



A reading of T.S.Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday*¹

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For now is the turning of the year ... the fowls of the air ...
'know their seasons', and make their just return. ... Every
thing now turning, that we also would make it our time to
turn to God in.
(Andrewes, Lancelot, 1619 in "Sermon for Ash Wednesday";
quoted in Kermode, 1975:179-188.)²

1. Introduction: the theme of *turning*

The title of this poem tells the reader that it will be a religious meditation. It helps to know that the main themes of Ash-Wednesday in the history of the church are those of repentance and renewal. From at least the fourth century the Western Church decided to set the Lenten season as 40 days before Easter. This is analogous to the 40 days of Christ's fasting in the desert (Matt. 4:2). The 40 days of Lent do not count the Sundays, and so Ash-Wednesday as the first day of Lent starts in the seventh week before Easter Sunday. In the early church, converts prepared for baptism during this time.

It will become apparent in the poem that the convert needs to turn his back toward what is transient and turn his face toward eternity. In

1 This article appeared in Hungarian and English in *Sárospataki Füzetek*, 2:47-64, 65-82 2008.

2 Eliot often read and quoted from bishop Andrewes (1555-1626), frequently using some of his phrases and word-plays in his poems. For Eliot's thoughts about Andrewes and some quotations, cf. Kermode (1975).

the spirit of true self-examination the Lenten project of Eliot reminds us that turning (conversion) is never once and for all, but must be undertaken time and again. It helps for our understanding to know that the Eliot writing these words is the newly baptised member of the Anglican Church (in 1927).³ Recalling what he had written until then, we could say that he is turning away from the life of those in the "wasteland" and the futility of those who live the lives of the "hollow men", who were more dead than living in a spiritual sense, with their "prayers to broken stone" and with the "hope only / of empty men". These earlier poems had expressed the situation of secularised humanity, wandering away from the meaning of life lived before the face of God. Now the poet offers God his "dead bones" and powerless state: "... these wings are no longer wings to fly / but merely fans to beat the air". This has been called poetic confession as psychotherapy (Brown, 2003), and Eliot might agree, as long as we understand the psyche to be the soul seeking God.

During the Lenten time believers are encouraged to meditate on their mortality, their sinfulness and their need for forgiveness, their spiritual path in life, and their blessings received from the Saviour. This is a time of self-examination, but also a time to renew their trust in God and their gratitude to Christ for having conquered sin and death. In the Bible and some antique cultures, ashes were used to symbolise frailty, mourning, sin and death, as well as repentance. Ashes were further associated with purification, since they were part of soap making and medical remedies. So in this way the anointing of the sign of the cross with strokes of ash on the forehead of believers during Lent spoke of a variety of aspects of repentance and renewal. During the anointing the pastor will often say such words as, "Consider yourself dead to sin and alive through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Eph. 2:1, 5); or: "Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). And so it is that the dying of the old self is a central theme in Eliot's poem, as well as the turning (conversion) to a new path. One of the passages referred to on Ash-Wednesday or during Lent is from the prophet Joel, which speaks of turning (back) to the divine call and finding God full of grace and compassion – also God shall turn toward us:

'Even now', declares the Lord,
'return to me with all your heart,

3 For an essay on Eliot's conversion, cf. Lyndall Gordon (1977).

with fasting and weeping and
mourning.'

Rend your heart
and not your garments.
Return to the Lord our God,
for he is gracious and
compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love ...

Who knows? He may turn and have pity ...
(Joel 2:12 ff. NIV.)

2. Part one

The opening lines from part one of the poem establish the theme of “turning”, or what soon appears to be conversion, in the sense of both turning away from one thing and turning towards something else. The beginning of this poetic meditation shows the difficulty of this decision to turn, especially the need to decide not to turn back again. The poem opens abruptly, saying:

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

We find here the typical repetition of Eliot, the varied cadence through differing length of lines, and the paradoxical statements.⁴ Which way are we turning? Are we striving not to strive? What is it that we do not hope, but then in our turning, now hope? Another characteristic of Eliot is the use of references, more or less to the saturation point. “This man’s gift and that man’s scope” rings of a line from Shakespeare.⁵ It is used here by Eliot to signify the high achievements of human culture.

4 “Because I do not hope to turn again” is a quote from the Italian poet Guido Cavalcanti (1255-1300). The meaning and setting in Cavalcanti are different: “Because no hope is left me, Ballatetta / Of return to Tuscany” – but Eliot liked to use such references and give them another *Umwelt*. For basic notes on the poem, see Michael Herbert (1982).

