. The Fourth Tempter flings Becket’s own words in his teeth, and all four tempters chant in unison about the unreality (or *maya*) of temporal existence:

Man’s life is a cheat and a disappointment;
All things are unreal,
Unreal or disappointing;
The Catherine wheel, the pantomime cat,
The prizes given at the children’s party,
The prize awarded for the English Essay,
The scholar’s degree, the statesman’s decoration.
All things become less real, man passes
From unreality to unreality. (*MC* 256)

He realizes with a shock that he is courting disaster by trying to impose his own will on God’s and initiating action and suffering in himself and others, as if he, not God, were the center of the wheel. The only way he can overcome various temptations and reach the still point is to surrender to the divine will. Those who act on their own initiative are inescapably on the wheel, but those who consent to the will of God are one with Him at the still point. Becket resolves, therefore, to submit and

find his peace, like Dante, in God's will. His way upward through the miasma of *maya* to the higher bird is now clear.

The Family Reunion too contains different orders of reality, corresponding to the potentials of the characters in the play. Amy, her sister, and their husbands are shallow, their vision circumscribed by the "normal" world of appearances. They see only events and cannot understand action that does not proceed from a selfish desire for sensory gratification. Harry reprimands them for their hollowness soon after his arrival:

You are all people
To whom nothing has happened, at most a continual impact
Of external events. You have gone through life in sleep,
Never woken to the nightmare. (FR 293)

Harry is right in claiming that their life would be "unendurable" if they were "wide awake" (FR 293), for they are people who have taken the reality of this world of appearances for granted, afraid to look beyond their ken. They are disturbed by Harry's passionate denunciation of their enslavement to the wheel, but they cling desperately to their world of make-believe. They are under the power of *maya*, for they take the real for unreal and the unreal for real. On the other hand, Agatha and Mary see beyond appearances and help Harry to escape from "the universal bondage" (FR 302). When he comes back to Wishwood, he is in acute spiritual distress; he is dissatisfied with his life in the phenomenal world, but he has not yet gained access to the noumenal realm to which Agatha holds the key. Agatha, in particular, seems to be a seer, aware of the eternal self that exists in us all, the timeless Truth that destroys all time-bound illusions by its mere presence, "watching and waiting" (DS 190) through all seasons, from birth to death, to claim us from its own. Not surprisingly, she alludes repeatedly to her perception:

Agatha: I see more than this,
More than I can tell you, more than there are words for.
... You and I, Mary,
Are only watchers and waiters: not the easiest role.
(FR 305)

Agatha: I have only *watched* and *waited*. In this world
It is inexplicable, the resolution is in another.
(FR 342)

Harry is acutely conscious of a tragic "sense of separation" from the eternal self within him, from "the self which persisted as an eye, seeing" (FR 330). Like the anguished protagonist of *Ash Wednesday*, he exists between sleeping and waking, in

of appearances. Edward especially is forced to recognize the temporal and eternal selves within him:

The self that can say 'I want this—I want that'—
The self that wills—he is a feeble creature;
He has to come to terms at the end
With the obstinate, the tougher self, who does not speak,
Who never talks, who cannot argue,
And who in some men may be the guardian—
But in men like me, the dull, the implacable,
The indomitable spirit of mediocrity.
The willing self contrives the disaster
Of this unwilling partnership but can only flourish
In submission to the rule of the stronger partner. (*CP* 381-382)

Edward might almost be explicating the Upanishadic parable of the twin birds on the self-same tree: one acts, while the other watches; one hops from branch to branch and eats sweet as well as bitter fruits, while the other remains still, immersed in austere contemplation; one entangles itself through weakness and ignorance in the web of *maya*, while the other sits silent, strong and unattached, savouring the freedom and bliss of *nirvana*.

Celia is ready, like Becket, to sacrifice herself and accept martyrdom patiently and humbly. Sir Henry sends her to the “sanatorium” where only saints go, and Celia consents to “journey blind” towards the still point (*CP* 418). Her life of self-abnegation “by which the human is / Transhumanized” (*CP* 421) contrasts with the non-mystical life of average people such as Edward and Lavinia. Celia’s way is that of the contemplative mystic (the *sannyasin*), who renounces all desires for the love of God; the other way, which Edward and Lavinia follow, under Sir Henry’s direction, is that of the dutiful householder (the *grihastha*), who consecrates all his actions to God. Both are ways of redemption, ways out of darkness through darkness, for “only through time is time conquered” (*BN* 173).

