
THE INFLUENCE OF MYSTICISM IN THE POETRY OF T. S. ELIOT

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Abstract: It is general belief among the critical society that, after a brief hiatus with the mysticism in the early stages of his career, T. S. Eliot reverted to Christian faith that informed the bulk of his best poems of his career. This article will attempt to contest this notion claiming that mysticism had always been a significant guide to Eliot and has massively influenced not only his early works but remained persistently present until his “Four Quartets”, which is his last great poem. The reasons for the avoidance of mystic relations, at least publicly, were many: Eliot’s conversion to the Anglican church in the first place, his position as a respected member of the well-known establishments like the Lloyd’s and subsequently as the chief editor in Faber and Faber, and lastly the bad reputation of various mystical societies in London at the time due to the many scandals associated with its fellow members, most notably Alistair Crowley. In general, unlike the times before the WWI which marked the golden age of mystic England, it was deemed inappropriate for a serious artist to acknowledge the influence of mystical and esoteric literature in his work. In reality, and despite the careful masking, everybody seemed to understand the meaning of the symbols, allusions and direct references that had nothing to do with the writings of the Ecclesiastes. Eliot used the mystical order of the universe to contest the historical narrative that was prevalent in the period between the two wars. Heralded by the 19th century philosophy, historical developments did not bring better society. The reverse course towards older non-historical readings of the mystic thought seemed like a logical solution.

Keywords: T. S. Eliot, mysticism, history

1. INTRODUCTION: HISTORY VERSUS MYTH

Eliot states that there are two aspects of artist’s creative struggle. On one hand, the artist has to destroy every trait of his subjectivity if he cares to enter the zone of eternal creation. But the quester has to be properly equipped for the journey. In other words, over time he has to develop a personality and a sensibility that he would readily abandon – only the ones with a strong character and disposition could willingly leave their subjective attributes behind when on the quest. Your own personal history is the sum of how well or ill you are equipped for the journey. In *Gerontion*, Eliot presents history as a corridor:

*After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities. Think now
She gives when our attention is distracted
And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions
That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late
What’s not believed in, or is still believed,
In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon
Into weak hands, what’s thought can be dispensed with
Till the refusal propagates a fear.*

The passage reveals history as a woman: deceitful; giving in the untimely manner, either too early at a young age when you are not ready to appreciate the gift, or too late, at an older age, when the passion is long gone and the craving has all but disappeared. Eliot uses the persona of Gerontion to reflect on the sterile minds of the people inhabiting the waste land, people who have no critical understanding of how everything that has happened is the sum of what is happening now. If you don’t look at the history from that perspective, you end up celebrating the past as a place where everything good was taking place and the current life as meaningless and eventless. These are the people that believe good life is always somewhere else and in some unapproachable corridors of the past. As Steven Wilson’s song vividly declares, these are the ones, “arriving somewhere, but not here.” James Longenbach in *Modernists Poetics of History*, succinctly defines the Gerontion’s *imperfect* view on history,

Gerontion’s understanding of history is a rationalization of his own inability to act or feel... a vision of historical chaos is a product of the mind that cannot unify the present and the past. Eliot ... emphasizes what his persona in “Gerontion” does not understand: that history is not something separate from the life of the individual in the present.

In other words, what you see as a failed life in the present is that, being lost in the corridors of history, you fail to understand that what is happening now to your life is a reflection of the sum of everything you did or have not done and everything you misunderstood but took as your guiding principle. There is nothing wrong with history, except of your mind interpreting it. Simply put, either good or bad, the world is of your own design, While the ordinary humans are pressed by the discharge of the willing from outside that shatters their life into an everlasting torture of alien desires, the artist opens himself towards the outer space, making it its own. The outer stops pressing his psyche as he unites his will with the cosmic will. For the artists, the presence of the outer, of the Gods, or in more precise terms if we speak about poetry, of the spirits of the dead poets, is constantly felt in their opus.

2. THE MYSTICAL ORDERING OF THE UNIVERSE

In “Burnt Norton”, Eliot openly announced the mystical presence of the dead poets: the famous illumination scene with the pool and the heart of sunlight is presaged by the appearances of the invisible visitors, emerging round the corner and through the gate that takes one,

*Into our first world.
There they were, dignified, invisible,
Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,
In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air,*

There is a clear distinction in the use of semantics in Eliot’s mature poetry. Instead of mythological juxtapositions of the incoherent symbols, one may witness a substantial increase of the use of mystical symbolism. In *T. S. Eliot’s Negative Way*, Eloise Knapp Hay clarifies that “the fire Heraclitus posited as the force moving along ‘the way upwards and downwards’ in sensible and insensible nature equals Eliot’s ‘spiritual fire’”. Dead poets are crucial for the opening of the poetic speech towards the spiritual fire that, as Eliot mentions in “East Coker”, is “burning in every moment”. Metaphorically, the decomposed bodies of the dead fertilize and stimulate the movement (the fire) to everything in nature. This flow of life, that evolves through the elements as a spiritual force, reflects the creative principle of the universe, the one that gives order to the enormous diversity in the natural world. Attempting to organize the content of their spiritual explorations, the poets, the philosophers and the religious individuals combine the mythical method with the “the way upwards and downwards” – an organizing pattern that is generally designated as *the negative way*, the call from the unknown, but it took him years to find the most suitable path to assist him approach the order of the universe. Discussing Eliot’s interest in mysticism Timothy Materer in his book, *Modernist Alchemy: Poetry and the Occult* argues that “Eliot’s concern with occultism is central not only to *The Waste Land* but also to his later poems and plays, as he searched for a language that could adequately approach what he called ‘the religious sources of poetry’”. Eliot gradually reduced the use of poetic symbolism to suit his interest in mysticism: his images (the garden, the pool, the shrubbery, the fire, the rose) bore direct relation to his metaphysical exploration of the life of the soul and its union with the divine. But he was still a poet, and not a saint. Initially he understood that by nature, poetry relies on creating images or similes, so the affirmative way was an obvious choice. As for the negative way, he surely spent most of the time investigating it, and doing his best to merge it into his poetry, if not in his life. In “Ash Wednesday” he openly copied *The Dark Night of the Soul*. The lines,