5 In Shakespeare’s Sonnet 29 he uses the word *art* rather than *gift*. Once again, Eliot takes a reference and uses it in his own way.

It is noticeable that this poem, as can be said of many of his poems, is fragmentary, which helps demonstrate the general theme (the fragmentary soul in a fragmentary civilisation). This was part of the trauma situation of the post-war generation which was existentially seeking to overcome their feeling of a breakdown of culture (cf. Spender, 1975:108). Like others, Eliot was influenced by Conrad's *Heart of darkness*, which exposes the barbarian heart of modern culture. The 1920s had many "elegant sceptics", but Eliot shows in *Ash-Wednesday* that he has moved beyond the scepticism of his own *Waste land*, which had attracted so much attention (cf. Kenner, 1959). Eliot uses many voices in his poems in order to catch the variety of directions and meanings that are opening or closing for the "lost soul". The present poem adds new flavour to his work, and we feel that there is an inner reality here of the changing self. The "I" is no longer the individualist and ironic outsider, as in *Prufrock*, for example, who is bored with life and mocks himself. The new "I" in *Ash-Wednesday* is a serious pilgrim. The neurosis and fragmentation of life found in *The waste land* (completed in 1922) are in *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) turned into a spiritual struggle to find a better way. *The waste land* deals with the temporal city, and *Ash-Wednesday* turns toward the eternal city, reminding us of Augustine's concepts of *civitas terrena* and *civitas dei*.

As we enter into the details of the poem it is good to remind ourselves that the purifying steps of world-negation are not final goals in themselves. When Eliot denies the gifts and scope of human cultural potential, he is setting limits to human endeavours; this negation is to be raised to something better through new affirmations. It of course remains to be seen for all such conversions, whether they result in a dualism (not knowing how to relate the transient and the eternal), or whether they become more wholistic. The emphasis on the spiritual aspect is not meant as turning away from the good things of the world, but rather as turning away from the world defined as the ideological pursuit of good things that have been averted and distorted, whether power, money, pleasure, and so forth. In the same way recent writers analysing the ideologies of modern times and the global problems of poverty, environmental degradation, terrorism, and other issues, say:

... if today's paralyzing uncertainty and agonizing problems do indeed have deep, spiritual roots (roots that are ideological), then only a spiritual turn or reversal, a turn at the level of people's deepest longings and convictions, will be able to generate practical ways out of today's stubborn dilemmas.

Problem-management solutions articulated independently of such a turn will not be effective. (Goudzwaard *et al.*, 2007:58.)

The repeated use of the term *turn* in the quoted paragraph is very much in line with Eliot, who also wrote two books on faith and society and indeed had a keen nose for ideologies. So the poet-pilgrim hopes to press forward, distinguishing things that last from things more frivolous, and also distinguishing ideological blindness from a turning toward the good.

However, a contra-voice also warns the pilgrim that these steps in saintliness are limited:

Because I know 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
I rejoice that things are as they are and
I renounce the blessed face

What we have here is the acknowledgement of the ambiguities of our life and spirit. The well-known theologian, Tillich (1968), expressed this in an impressive way. Tillich speaks of many kinds of ambiguities, which enter into our understandings and our actions. In relation to aesthetic expression, he says the following, which fits very well with Eliot's purposes: "... the aesthetic image is no less ambiguous than the cognitive concept and the grasping word" (Tillich, 1968:76). We are tied to time and place. There are actualities at hand and potentialities cannot always be reached. In his turning the poet seems to point to two paths. He does not wish to follow the old path, but he can only follow the new path a little way. He renounces the "blessed face",⁶ which for Eliot also means a turning from former values to new ones.

The first section of the poem began with the word *because* and this word is used another ten times in part one to start a line. This frequent "because" is a way of reasoning: arguments are presented by the convert as he meditates on the past, present and future. What are the choices, the limits, the goals, and the path to be taken? Eliot turns away from the futile life mentioned at the end of

6 This is usually seen as a reference to Dante's Beatrice. Dante was a spiritual and literary master for Eliot. However, the reference to Dante has a personal setting for Eliot, namely the breaking up of his marriage because of Vivienne's psychological state of mind and her eventual consignment to an institution.

The hollow men, which takes the well known children's song, "Here we go 'round the mullberry bush", and turns it into: "Here we go 'round the prickly pear". When we look back at Eliot's earlier poems we see that his ironic heroes often have a failure of nerve to confront their own "I" and their situation. They do not make meaningful choices. In *Ash-Wednesday* the pilgrim "I" needs to dispossess the world, while in his prose Eliot was trying to save the world, as it were, by questioning the direction of modern culture and suggesting deeper values. But in this poem the pilgrim "I" learns that in the journey toward the absolute, the "I" is unworthy and self-effort is not helpful (Kwan-Terry, 1994:132 ff.): "teach us to care and not to care / teach us to sit still", is the recipe for going forward.

