A. The Poetic Mode and Religion

(a) The General Context

The word 'religion' has come to acquire certain pejorative connotations. To some of us, it almost always seems to stand for blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition and exploitation, and the preservation of vested interests. These negative manifestations, however, are mere aberrations and do not reflect the true spirit of religion. In its essence, religion is a positive force which informs man's moral and spiritual ideals and aspirations.

Poets, everywhere and always, have experienced what John Keats called 'the wakeful anguish of the soul' even as they have found the world of palpable reality inadequate and imperfect. Like Gautama the Buddha, they too have yearned for emancipation from human suffering, for liberation from temporal bounds, for the light that does not fail, for immortality. Religion deals with the inner life of man and his relationship with the Ultimate Reality. Since these form the core of much human experience, they have been made the subject as much of discursive literature as of poetry. Poets in all ages have taken recourse to poetry as a mode of embodying their moral and spiritual vision of life.
In India, we have had the great religious epics The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. In the western world, we have the great religious epic of the Italian poet Dante, The Divine Comedy. The medieval Indian saints like Kabir and Meera sang devotional songs. In England, John Milton wrote the Christian epic Paradise Lost. Even in our own times, the religious concerns of poets have not abated. Though there has been a radical shift in poetic technique, the poetic vision remains. There is abundance of spirituality in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden. Among the great American poets, it was a passion with Walt Whitman. And William Carlos Williams would match Eliot in his spiritual perception of life in a modernist idiom. In our own country, Rabindranath Tagore won the Nobel Prize for his Geetanjali, a collection of devotional and mystic songs.

There is no denying the fact that there exists a large body of poetry which is explicitly 'religious' in its character. It exists alongside an equally large body of poetry which seems secular in character. What should, however, hold our attention is the fact, largely neglected, that most of the poems which we categorise as secular end up by imparting to the perceptive reader an insight or vision which is essentially religious in nature. Implicitly though, such poems tend to reinforce our belief in the moral and spiritual values of life. If a so-called 'secular' poem
affects the reader in a manner so as to enlarge the area of his affections or sympathies, tends to humanize him by urging him to be more compassionate, if it ends up by raising his gaze heavenward, or fortifying his belief in goodness, may be indirectly, that poem is, to that extent, 'religious' in its effect.

Poetry can thus be a mode of religion without avowedly professing to be so. Such, for instance, is Chaucer's Prologue to The Canterbury Tales, or Browning's Andrea del Sarto. These poems foster our innate love of the virtuous and the pure, our native revulsion against vice, our spiritual craving to belong to a higher and more perfect order of existence. Mark, in this regard, the concluding lines of Andrea del Sarto:

What would one have?  
In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance --
Four great walls in the New Jerusalem,
Meted on each side by the angel’s reed,
For Leonard, Rafael, Angelo and me
To cover -- the three first without a wife,
While I have mine: So -- they still overcome
Because there’s still Lucrezia, -- as I choose.
Again the Cousin’s whistle : Go, my love.

Significantly, T.S. Eliot observed that Vaughan, Southwell and George Herbert 'are not great religious poets in the sense in which Dante, or Corneille, or Racine, even in those of their plays which do not touch upon Christian themes, are great Christian religious poets. Or even in the sense in
which Villon and Baudelaire, with all their imperfections and
delinquencies, are Christian poets. H.N. Fairchild in his
Preface to Religious Trends in English Poetry talks of "the
basically religious art of the poet", remarking that there is
a large poetic element in religion and a large religious
element in poetry. It is more appropriate, says Vincent
Buckley, to speak in terms of the religious nature of poetry
than confine the term "sacred" to purely religious poetry. In
his view, the element of the "sacred" has continued to occur,
in a variety of forms and in diverse ways, in English poetry
right up to modern times. It would be appropriate for our
purpose to take into account some of the major voices on the
subject.