None of the characters in *The Confidential Clerk* is a martyr or a saint. None is an artistic genius. Even Colby, who seems distinct from the others, has only a second-rate talent. None cures the ills of the mortal condition by recipe. The characters are all ordinary men and women who insist on their own diagnoses and make up their own prescriptions. Yet, by the end, they all gain a measure of self-knowledge, though Colby attains the deepest insight. His self-education begins in the first serious conversation he has with his father. He rebels against his father’s fatalistic acceptance of life’s terms in the fond hope that “make-believing makes it real” (*CC* 464). He refuses to be content with less than the wholly real. He has a “secret garden,” an

inner world into which he occasionally retires, but he cannot accept what his half-sister, Lucasta, tells him: “it’s only the outer world that you’ve lost; / You’ve still got your inner world—a world that’s more real” (CC 472). Colby wants a “garden” as real as the literal one in Joshua Park, from which Eggerson, his predecessor in Sir Claude’s service, not only gains creative joy but also “marrows, or beetroots, or peas” for his wife. To a man of Colby’s sensibility, no reality is acceptable that does not integrate the ideal or spiritual with the actual or practical. He knows that both his outer world and his secret garden are insubstantial:

my garden’s no less unreal to me
Than the world outside it. If you have two lives
Which have nothing whatever to do with each other—
Well, they’re both unreal. (CC 473-474)

Moreover, he is alone in his garden. He longs for God to walk in it, since “that would make the world outside it real” (CC 474). Mere ecstasy, aesthetic or spiritual, is not enough for Colby; it must be expressed through practical action and, more important, it must be shared, with man or God. Clearly, Colby yearns to break out of the closed circle of his self, the private world of make-believe, and be free of *maya*. In the end, he does take his first step in this direction by becoming a church organist.

In *The Cocktail Party*, after Sir Henry has appropriately guided his “patients” onto their respective paths, his confidante Julia comments:

All we could do was to give them the chance.
And now, when they are stripped naked to their souls
And can choose, whether to put on their proper costumes
Or huddle quickly into new disguises,
They have, for the first time, somewhere to start from.
(CP 421)

Lord Claverton, in *The Elder Statesman*, is also given a chance by the sheer force of circumstances to reform his life. He seizes the opportunity and, though it entails considerable pain, strips himself naked to his soul before his daughter and her fiancé and chooses to put on the proper costume. To start with, he is a sick and lonely man who finds himself aging prematurely. On his retirement from public affairs, he finds himself “contemplating nothingness” (ES 529). All that he has done in life does not seem to amount to much, and he is left with the “fear of emptiness” before him (ES 529-530). Then he is suddenly confronted by two persons from his past life who accuse him of having adversely affected their lives. Forced to come to terms with his past, he finally recognizes that they are “merely ghosts” who have always been with him, tormenting his conscience (ES 569). With this recognition, he emerges from his “spectral existence” into something like “reality” (ES 569). When he has

exorcised the ghosts of his past, his tormenting visitors are reduced to mere human beings who can no longer harm him. He confesses to his daughter and her fiancé and receives a kind of absolution from her. He now dares to be “the man he really is,” and recognizes the existence of the twin selves within him:

What is this self inside us, this *silent observer*,
Severe and speechless, critic, who can terrorise us
And urge us on to futile activity,
And in the end, judge us still more severely...
(*ES* 545)

This recognition marks the death of his unreal self, that which “pretends to be someone” (*ES* 582). In other words, he has battled with the accusing phantoms of his shadow self and thus loosened the grip of *maya* over his existence. In the end, like Becket, he too is “brushed by the wing of happiness” (*ES* 581), a sign that he is well on his way to freedom.

The characters and episodes in Eliot’s plays are no doubt different from each other. Yet, their focus is on the deceptiveness of man’s temporal existence and the necessity of living in the light of eternity. Humans, as a rule, dwell amidst appearances and delude themselves into taking the unreal for real and the real for unreal. Consequently, they are enslaved by shifting desires and become bound to the turning wheel, which involve them in endless suffering. The treachery of carnal hopes and desires which enmesh humans ever more firmly in *maya* is thus Eliot’s great dramatic theme.

In an essay on John Marston, Eliot tried to isolate a quality that sets poetic drama apart from prosaic drama, a quality discernible in his own plays:

It is possible that what distinguishes poetic drama from prosaic drama is a kind of doubleness in action, as if it took place on two planes at once... In poetic drama a certain apparent irrelevance may be the symptom of this doubleness; or the drama has an underpattern... the characters... are living at once on the plane that we know and on some other plane of reality. (*Elizabethan Essays* 189-190)

The characters in Eliot’s plays, from *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) to *The Elder Statesman* (1959), may not always be conscious of the lower and the higher, the material and the spiritual planes of existence; but, they do contribute to a certain “doubleness in action.” Apparently, the characters are aware only of their limited egotistic selves and take part in simple realistic events. In reality, they are involved in a mythic or ritualistic mode of action, so that we sense “a pattern behind the pattern into which the characters deliberately involve themselves; the kind of pattern which we perceive in our own lives only at rare moments of inattention and detachment,

drowning in sunlight” (*Elizabethan Essays* 194). Not surprisingly, contemplative and self-examining characters like Becket, Harry, Celia, and Lord Claverton do perceive the eternal design and allude cryptically time and again to the omniscient watching and waiting self.