*Although I do not hope to turn again
My eyes are not eyes to see
My ears are not ears to hear*

surely suggest the negative way of the mystics. In “East Coker” he is even closer to St. John of the Cross. The lines,

*In order to arrive there,
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.*

openly refer to the verses from St. John’s, *The Ascent on Mount Carmel*,

*To reach satisfaction in all
desire its possession in nothing.
To come to possess all
desire the possession of nothing.
To arrive at being all
desire to be nothing.*

At the time when London was bombarded by the Luftwaffe, Eliot felt that St. John's allegories reflected his life. He became aware that as Hays notes, "The 'negative way' clearly may be either a psychological discipline or a metaphysical 'quest,' or both." Later, he described St. John of the Cross as "the greatest psychologist of all European mystics". It is against this background that his mature poetry combined the mythological with a mystical quest, which eventually evolved as a psychological inquest into the psyche of Europe. As the ordering of the chaos was not his priority any more, his poetry started using memory traces to creating meaning out of the voices from the past. Eminent way was the path he never got rid of. In Hays words, "Eliot has steadily kept the eminent way in sight by his interweaving of voices, places, and things from the past. The voices of saints, presidents, kings, and poets, all point to his (search for) meaning."

Despite all these experiences Eliot, who studied Indian religion while in Harvard, and was obviously inspired by the teachings of Buddha, chose what he called "the middle way". In "Little Gidding" he describes the ways of the mystics, but also announce his middle way,

*There are three conditions which often look alike
Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:
Attachment to self and to things and to persons,
detachment From self and from things and from persons;
And, growing between them, indifference
Which resembles the others as death resembles life,
Being between two lives—unflowering, between
The live and the dead nettle. This is the use of memory:
For liberation—not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past.*

In his view, one can liberate his prowess for love by placing the memory between life and death. In practical terms, he lived what we may call a "double life": a bank clerk, a magazine editor and a husband during the day (the public self), and a poet, trying to copy the life of saints, during the night (the liberated self). In time, he realized that he will never accommodate himself to the life of the saint although, at a certain time, he was thinking of going to a monastery in India to live the life of a monk, As he predicted early on in "Prufrock" - "I am not a prophet", twenty five years after that he would state in "Dry Salvages",

*But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint—*

Few lines later he admits his inability to reach the apprehension that is reserved only for the ones that have this faculty as given by the divine. For him, as a poet, what remains is the memory of significant moments "in and out of time", when his soul sings the music of the universe, and when the poetry is not needed any more as you are one with the music,

*For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts.*

Nevertheless, he revered the lives and the ways of the saints as they, in Hays words, "provides history and mankind with assurances that life can be transformed by grace here and now." On his path, and in order to decipher the great cosmic pattern, Eliot was able to use his poetry to try to approach the language of fire, the way the dead communicate the living,

*...what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living. they vanish,
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.
We are born with the dead:
See, they return, and bring us with them.*

In this respect, by not treating it strictly as a reflection of the ideas and the consciousness of the whole society, but, in the words of Timothy Materer, "...conceived of myth as the record of the encounters with the

spirit world”, Eliot mysticized the myth. In “Little Gidding”, the last piece of poetry he wrote, Eliot describes how at the murky dusk of London streets, he finally met his “compound ghost” – a composite of all the dead poets from the past – addressing him,

*Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled
Both one and many; in the brown baked features
The eyes of a familiar compound ghost
Both intimate and unidentifiable.*

So, the same way Virgil took Dante to the place where he was not needed any more, the compound ghost of Dante (composed of all the great poets that Eliot admired) took him to the place where he did not need him any more. In a state of complete harmony, where all the complexities and contrariness had been silenced, Eliot ended his poetic career with what would become something of his poetic epitaph,

*And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.*

In his subsequent critical essay Eliot would state, “it is ultimately the function of art.. . eliciting some perception of an order in reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation; and then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed to a region where that guide can avail us no farther.” To leave the guidance of others, even the ones that assisted you in the path, might be the final wisdom of the mystics. The seeker should follow the words of the Great Master, “Seek the Path, do not seek attainment. Seek for the Path within yourself.” Speaking about the meaning of Tarot cards, Ouspensky would conflate a similar message, “The Path is in yourself; and the Truth is in yourself and Mystery is in yourself.”

3. CONCLUSION

Eliot’s vision of the artist’s struggle rests on a paradox: only those with a fully formed personality and sensibility can truly renounce them in pursuit of timeless creation. In *Gerontion*, this tension is mirrored in the portrayal of history as a deceptive corridor - offering its lessons too early or too late, leaving individuals unable to unify past and present. The sterile minds of Eliot’s wasteland figures fail because they misinterpret history as something external, detached from their own lives, rather than recognizing it as the sum of their choices and missteps. Ultimately, Eliot suggests that history itself is neutral; its meaning depends on the mind that interprets it. Ordinary humans remain trapped by alien desires, while the artist, attuned to the cosmic will and the voices of past poets, transforms the outer pressures into creative unity. In this way, the artist transcends history’s corridors, embodying a vision where personal struggle becomes the gateway to eternal creation.

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