The way that Plato sought was the mystic way. His
task as an educator was to "turn the whole soul round to see
the light of the sun...by studies which tend to draw the mind
from the sensible to the real, the visible to the invisible." He, therefore, insisted that only poems that are
hymns to the Gods or praise of great men may be admitted to
the State. Plato, in fact, demanded a poetry of a
philosophical kind, produced in the light of ideal
knowledge. To him, all the arts are "imitative", but the
objects represented are not the deceptive phenomena of sense
but essential truths apprehended by the mind and dimly
described in phenomena. The process by which the artist
apprehends such truths is not one of dialectic but of inspiration. Inspired therewith by God, the poet in turn inspires his interpreter, and through the interpreter the magnetic current passes to the audience.\(^7\)

To Aristotle, poetic "imitation" meant "producing" or "creating according to a true idea" derived from the general concept which the intellect spontaneously abstracts from the details of the sense. The poet, in his view, brings to light the ideal which is only half-revealed in the world of reality.\(^8\) Aristotle's idea of purgation of feelings brought about by poetry has had an enormous influence into quite recent times.

Critics from Horace through Longinus to Philip Sidney generally averred that poetry aims to delight and teach. To Sidney, poetry taught by imitating the "inconceivable excellence of God", by dealing with philosophical matters, and by presenting histories.\(^9\) Boccaccio held that poetry and theology were essentially the same. For him, poetry was useful and the delight that came from it served as "a means to ethical knowledge and moral betterment.\(^{10}\) Renaissance critics like Antonio Minturno attributed to poetry a didactic, moralistic function, ascribing it to the purgation of feelings which poetry brought about.\(^{11}\)
William Blake, at once mystic and poet, was conscious of his role as a "prophet"; it was his vocation to bring mystical illumination within the range of ordinary man. In his "Introduction" to the Songs of Experience, he makes a fervent plea for the religion of poetry:

Hear the voice of the Bard!
Who Present, Past, & Future, sees;
Whose ears have heard
The Holy Word
That walk'd among the ancient trees,

Calling the lapsed Soul,
And weeping in the evening dew;
That might controll
The starry pole,
And fallen, fallen light renew!

The lines bring to mind Northrop Frye's remark that a "poet's specific task has something to do with visualising the Promised Land": on the historical level, he may often be a lost leader, a Moses floundering in a legal desert. To Eliot too, the poet is the Word in the desert that is most likely to hear "The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera."

Wordsworth believed in the "sanctity and truth" of poetry. Poetry, he said, "enlightened" the reader's understanding as well as "strengthened and purified" his affections.

For Coleridge, the "primary imagination is a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation
The object of poetic imagination, he said, is to "idealize and unify".

In his *Defence of Poetry*, Shelley observed that a poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one. The supreme poets, he remarked, perceive and teach "the truth of things". Poetry, in his view, enlarges the area of human sympathies.

Matthew Arnold, in his essay "The Study of Poetry", made a prophecy about the scope of poetry: "More and more mankind will discover", he said, "that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry."18

The positivists may dismiss religion as mere illusion as it has no "empirical" basis. But critics like F.R. Leavis, Yvor Winters and D.H. Lawrence have felt that without any ideological base to inspire the artist, his work as a pure piece of art is meaningless.19 To T.E. Hulme, who was at the head of the Imagist School and who wanted the boundaries between art and religion to be firmly drawn, true art could flourish only against the background of a well-defined ethical system. The poet would not propagate these values mechanically, nevertheless his would be an aesthetic commitment to the system of values adhered to by his age.20
W.B. Yeats had to push his work further than an art-for-art's sake theory of poetry. Literature had, for him, to have conviction. "A symbol", he wrote in an essay on Blake, "is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence". In "The Autumn of the Body" he wrote: "The arts are, I believe, about to take about their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of the priests, and to lead us back upon our journey by filling our thoughts with the essence of things, and not with things." He held that "the more a poet rids his verses of heterogeneous knowledge and irrelevant analysis, and purifies his mind with elaborate art, the more does the little ritual of his verse resemble the great ritual of Nature, and become mysterious and inscrutable."