Except for two question marks, this is the first stop at the end of a line in the poem. The first stop sign after thirty-nine lines. Eliot likes the flow of short and medium length lines, which twist and turn the meaning faster than the reader can catch at a first reading. Indeed, the first reading is meant to catch our ear for the music and general themes without in any way hoping to illuminate all the details. A study of the hidden meanings is useful so we can reread this poem with more insight, but we must not lose our delight in the cadence and dynamics. Then the poem can be read again at each new Lent with new impressions and new insights. These new insights are available because the multiple meanings and the high density of implications are not spelled out by the poet; the purposeful vagueness which hints at known symbols places these in a new setting, creating intended ambiguities. The poem then is like a bird with two wings: both the writer and the reader need to cooperate in spelling out some of the thoughts and their implications.

The suggestion of section one is that we are "to care and not to care". We are to care about that which has eternal value and not about what detracts us from this path. The prayer: "Teach us to sit still" refers to the passive way the soul prepares to accept God, as described by the Spanish mystic St. John of the cross (1542-1591).⁷ The last lines are a prayer from the liturgy of Lent:

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death
Pray for us now and at the hour of our death.

7 Another reference could be to Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) who made the famous statement that "all the troubles of man come from his not knowing how to sit still".

It has been said about *Ash-Wednesday*,

Structurally, Eliot built the poem on a phrase from Bishop Andrewes about the ‘two turnings’ which Andrewes had declared were necessary for a ‘conversion’. The one turning looked ahead to God; the other, appropriate for a penitential season, looked back to one’s sinful past. The style of Eliot’s poem is simple and lucid, but its meaning is complicated and difficult. *Ash-Wednesday* combines intense personal emotions, often obscure to the reader, with the formal use of liturgical texts. It is the story of Eliot’s conversion, both public and private – with all his scepticism and doubts still there, offered to God. (Stone Dale, 1988:102.)

3. Part two

The second section introduces us to the stronger issues of repentance: the bones must die. At the same time dead bones revived to live again is a well-known theme from Ezekiel 37. Eliot works with this theme:

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?

The leopards may be an echo of the three beasts at the beginning of Dante’s *Inferno*, but they have their own role here. The white leopards are beautiful and the colour white in this poem makes them holy – for their work is to sanctify. There is no statement about blood colouring their necks and paws, even though they have done the work of cleaning the flesh off the bones. Apparently they have cleaned their own fur, too. All of this signifies a spiritual cleansing. The parts specifically mentioned are chosen to represent a variety of human aspects and skills: legs (activity), heart (emotion), liver (sensitivity) and skull (thought). Other details are also carefully chosen: the white bones, white leopards and Lady in white, refer to purity. Only when we have died to the “flesh” may we truly live in a spiritual way. It is worth noting that dying to the flesh, in the biblical view, means more than controlling carnal desires. It also means rising above the sins of the “spirit”, which are also called sins of the flesh – for example, jealousy, anger, and pride (Gal. 5:16 ff.). “Flesh” in the writings of the apostle Paul, for example, refers to humanity in rebellion against the will of God. So this includes what we might call

sins of the body, mind, and spirit.⁸ Another way of saying this is that “flesh” is the bodily existence in time, our finite and fallen life, while the “spiritual” is our orientation toward God, or the eternal and the redeemed life. In this understanding, “flesh” and “spirit” are not parts of our body, but rather two directions of our total existence.

There have been a variety of movements, religious and philosophical which seem to place evil on the side of matter (our finite possibilities), and good on the side of spirit (including the mind). Eliot is using traditional language when he refers to the casting off of the flesh. This does not immediately imply that he is caught in a dualism of negating bodily life. Eliot is also known for pointing out the evil encroached in aspects of (degraded) human society and culture. Perhaps we can say that similar to Augustine, Eliot begins with the traditional dualism of flesh and spirit as found in Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, but goes on to express this in a reforming way, rather than merely in a simple dualism. Then we are dealing with existential understandings of ways of life, and not with separate ontological aspects. The difference has also been explained in this way: in the Bible the duality of choice is between the good heart and the bad one. This is a choice of the direction of our heart – for or against the will of God. That is the essence of both the Old and the New Testament. Over against the neoplatonic view, such as Plotinus' idea of sanctity as escaping from finite, contingent reality (thus leaving behind the material in order to reach the spiritual), the biblical view is that of a daily sanctifying, of historical contingent reality (cf. Taylor, 2007:275 ff.). There is no doubt that this poem expresses the more dualistic view (the material/spiritual dichotomy); but we may rescue Eliot by saying that this is a purposeful exercise in such spirituality, in order (like the continuous turning of the staircase) to move from the relinquishing of worldly things, to spiritual renewal, to a renewed sacral understanding of the world.