Only gradually do we become aware of the subtly wrought “pattern behind the pattern” in Eliot’s poetry and drama, as we imaginatively participate in the poet’s own painfully won apprehension of that higher reality of the still point in which all the contraries of the turning world are reconciled. Slowly but surely, we become conscious of our dual citizenship in time and eternity and grasp how our life on earth need not just be endured or diverted but actively embodied and possessed, so that, however alone and unbelonging our “I” may be, it can still break through, break in and find the Kingdom of Heaven waiting there.

Ultimately, what gives Eliot’s poetry and drama an enduring beauty and a penetrating power is the fact that he has perceived the perennial and most ancient truth of humanity and invoked that which is universal and eternal, beyond man-made boundaries of the East and the West. ✱

Notes

¹I have analyzed this influence extensively in my book, *T.S. Eliot, Vedanta and Buddhism*. Cleo Kearns has also addressed the same subject biographically in *T.S. Eliot and Indic Traditions*. See also Eliot’s *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (113). Long ago I studied the ancient Indian languages, and while I was chiefly interested at that time in philosophy, I read a little poetry too; and I know that my own poetry shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility.

²The following texts are quoted in this article with references made in the abbreviated form shown on the left. The texts may all be found in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot*.

- AW *Ash Wednesday*
BN *Burnt Norton*
CP *The Cocktail Party*
CC *The Confidential Clerk*
DS *The Dry Salvages*
EC *East Coker*
ES *The Elder Statesman*
FR *The Family Reunion*
FQ *Four Quartets*
G *Gerontion*
HM *The Hollow Men*
LP *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*
MC *Murder in the Cathedral*
P *Preludes*
WL *The Waste Land*

By his own admission, Eliot preferred “poetry with a clear philosophical pattern,” since it satisfied “more of his own needs.” Among the poets whom he liked for this reason, he included the “Forest philosophers” of India who composed the Upanishads. See Eliot’s Introduction to G. Wilson Knight’s *The Wheel of Fire* (xv-xvi).

³The texts of these Upanishads may be found in translations by Juan Mascaro (1965) and Max Müller (1962).

⁴Tiresias is a celebrated seer of ancient Greek mythology. His name means that he is “a seeker of signs.” He comes across coupling snakes, strikes them with his staff and is transformed into a woman for seven years. At the end of this period, he again encounters the two snakes coupling, strikes them and regains his male form. The other signal event in his life is the loss of his eyesight as a punishment for seeing Pallas Athene bathing in the nude. As a consequence of his peccadilloes, Tiresias is a blind hermaphrodite, gifted with foreknowledge. He resembles to a certain extent the Hindu figure *Ardhanareesvara*, probably the best known of the Eastern hermaphroditic deities: a fused embodiment of the male and female principles of the universe, of *Shiva* and his *Shakti*.

According to Eliot, Tiresias is the central uniting figure of *The Waste Land*:

although a mere spectator and not indeed a “character”, [Tiresias] is yet the most important personage in the poem, *uniting all the rest*. Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenecian sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand, Prince of Naples, so all women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem. (*WL* 78)

In other words, Tiresias is all the different characters in the poem; they are his own self reincarnated endlessly in different lives, which are yet one life, united in his consciousness.

Tiresias is no doubt the spectator. But the characters are not totally distinct from his personality. He has been all those characters and enacted their different lives, at one stage or another, in his long journey towards the freedom of *nirvana*, or the peace that passes understanding. *The Waste Land*, then, appears to be a collection of dramatic monologues uttered by different voices, ancient and modern; actually, the poem is Tiresias remembering his past lives, seeing them all unroll before his mind’s eye. He is not impersonating these characters; he *is* these characters. He is seeing himself enacting different roles at different times and enduring the same suffering: “And I Tiresias have foresuffered all / Enacted on the same divan of bed” (*WL* 69). The characters range from queens to washerwomen, from warriors to clerks, and from sinners to saints. The faces and lives may be different, but the underlying consciousness is the same. And sameness is bound to produce ennui, a most refined and horrible form of suffering. Within his refined consciousness, then, Tiresias can now contain all his past lives in his gnostic vision and grasp how his own past deeds have determined the nature of his subsequent lives and actions. In other words, all the characters in the poem are stages in his quest towards *Brahman*; this is why he knows them and their actions so intimately. In Hindu-Buddhist terms, his own *karma* has ruled over all the different incarnations of Tiresias; this is why there are so many different characters and episodes illustrating the same pattern of impulse, action and suffering. And theoretically, it is possible for Tiresias’ consciousness to include many more characters. The manuscripts of *The Waste Land* do indicate that Eliot toyed with the idea of including many other incarnations, but refrained from doing so because of Pound’s disapproval. *The Waste Land* is, in fact, a marvellously open-ended poem, capable of infinitely expanding

the consciousness of its readers and making them aware of existential realities outside and beyond the poem.

⁵See *Little Gidding*:

See, now they vanish,
The faces and the places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern. (FQ 195)

See also the following quotation from Shakespeare:

The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yes, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.
(*The Tempest* IV.i.152-158)

⁶See also *The Dry Salvages*: “So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing” (FQ 180).

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