According to I.A. Richards, various theological, mythological, metaphysical and mystical views are highly valuable as ideas around which human feelings have richly accreted themselves or as metaphors expressing obscure truths about our feelings. Poetry, in his view, is "in some degree, a substitute for religion - not for the dogmas but for the practice of religion". We can read poetry profitably, he said, not so much for what it says to us as for what it does to us. (Emphasis added) The great poets, Emerson had said, are judged by the frame of mind they induce.
The ambition of truly great poets, said Stephen Spender, is:

that their lips, still touched with fire,
Should tell of the Spirit, clothed from head
to foot in song

and

Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother,
With noise and fog the flowering of the spirit.24

For many writers, myth is the common denominator between poetry and religion. For Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, 'Religious myth is the large-scale authorization of poetic metaphor.' In their view, both metaphor and myth indicate the pull of poetry towards 'picture' and 'world' on the one hand and towards religion or Weltanschauung on the other.25

Philip Wheelwright, protesting that by positivists 'religious truth and poetic truth are dismissed as fictions', asserts that the 'needed perspective is...a mytho-religious one.'26 A representative of this view is Arthur Machen to whom religion, i.e. myth and ritual constitute the large climate within which alone poetry (i.e. symbolism, aesthetic contemplation) can breathe and grow.27

The very act of poetry, observes Donald Davie, implies a religious view of the world.28
We are not, however, to confuse the functions of a poet with those of a priest. The latter's business is 'to instruct and guide', the former's 'to stir and vivify, to inspire, energise, and delight'.

Actually, there is no truth cognizable by man which may not form the stuff of poetry. It does not matter if it is some moral sentiment or some glimpse of the spiritual world. It is, however, necessary for that truth to cease to be a mere notion of the understanding. It must pass inward and get vitalized there so that it shapes itself into 'living images which kindle the passion and affections, and stimulate the whole man'.

(b) Eliot's Views

It is a common impression, though a partial one, that Eliot tries to impose upon us a conception of poetry as some sort of pure and rare aesthetic essence'. Such an impression is fostered by Eliot's own statements. The poet-critic maintains throughout that art is independent and supreme in its own sphere. In 'The Function of Criticism', he assumes that a work of art is an end in itself. In 'Experiment in Criticism' (1929), he repudiates the notion that literature is the expression of philosophical or religious intuition. In 'A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry', Eliot asserts that literature can be no substitute for religion or philosophy.
The difference between art and belief, however, is repeatedly emphasized by Eliot for the obvious reason that it is here that abuses have most frequently occurred: 'Our literature is a substitute for religion, and so is our religion'. And he chiefly blames Matthew Arnold for this abuse because it was he who made the 'striking, dangerous and subversive assertion' that poetry is 'a criticism of life'. In Eliot's view, poetry and religion must be perceived as sovereign and autonomous disciplines.

In spite of all these assertions, however, Eliot admits that there is a necessary connection between religion and poetry. This is evident from his disagreement with I.A.Richard's observation that in *The Waste Land* the poet had effected 'a complete severance between poetry and all beliefs'. Significantly, in 'The Lesson of Baudelaire' (1922), Eliot remarks that 'all first-rate poetry is occupied with morality', and that what matters to a poet is the problem of good and evil. And, in *The Use of Poetry*, he affirms that aesthetic studies should be 'guided by sound theology'.

Quite significant in this regard is Eliot's concept of tradition and impersonality. In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', the poet-critic speaks of the need for the artist to acquire a sense of history and tradition, i.e.
a sense of "the timeless as well as the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together'. He also stresses the need for the artist's "continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable'.

Eliot's ultimate views on the question of impersonality in poetry are thus determined by the sense of an Absolute beneath the changing phenomena. Remarkably, in his 'Commentary' in The Criterion of Oct. 1932, Eliot observes that "in the greatest poetry there is always a hint of something behind, something impersonal, something in relation to which the author has been no more than the passive (if not always pure) medium." It is here that Eliot's notion of "the intensity of the artistic process", of "concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation", approaches a kind of aesthetic mysticism which accepts the idea of supernatural inspiration.

Equally significant is Eliot's use of "objective correlatives" which give his poems two layers of meaning --the completely objectified meaning on the surface, and, on a deeper level, the generalized meaning which is not without some philosophic, religious or mystic import.