Like all his poetry, this poem is also rich in metaphor and loaded with references to various sources. He mixes these references in a very loose way and recreates his own story. In part two the key words point to a mood: bones, desert, disassembled, forgotten, rejected, and so forth. This is spiritual death by cleansing, a following of the way of repentance. On the other hand we also have words or phrases like: cool of the day, blessing, brightness, and so forth. The

8 For a discussion on such Pauline categories of heart, soul, mind, spirit, body and flesh, cf. Herman Ridderbos (1975:114 ff.).

poet makes some strange combinations: blessing of sand, and bones which shine with brightness and sing with joy. When all is said, the point is that these bones are redeemed by God. The word *atone* also appears in relation to the bones. Even the Juniper tree has meaning as the place of renewal for Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-8).⁹ The poem is a struggle for renewal, even though “I who am here disassembled / Proffer my deeds to oblivion”, indicates a desire to rest in death.

Who is the Lady, so dominant throughout the poem? The first reference suggested by most commentators is “Beatrice, agent of Dante’s salvation, and devoted attendant on the Virgin Mary in Paradise” (Herbert, 1982:42). Others suggest Dante’s Matilde. Knowing Eliot, there could be multiple references, such as recalling Lady Philosophy in Boethius’ *The consolation of philosophy*. This also fits, since Eliot likes to combine philosophy, mysticism and theology. By the end of the poem the Lady becomes: “Blessed sister, holy mother ... spirit of the garden ...” This is a feminine counterbalance to the desert, rocks, sand and abstract conflicts of the soul. Eliot needs the symbol of Lady, sister and mother in order to personalise the poem. Much of his poetry is highly intellectualised, dealing with ideas, and one of the ways he balances this is to introduce persons as symbols, and conversations as representative of different views and ways of dealing with the conflicting choices, and as possible ways of restoration. On this point, it can also be said that the Lady is partly his wife, Vivienne, and indeed the poem was originally dedicated to her. Eliot had great feelings of sorrow, despair and failure at this time as he saw no way to help her psychological state and save their marriage. He is both turning away from a Lady and turning toward the help of the blessed Virgin, but he knows he is in a state of ambiguity as to his personal path in life. His basic values and lifeworld are at risk. This is a prayer and an urgent one at that.

The poet continues in a litany of his own paradoxical style while focusing on the ambiguity of the lost soul, as well as the hope of salvation:

Lady of silences
Calm and distressed
Torn and most whole
Rose of memory

9 Another reference is to a juniper tree in the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales where a murdered child’s bones under such a tree are miraculously restored to life.

Rose of forgetfulness
Exhausted and life-giving
(etc.)

Eliot's use of such paradox is found throughout most of his poetry. He wants the reader to imagine more than one possibility, to admit that we know little and that life is always in flux. In this particular focus on the Lady, who sooner or later is not Beatrice or any other symbol, but the Virgin Mary herself, we have the religious paradox of Virgin and Mother (of God). We have the further religious paradoxes of salvation through the suffering God, the way of the pilgrim as the way of arriving, the way of faith as the way of knowing, and the importance of the *via negativa* as preparation for moving from our torn condition to wholeness. Eliot uses the empathy of the Lady (sister, mother, etc.) to refer to divine grace as the necessary ingredient to find redemption. The "rose" in Dante and in Eliot can have the meaning of beauty, joy, and visionary memories or expectations. In Dante the rose is used to symbolise the communion of the saints, as in his *Paradiso* where the redeemed are gathered together as petals forming a white rose. Eliot later returned to this theme in *Burnt Norton*. Here, in *Ash-Wednesday* the rose is the special agent of salvation within the rose garden. Woven into this, however, are personal memories, as well as the *memoria sancta* which restores spiritual life.

Part two ends with the bones under the juniper tree happy and singing. In his puzzling way, the poet writes:

Under the 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.

This may seem to be salvation through forgetfulness, but we already know that the question "Shall these bones live?", has a positive answer. What looks like death is a step toward salvation. The bones of Ezekiel 37:1-14 are also the bones which can say "this is the land" (Ezekiel 48:29). Eliot uses references as preferences. He is writing his own prophetic material, with a re-interpretive use of Ezekiel. The question is whether we have the land, or only have the sand. Bones may be happy to merely inherit the sand, but Eliot is also saying that the divine plan includes spiritual restoration, pictured bodily in Ezekiel 37, and in biblical New Testament terms

as bodily resurrection. However this may all turn out, Eliot is not content to end with the desert as inheritance. The desert in the Bible – in the history of Israel, the life of Jesus, the life of the early church – is the place of waiting for God, a time of temptation and renewal. The desert is not enough and the *via negativa* is not the whole story. Eliot also speaks in this section of the poem about the garden as a symbol of new life. The “cool of day” is a reminder of Genesis 3:8. He is not so much dwelling on the end, as on the “turning”, the beginning of the path forward, the first step of which is the renewal of the soul, and thus gradually the renewal of daily life. Tillich (1968:54 ff.) explains this theme as follows:

Man, in actualising himself, turns to himself and away from God in knowledge, will, and emotion. ... For Augustine, sin is the love which desires finite goods for their own sake and not for the sake of the ultimate good. ... Love of one's self and one's world is distorted if it does not penetrate through the finite to its infinite ground.

4. Part three

In this section the poet picks up the theme of turning in a new way:

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.

Here the poem uses strong end rhymes, especially emphasising the sound of “stair(s)”. This is the path of salvation, the up-hill climb of the pilgrim of faith, toward the holy place, indeed, toward God. These are steps of hope and despair in relation to the thoughts, values, and choices which come from one's own heart and from the world – the demon of doubt always accompanies the spirit of faith. The poet explored that in the *The hollow men* when he pointed at the disillusionment of never achieving a satisfying goal:

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the shadow
For Thine is the kingdom

Repeating a phrase from The Lord's Prayer in italics was a way of imitating a liturgical setting but for the hollow men it is secularised to the point of not knowing where to turn. The question was which kingdom has lasting value. In *Ash-Wednesday* he continues to juxtapose the choices:

At the first turning of the third stair
Was a slotted window bellied like the fig's fruit
And beyond the hawthorn blossom and a pasture scene
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.

Lord, I am not worthy
Lord, I am not worthy

but speak the word only.

The charms of "distraction" (fruit, colours, hair, flute music) are alternatives which can hold back spiritual progress.¹⁰ The holy colours are white and blue in this poem (as we shall also note in section four). The blue, green, and brown of part three are earthy colours, not the heavenly colours. *Lilac* may be the colour or the fragrance that symbolises past loves. It all adds up to the temptations of pleasures to lead us from the spiritual climb. Even the best attempts to integrate all aspects, material and spiritual, pleasures and duties, the enjoyable and the ethical – all such integration easily flounders on one side or the other. The poet holds forth the way of repentance and spiritual exercise; the way of the pilgrim, which must be light weight and not loaded down by the "cares of the world". If we renounce ourselves for something greater, we must also renounce all that made us who we were. This is the ascetic line which must not be lost by following (only) the aesthetic enjoyments.

However, in Christian doctrine, repentance must also be balanced by faith, hope, and love; and the joy of salvation should be balanced by the joy of creation. Even though catechisms rightly talk about

10 There is a reference here again to Dante, which includes the "third stairs" and sensuality as a misleading force. Cf. Herbert (1982:44).

“daily repentance”, this does not mean that every day is Ash-Wednesday. Eliot also knew that Ash-Wednesday and asceticism are not the whole story. It is a matter of turning in the right direction. Indeed, Ash-Wednesday is a step toward Good Friday, and also Easter morning.

The third section ends with a biblical reference to the words of humility found in Mathew 8:8 and used in the litany for Ash-Wednesday: “Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed” (KJV). In liturgical reference and for Eliot, we may read: “but speak the word only and my soul shall be healed”.

5. Part four

Once again, *violet* can refer to a flower or a colour. As a colour it is sometimes associated in religion with repentance, and as a flower with resurrection. There is also mention of “various ranks of varied green”, but all these references are bound together by “white and blue ... Mary’s colour”. Even the singular of “Mary’s colour” is interesting, since the white and blue are apparently one pattern of harmony for the poet. To understand this section we need to imagine a nun-like figure silently symbolising redemption in a garden setting. The continued reference to a female person brings associations of Beatrice, Mary, but also Eliot’s wife, Vivienne, to whom he originally dedicated the poem. Further, as his wife was hospitalised because of her psychological condition, the reference to “sister” could mean a nurse. There is a private meaning in the symbols for Eliot as he struggles with redemption, in the double sense of seeking healing in this life and beyond. The “silent sister veiled” refers to a religious person such as a nun, but could also refer to mourning. We must also realise that some have spoken of the veiling of truth and this was often personalised as Lady Philosophy (the Greek word for truth is *unveiling*). At the same time, one could speak more about the Lady or more about philosophy, and that is indeed done (cf. Bennett, 2008:313 ff. on Nietzsche’s philosophy). All of this enters into Eliot’s poem. In general the word *veil* also refers to hidden aspects of spiritual matters beyond our present understanding, as when Tennyson (quoted in Jump, 1974:104 – *In memoriam*, section LVI) says:

O life as futile, then, as frail!
 O for thy voice to soothe and bless!
 What hope of answer, or redress?
 Behind the veil, behind the veil.

The veil then is a symbol of holding back what is not yet revealed or unveiled. In the Bible a veil was seen as necessary because we are sinful and God is holy. Moses could not see God face to face (Exod. 33:20), and also needed to veil his face when he came down the mountain from the presence of God to speak to the people (Exod. 34:29-35). Yet when Christ arose, the temple veil was torn in two, making the way to God open (Matt. 27:51). The history of this multiple significance of *veil* echoes throughout the poem.

As we follow section four of the poem, Eliot wants us to focus on the pilgrim's way of redemption and to be mindful of the dangers of temptation which may lead us astray.¹¹ Still imagining the figure among the flowers,

... wearing
White light folded, sheathing about her, folded.
The new years walk, restoring
Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring
With a new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem
The time. Redeem
The unread vision in the higher dream
While jewelled unicorns draw by the gilded hearse.

Here we have the theme of redemption and restoration, the swift passing of youth, and the "be mindful" of death, although even that vision includes the glorious signs of jewels and gold ("gilded") ornamentation.¹² There are associations again with Dante (*Purgatory* 29), in the work of whom a chariot appears. The "high dream" may remind us of Tennyson, who says (*In memoriam*, section 1):

I held it truth, with him who sings
To one clear harp in divers tones,
That men may rise on stepping-stones
Of their dead selves to higher things.

But in Tennyson we also have the heaviness of the road upwards (*In memoriam* section 4):

11 In this section of the poem there is a reference in Italian – *sovegna vos* – or, "be mindful", which comes from Dante's *Purgatory* 26:147. The contextual meaning is that we must be "mindful" of punishment for sinners.

12 Elizabeth Schneider (1975:121 ff.) explains this source as a poem by Conrad Aiken which Eliot echoes.

I falter where I firmly trod,
And falling with my weight of cares
Upon the great world's altar-stairs
That slope thro' darkness up to God.

We have all these elements in Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday*: a turning from our "dead self", the upward path of stepping stones, the weight of the cares of the world, the darkness ("veil"), as well as the higher dream, and a new song.

But the fountain sprang up and the bird sang down
Redeem the time, redeem the dream

Given the religious setting in a garden, this could remind us of the conversion of Augustine, who heard a voice in the garden like that of children singing *tolle lege*, which he interpreted as telling him to "take up and read" the Bible.¹³ The symbol of a fountain in the desert (garden) refers to life, especially to the new life of faith. At the beginning of the Bible the garden is a symbol for paradise, the good creation where Adam walked with God. At the end of the Bible we find a redemptive symbol in which the "tree of life" appears as given for the "healing of the nations" (Rev. 22).

There is a line in the poem from "Salve Regina" of the Roman Catholic Mass which speaks of our troubles in "this valley of tears", and says: "turn, then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us ...". This means that there are our turning to God, as well as the divine turning toward us – a fountain of mercy springs up. In Christian theology it has always been said that God first turns toward us, and therefore we should re-turn toward God.

6. Part five

If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent
If the unheard, unspoken
Word is unspoken, unheard;
Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,
The Word without a word, the Word within

13 This is found in Augustine's account of his conversion in *Confessions*, book 8. Even the details are similar, for Augustine was struggling with the cares of the world, the desires of the flesh, and the text for his conversion was found when he read Paul's *Letter to the Romans* 13:13, 14. This talks about clothing ourselves with Christ as a new identity (and by Augustine's time could mean the new robe of baptism) and turning away from the desires of the flesh, listed by Paul as including drunkenness, lewdness, quarreling and jealousy.

The world and for the world;
And the light shone in darkness and
Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled
About the centre of the silent Word.