On the whole, Eliot is in agreement with Jacques Maritain who holds that fine arts, even though an end in themselves and completely disinterested, can, help us on the road to salvation by the secondary effects of the emotions.
they arouse in us. For, the objects of art can be read as signs of a transcendent reality. And the purity of the artist, though it cannot save his soul, can reflect, and so prepare, moral purity. It is in a similar vein that in "Religion and Literature", Eliot remarks that what we read "affects our moral and religious existence". Poetry, he avers, can help us to approach an understanding of the ultimate reality. It can give a sensitive reader the assurance that there is this kind of reality.

In his later essays too, as for instance in "Notes towards the Definition of Culture", Eliot considers art as "one of the essential constituents" of the soil in which religion flourishes. In effect, aesthetic sensibility and spiritual perception may so coalesce in a work of art that "in the end, the judgment of a work of art by either religious or aesthetic standards will come to the same thing."

All the same, Eliot does not subscribe to the view that poetry should set forth a belief, though he would much rather subscribe to the view of poetry as "mantra or aspiration"; "poetry cannot be mantra again though I wish that I was living in an age when one could recite only mantras". Actually, Eliot admits to having learnt from the Purgatorio "that a straightforward philosophical statement can be great poetry".
Altogether, what Eliot desires is a literature which should be unconsciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian. He subscribes to Maritain's view that the sole end of art is the work to be done and the beauty of the work. But, in its human aspect, art has a moral dimension and is subordinate to the sanctification of man and to the human values.

The following lines from the ninth Chorus of The Rock, wherein Eliot regards the creative act as both a gift of God and as service of God, reflect Eliot's final view of art:

LORD, shall we not bring these gifts to Your service? Shall we not bring to Your service all our powers For life, for dignity, grace and order, And intellectual pleasures of the senses? The LORD who created must wish us to create And employ our creation again in His service Which is already His service in creating.

B. The Biographical Context : Early Influences

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri. The son of a New England schoolteacher and a St. Louis merchant, he was the last of the seven children. Raised in a household of people much older than himself, he had few playmates and spent most of his time reading. The foremost influence on his life was that of his family.
The pervasive influence at home was that of Eliot's grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot. He came from Boston, the seat of the Eliots. He was a Unitarian minister who left the Harvard Divinity School in the role of a missionary and came to St. Louis, the frontier city of the 'Wild West', to help found a Unitarian Church and a University. He worked with the poor and the sick, despite his weak constitution, with an indefatigable fervour as though some angel or demon were perched upon his shoulder.¹

Although William Greenleaf died the year before Thomas was born, he was one who ruled his family from the grave. Eliot was brought up to be very much aware of him: "The standard of conduct was that which my grandfather had set: our moral judgements, our decisions between duty and self-indulgence, were taken as if, like Moses, he had brought down the Tables of the Law, any deviation from which would be sinful..."² Eliot's mother had published a biography of her father-in-law and dedicated it to her children 'Lest They Forget'.

To Eliot, the grandfather was an exemplary figure who championed the subordination of selfish interests to the good of the Community and the Church, and interfused in his own life piety with public enterprise. Eliot was brought up to applaud his grandfather's missionary zeal. No wonder, said a cousin of Eliot, even as a boy, "Tom had a great sense of mission".³
It was also from his grandfather that Eliot seems to have derived the Puritanical streak which made him eschew even the simple and harmless pleasures of life. This influence was to last a life-time.

An equally formidable influence on Eliot was that of his mother, Charlotte Champe Eliot, herself a poet of great religious conviction, from whom he seemed to derive his very sensibility. High-minded and plain-living, she was a woman of rare moral passion who taught her children to perfect themselves each day, 'to make the best of every faculty and control every tendency to evil'. She wrote of 'the vision of the seer' and 'the prophet's warning cry', and dwelt upon the incidents in the lives of the Apostles and the Saints. She exhorted those who 'by gift of genius' are set apart, to endure with faith periods of religious despair. It was her preoccupation with the state of loss and recovery of faith that was to be Eliot's passion too. And, the religious imagery of her poetry was to recur in Eliot's, charged with a new energy in images such as those of 'the beatific light', the fires of lust and purgation, the pilgrimage across the 'desert waste', as well as water, the 'celestial fountain'. However, there is in her poetry a note of abiding optimism and assurance of grace which is largely missing from her son's. Nevertheless, it is said that before he left his mother's side, Eliot seems to have understood the crucial
issues of life, like blank annihilation, the worth of life so incomplete and mortal, and the way through the impasse.

It was from his mother that Eliot seems to have derived his strong antagonism to the world of 'sense'. Charlotte's exhortations in her poems to 'loose the spirit from its mesh,'6 formed, as it were, an enduring backdrop to Eliot's own hatred of the world of insistent material facts. One may, therefore, concede that the doting mother nourished her son's intellectual and spiritual development at the expense of his sensuality and independence.7 There is pervasive echo in much of Eliot's work of the following lines from her long poem Savonarola:

...and while my eyes
Are closed I see it all. There is no hell
More horrible than this.8

Nor should one lose sight of Eliot's early memory of his Irish nursemaid, Annie Dunne to whom he was 'greatly attached', her prayers in the little Catholic Church, and her discussing with him, at the age of six, the existence of God.9 Undoubtedly, therefore, his beginnings made him a God-oriented person.

Eliot's childhood impressions were mainly of St. Louis, an industrial city in decay. The area of the city in which he grew up was becoming shabbier and grimier, declining
into a slum. To the boy's sensitive mind, the city's chimneys exhaled urban squalor. When he was fourteen, the city's stinking corruption might have revolted him. No doubt, he seems to have harboured the notion that this was a place to which he did not truly belong. Later, during his Harvard days, Eliot was to be equally estranged from Boston.

In the autumn of 1898, Eliot went to Smith Academy, a preparatory school for the University. Going by the account of one of his contemporaries, he was rather dreamy and bookish. While here, Eliot studied Greek, Latin, French, German, Ancient History and English. In his final year at Smith, he studied, among other things, Virgil, Ovid and Homer. He had already read Milton and Browning as part of his school curriculum. In his reading of The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, as translated by Edward Fitzgerald, Eliot discerned 'an image of the world, and of himself, larger than any he had known before.' The reading made him wish to be a poet. But the direction in which he was led is suggested by the memory he cherished of an epigraph (taken from a poem by Henry King) of Poe's story 'The Assignation':

Stay for me there, I will not fail
To meet thee in that hollow vale...

As a boy, Eliot also read Sir Edwin Arnold's The Light of Asia, a poetic history of the Buddha. All these he assimilated to an unusual extent.
Eliot spent his most formative years in Boston -- a society going to seed. The authority of the class to which Eliot belonged, genteel responsible descendants of the Puritans, was fast being replaced the rising mercantile class which was indifferent to truth, to love, and to religion -- all things, in fact, which Eliot tried to recover. The source of the cultural deadness lay in the Brahmins' tenacious gentility. 'Serious poetry, profound religion (Calvinism, for instance)', remarked George Santayana, a Harvard teacher, 'are the joys of an unhappiness that confesses itself; but when a genteel tradition forbids people to confess that they are unhappy, serious poetry and profound religion are closed to them by that. The smug righteousness of Eliot's class was the triumph of a bourgeoisie without a trace of aristocracy. To quote from The Bostonians, it was 'a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solicitudes and coddled sensibilities which, if we don't look out, will usher in the region of medicrity, of the feeblest and flattest and most pretentious that has ever been.' Eliot suffered from the emotional inertia of Boston Brahmins and reacted against the moral blight.

Disgusted by his own class, Eliot explored life in the slums, amid squalor. But he found it too as enervating as the well-to-do Boston squares. It was his first image of a
"waste land'. 'For those', observes Peter Ackroyd, 'who feel themselves to be set apart, and who have found in their reading of literature a sense of life and of values not available to them in their ordinary lives, there is a terrible emptiness about such a country at such a time.' It was, therefore, quite inevitable for a person of Eliot's sensibility to seek a tradition or order of his own. Like Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, he had to create it for himself, going to sources as remote as Platonism, Buddhism or medieval literature.