Section five begins with a theology of the Word. The references include the Gospel of John 1 which speaks of the "logos" which shines in the darkness. John 1:8 is a difficult verse to translate and the meaning can be that the world did not understand the word, but also that the world did not conquer the divine Word. In any case, the poet finds this expressed by the idea that "the word still whirled" against God, who as Creator set the world in motion. The whirling of the world against the divine Word is also part of the turning which is a central theme in this poem. There is a cosmological meaning (God as sovereign over the whirling planets) and a redemptive meaning (God who reveals love through Christ, the Word).

We must consider that even though this poem deals with the journey of the soul towards union with God, for Eliot there is a cultural meaning also. He (Eliot, 1988:304) later wrote in an essay on his view of culture:

If Christianity goes, the whole of our culture goes. Then you must start painfully again. ... To our Christian heritage we owe many things beside religious faith. Through it we trace the evolution of our arts, through it we have our conception of Roman Law which has done so much to shape the Western World, through it we have our conceptions of private and public morality.

As Western culture has indeed become more and more post-Christian and highly pluralist, since the time of Eliot, the relevance of this view he holds forth may be estimated more accurately as time passes. He could also say in the same essay that, "Only a Christian culture could have produced a Voltaire or a Nietzsche. I do not believe that the culture of Europe could survive the complete disappearance of the Christian faith." Things would change so drastically, he thought, that Europe would also become quite different.

Returning to the poem, the Word (capitalised as a reference to Christ, the Logos in John's Gospel) communicates that God is "for the world". "For the world" was an element used by theologians who were contemporary with Eliot, such as Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Tillich. Just as the poet here, they emphasised the dialectics of human alienation and divine grace, as well as the misunderstanding and misuse of God's "word". The phrase "unstilled world" contains the

thought of ever-moving, but also ever-rebelling against God. “Un-stilled” is the opposite of the stillness to which the poet repeatedly refers, as a condition for hearing the voice of God. Eliot further plays with the idea of the revelation of the word, which may at times be wordless.¹⁴ This could remind us of the prophecy applied to Christ: “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open his mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so He did not open his mouth” (Isa. 53:7). Eliot essentially says that we are too busy to hear the word of God:

No place of grace for those who avoid the face
 No time to rejoice for those who walk among the noise and
 deny the voice

Part of this section is notably full of rhyme, including internal rhyme within lines, such as: *found/resound*, *mainland/rainland*, *place/grace/face* and *rejoice/noise/voice*. This creates a musical quality, a background song of hope even though the words are often sombre: *lost*, *spent*, *unheard*, *darkness*, and so forth. The mixture of despair and hope continues throughout the poem and its music “... is capable of making an instantaneous impression purely through the beauty of its sound” (Matthiessen, 1958:114).

To express the idea that people – and Eliot includes himself – neglect and reject God, he writes:

Will the veiled sister pray for
 Those who walk in darkness, who chose thee and oppose thee

This could be a question as to whether the sister is willing, but it is also a petition: will the sister please pray for ... and the poet adds several categories. These include “children at the gate”, who are perhaps those close to the gate of the heavenly kingdom, but who “will not go away and cannot pray”. They are the innocents. Then there are also those who “offend” and those who are “terrified” and those who do not know how to “affirm” their faith.

The scene ends speaking of “the desert in the garden the garden in the desert”. This is the dialectic of doubt and faith, the struggle between choosing and opposing, and what he refers to as being “torn on the horn(s)” of a dilemma. We do not know how to avoid the temptations in the world, nor how to properly honour God. There is

14 Here we find word-plays also used by Bishop Lancelot Andrewes. Cf. Eliot’s essay, *Lancelot Andrewes* (Eliot, 1988:185.)

not only the pilgrim's progress (John Bunyan), but also the pilgrim's regress (C.S. Lewis).

There is a refrain used in full or in part three times in this section: "O my people, what have I done unto thee". This comes from the prophet Micah 6:3 and is part of the Good Friday liturgy, as words Christ could have said from the cross. The theological basis which resounds throughout this poem is that of God seeking those who are lost.

7. Part six

In the final section Eliot reminds us of the first lines of the poem, with a slight difference: "although I do not hope to turn again". What began as *because* and then became *cannot*, is now *although*. There is, he says, a *wavering*, but *although* means that the turn has been made, even if the turning is only a beginning:

Wavering between the profit and the loss
In this brief transit where the dreams cross
The dreamcrossed twilight between birth and dying
(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

The question of profit and loss refers to eternal values that need to be chosen during the brief transit of life. Shall we be care-burdened by worldly pleasures, or carefree like the sails in the wind? Shall the old eagle mentioned in part one, fly again?¹⁵ Here is a picture of nostalgia for the past, but also the knowledge that a choice must be made between our dreams. What was earlier a "slotted window" is now a "wide window", because the poet has settled his attitude as to the past.