Eliot's fervent nature found little nourishment in Unitarianism, the religion of his family. He found it morally strict rather than spiritual. It was not concerned with perfection but with a 'practical' code of conduct. Eliot, who was always acutely conscious of the insidious power of evil, yearned for an older, stronger discipline, undiluted by the Enlightenment. In his redefinition of the Christian experience in terms of human need and desperate faith, in his revival of the ideas of depravity and damnation, in his belief in the Incarnation, Eliot disavowed his Unitarian background. Like Henry Adams who turned away from the barren chaos of American life to the certitudes of Dante and St. Thomas, Eliot yearned for the lost traditions of Catholicism and endeavoured to reclaim them.
By the time Eliot came to Harvard for his graduate studies, he was so widely read that he carried an air of "scholarly detachment". To most students, he seemed a bit of a recluse. Critical of other students' laziness and lack of concentration, Harvard was, for Eliot, essentially a place for unremitting work. He was acutely, rather painfully, conscious of the passage of time and of the need to "redeem" it.

Eliot's association with two or three eminent teachers, at this stage, markedly influenced his personality. One of them was the poet and philosopher George Santayana, whose philosophy, based on disillusion, assumed that life had no meaning or metaphysical import. Nevertheless, he did accept "a pure and radical transcendentalism", which recognized no facts but only "essences" corresponding to the platonic ideas. To him, the realm of essence was an eternal and infinite one, to be penetrated by a species of thinking akin to poetry.\textsuperscript{15}

Irving Babbitt, exerted a more powerful influence upon Eliot. He made his class read widely in the classics of the past, and alerted his students to the dangers of the modern secular world. In his \textit{Literature and the American College}, he came down heavily on the American, and indeed Unitarian, "notions of progress". He took strong exception to institutions like Harvard subscribing to the then nascent
egalitarian and industrial culture. He advocated 'standards' and 'discipline', as against the conventional demands for growth, prosperity and success.

It was, however, in his paradigm of the classicist that Babbitt held for Eliot the greatest appeal. Babbitt repudiated 'Rousseauism' for its dubious notion that human personality was innately good. He envisioned order and authority as imperative to check man's equally innate tendency to evil.

It was Babbitt too who first directed Eliot's attention to the study of Sanskrit and Oriental religions. Eliot was greatly impressed by Babbitt's notion of 'impersonality' which suggested a certain aloofness and invulnerability -- aspects of that shuddering disaffection towards the ordinary world which was to emerge in Eliot's early poetry. In fact, Eliot was strongly drawn towards Buddhism because, as Babbitt pointed out in his essay 'Buddha and the Occident', 'the temper of the Buddhist is more impersonal than that of the Christian'.

Apart from these two teachers, Eliot also found his course with Palmer useful. Palmer taught pre-Socratic philosophy, and introduced Eliot to the Heraclitean notion that the highest good was a combination of the greatest intellectual activity and the greatest receptivity to the divine around us.
However, Eliot's reading in December 1908, of Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* made the most everlasting impact on him as a poet. Symons presented the artist in the role of a privileged seer. He advised poets to wait on every symbol by which 'the soul of things can be made visible'. In his view, the sacred task of the poet was to shed the 'old bondage of exteriority' and become a prophet of the unknown. It was through Symons that Eliot came in touch with the late nineteenth-century French poets like Jules Laforgue and Baudelaire in whom he discovered a strong spiritual kinship. He shared with them a powerful sense of evil and a passionate antagonism towards society. In Laforgue especially, Eliot discovered an alienation from the world and from women, as well as a yearning for a perfection not to be found in this matter-of-fact world.

In 1910, around the time he graduated from Harvard College, while walking on the crowded and noisy streets of Boston, Eliot experienced a timeless moment of peace. The external world of fact seemed to fall away from him. 'You may call it communion with the Divine or you may call it temporary crystallization of the mind', Eliot explained later. The memory of this bliss, however, proved to be a torment, reminding him that there was an area of experience which was just beyond his grasp and which the sordid images of contemporary life could not comprehend. Eliot later
admitted to being naturally inclined to the metaphysical. He treasured such beatific moments which were to recur in his later life too. In each case, the intimation seemed to disperse and obliterate ordinary reality. All the same, the mystical flash in the spring of 1910 remained for the poet the defining landmark of his life.

The year 1910 marked a watershed in Eliot's life, the beginning of a religious ferment and a rebellion against the world. In the autumn of that year Eliot took the first radical step in severing himself from his earlier moorings to live in Paris. To him France stood for poetry and wishing to be a poet, he expected to be nourished by the kind of intellectual ferment he had missed in America. He also hoped that a poet's solitude there would be quite a different thing from the barren isolation he had known in Boston. But this fervent hope was to be belied. As in Boston, so there, he was filled and bored with the smug formulas of academics. Nevertheless, in 1911, Eliot did witness la ferveur bergsonniene and took in the anti-democratic, anti-romantic notions of the Action Francaise, though these did not provide him the larger philosophic framework he needed. The latter was to come to him eventually from men outside his immediate milieu, from Dante and St. John of the Cross. Significantly, however, Eliot was impressed by Bergson's belief that in the act of poetic composition, 'intuition attains the absolute',
and that reality can only be grasped by an act of ‘intellectual sympathy’.21

Back at Harvard, in 1912, for his Master's degree in philosophy, Eliot devoted himself to the study of Eastern philosophy. He studied Sanskrit and Pali under Charles Lanman and Patanjali's metaphysics under James Woods. He tried to master, in the original language, the Pancha-Tantra, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Jatakas (the sacred books of Buddhism) and attended a full-year course on Buddhism under Masaharu Anesaki. Significantly, Eliot's attraction to Buddhism was not simply philosophical. He was irresistibly drawn to the Buddhist concept of Nirvana -- the extinction of desire, the freedom from worldly attachments.

It was during this time too that Eliot steeped himself in Dante's vision by memorizing long passages from The Divine Comedy. The Italian poet became the most profound and insistent influence in his life because, as Eliot said, he helped him see the connection between the medieval Christian concept of inferno and modern life.

However, by the time Eliot undertook graduate studies in philosophy, Harvard had lost the idealist bias and was dominated by the New Realists. Eliot, who disapproved of the philosophic schism from religion, revered philosophy in its original connotation of the study of wisdom. There was one
teacher though, Harvard's leading idealist philosopher, Josiah Royce, who helped Eliot bridge the gulf between philosophy and religion. He proposed an absolute, "a world soul that reconciled the antithesis between the finite and the infinite. He perceived evolution as the form in which the temporal constantly yearned to over-reach itself, and, with the ever-increasing growth of consciousness, strove for the eternal'.

It was his course with Royce that awakened Eliot's interest in F.H. Bradley who was yet another important influence on him in the field of philosophy. Bradley, who was partly inspired by Hegel and Lotze, was an exponent of the new idealism, and an opponent of the Utilitarian philosophy of Bentham and Mill. Eliot, who later worked on Bradley for his doctoral dissertation, discovered in his philosophical treatise, Appearance and Reality, a symbiotic affinity with his own awareness of the limitations of conceptual knowledge. The idealistic philosophies of Royce and Bradley never lost their hold on Eliot.

The achievement of saints had an abiding fascination for Eliot. Only saints can know "a life time's death in love, / Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender', Eliot wrote in 1941. And, during his last years at Harvard, Eliot devoted himself to the study of the lives of saints and mystics like St. Theresa, Dame Julian of Norwich, Mme Guyon, Walter
Hilton, St. John of the Cross, Jacob Bohme, and St. Bernard. He took notes from Evelyn Underhill's book, Mysticism (1911), and copied in detail one passage which explains vision as a work of art created from real experience: "If we would cease, once for all, to regard visions and voices as objective, and be content to see in them forms of symbolic expression, ways in which the sub-conscious activity of the spiritual self reach the surface-mind, many of the disharmonies noticeable in visionary experience which have teased the devout, and delighted the agnostic, would fade away. Visionary experience...is a picture which the mind constructs...from raw materials already at its disposal." 25 This passage is a clear exposition of the nature of Eliot's own poetic composition.

Eliot's star-crossed marriage of 1915 was the ultimate cataclysmic experience of the inferno through which he had to pass, like a latter-day pilgrim, before awakening into pristine Christianity.
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A. The Poetic Mode and Religion

(a) The General Context

6. R.A. Scott-James, The Making of Literature, p. 44.
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10. Ibid.
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23. G.S.Fraser, The Modern Writer and His world, pp. 385-86.
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18. Ibid., p. 15.
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