The rest of the poem reads as follows:

15 The symbol of wings has many meanings for Eliot, for he knew about the medieval symbol of an eagle falling into the water and being renewed as relating to baptism. The eagle also appears in Dante, and Eliot refers in an essay to Homer and the other great pre-Christian poets as eagles that fly above the rest. In Christianity the basis is found in Psalm 103:5, and in Isaiah 40:31, "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles ..."

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
And the blind eye creates
The empty forms between the ivory gates
And smell renews the salt savour of the sandy earth

This is the time of tension between dying and birth
The place of solitude where three dreams cross
Between blue rocks
But when the voices shaken from the yew-tree drift away
Let the other yew be shaken and reply.

Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, 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
Even among these rocks,
Our peace in His will
And even among these rocks
Sister, mother
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated

And let my cry come unto Thee.

The “lost heart” and the “weak spirit” try to turn back to the joys symbolised here by the sea and flowers and past memories. This is the *although* with which section six begins. He turns both to recall the past but also to hope for a more spiritual life. This is letting go in order to go forward. The past joys were not all wrong, but he must be willing to go beyond them. He must for a time be world-negating in order to affirm the highest values. But Eliot does not compromise here. He wants to say that the pilgrim’s road is very difficult. We may feel that layer by layer Eliot is peeling away the onion of life and leaving us with nothing. This is, however, an exercise in repentance, a point of turning, and not yet the whole vista. “Let the other yew be shaken” could be read as “the other you”. There is the danger that we let ourselves be mocked with “falsehood”. We like to fool ourselves without really undergoing a conversion of our heart and life. We must learn, as he showed earlier, that we are “hollow men”. The “blind eye creates ... gates” refers to false dreams which entice us: hopes, plans and ideas in which we seek an alternative salvation not

communicated by the divine word. "Three dreams" could be any three choices in which we seek our life meaning, such as family, work, or pleasure. Or in this poem the three dreams could be past, present and future, or even earth, purgatory/hell and heaven.

The order is reversed: dying is followed by (new) birth. The reference to "spirit of the river, spirit of the sea" is rooted in Eliot's childhood since he lived near the Mississippi and spent summertimes by the coast of Massachusetts. *Suffer* in older English had the meaning of *allow* or *permit*. So in the King James Bible we read: "Suffer the little children to come unto me ...". "Our peace in his will" is found in various classical theological references and in Dante. "Suffer me not to be separated" is found in an ancient hymn.¹⁶ "And let my cry come unto Thee" is also from church liturgy, as a response to the priest's words: "Hear my prayer, O Lord" (Ps. 102). We should not forget that the whole poem is essentially a prayer, though more complicated than ones we might usually whisper. Indeed, at his point of turning, the only answer to the wasteland experience and the dead end of the hollow men's experience, is prayer. Prayer is the turning point (Spender, 1975:134). It was a shock for the lost generation of that time to identify with Eliot's powerful description of cultural despair in his earlier poems, only to find him setting off in an entirely new direction – even if this was hinted at earlier. To take religious conversion seriously was a step too far for many of his admirers (Gordon, 1972:93). Striving for union with God, Eliot could say, is the way of forgetting oneself and becoming open to renewal. None of this is the easy evangelism of "come to Jesus and He will take away your troubles" (Schneider, 1975:116). Christianity for Eliot meant the narrow way of repentance. He could say in his essays, along with Pascal, that despair is a necessary "prelude to, and element in, the joy of faith" (Schneider, 1975:117; with references to Pascal & Eliot). If, in the categories of Dante, *The wasteland* was Eliot's *inferno*, then *Ash-Wednesday* is his *purgatorio*, his repentance and cleansing.

We have seen that a reading of the poem could more or less have a dead end in following all the references to their many-sources. Eliot himself said that poems must be read for their first impressions and music if they are to help us in a wholesome way. Having a deeper understanding through the references and word-plays, and the multiple meanings of unusual phrases, allows us to reread the

16 The hymn called *Anima Christi*, cf. Herbert, 1982:47.

poem, as some do at the beginning of Lent, in order to benefit from the central message and the rich unfolding of that message in surprising details and expressions. The poem is meant to be a turning point for the reader. It can be balanced by other poems Eliot wrote in these years, for example, the challenge to the *Magi* which gives them the question of the sweeping impact of the gospel on culture, but also *A song for Simeon*, which expresses the calmer joy of faith – for like Simeon in Luke’s Gospel, “Eliot had waited long years for the coming of Jesus” (Sencourt, 1971:140 ff.).

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