Eliot's Dedication to Jean Verdenal

Dedicating his first volume of poems *PRUFROCK and Other Observations 1917* to his poet-friend in Paris, Jean Verdenal, who was killed in the First World War on the Anglo-French expedition to the Dardanelles in 1915, Eliot quotes lines from Dante (*Purgatorio* xxi, 133-6) occasioned there by an "affecting" ¹ meeting of the souls of the Roman poets Statius and Virgil. Just as Statius bows to touch Virgil's feet, the latter reminds him of the fact of their being mere shadows. To this, Statius says:

> Now can you understand the quantity of love that warms me towards you, so that I forget our vanity, and treat the shadows like the solid thing.²

The lines have aptly been regarded as "a testimony" to the strength of Eliot's friendship with Jean Verdenal.³ To Eliot, the poet, however, they would signify much more than just this.

For one thing, they seem to indicate that it is man's vanity that stands in the way of his apprehension of the truth of human spirit. Prompted by love, though, one might overcome this barrier. Dante's words, thus, underline a major
thematic concern of Eliot. The full ramifications of 'love' and 'vanity' were to be subsequently explored by Eliot at every step of his spiritual odyssey.

For another, there is, in the Dedication, a tacit realization that human soul is no mere shadow but 'the solid thing', i.e. the only ultimate and 'absolute Reality'. Eliot would, doubtless, associate Dante's words with the Absolute Idealism of ancient Indian philosophy which held that the Reality was 'one and spiritual, Brahman' and that 'the world of sense perception was relative and deceptive, maya'. As the Bhagavad-Gita says:

Not subject to change  
Is the infinite Atman,  
Without beginning,  
Beyond the gunas....

In deciphering Dante's words in this light, Eliot would seem to focus on, what he later called in 'Religion and Literature', 'the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life : of something which I assume to be our primary concern.'

For still another thing, Statius's act of bowing to touch Virgil's feet may be regarded as an instance of the greatest, the most difficult of the Christian virtues, the virtue of humility which is 'necessary if the soul is to be exalted'. It was to inspire the protagonist of Ash-Wednesday:
Lord, I am not worthy
Lord, I am not worthy
And, in 'East Coker', the poet would proclaim:

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.  

It is remarkable that this virtue had for the poet not only an ethical and spiritual but also a great literary value:

"...I am sure that for a poet humility is the most essential virtue. That means, not to be influenced by the desire for applause, not to be influenced by the desire to excel anybody else, not to be influenced by what your readers expect of you, not to write something merely because it is high time you wrote something, but to wait patiently, not caring how you compare with other poets, for the impulse which you cannot resist...." 

Last but not least, the lines from Dante underscore Eliot's allegiance to tradition upon which he was so heavily to draw in the course of his poetry. Subtly though, the poet has, via Statius, made obeisance to the master spirits of all ages represented in the figure of Virgil. Covertly too, he has adhered to the timeless tradition of seeking the benediction of the Muse, here the guru, before undertaking the sacred but arduous poetic task which involves "the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling". 

Touch as they do the tip of Eliot's poetic iceberg, the prefatory lines from Dante may be seen as constituting...
the quintessence of Eliot's vision of life and forming, as it were, the philosophic basis of his poetry. In view of the epic dimension and structure of his complete poetic output, with three well-marked stages that correspond with those of Dante's Divine Comedy, the lines dedicated to Jean Verdenal, placed at the head of Eliot's poetry, might be perceived as a disguised version of the conventional Invocation.

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THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK

I

In his Introduction to Ezra Pound: Selected Poems (1928) Eliot cautions the readers against confusing 'the material (borrowed from other authors) and the use which the author makes of it.' In his own poetry too, Eliot makes a creative use of his borrowed material to serve his own context. The epigraph of The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock is a case in point. The lines from Dante, apart from establishing a relationship between the medieval inferno and modern life, have a certain metaphoric strain that must have held a special appeal for Eliot vis-à-vis Prufrock:

'If I thought that my reply would be to some one who would ever return to earth, this flame would remain without further movement; but as no one has ever returned alive from this gulf, if what I hear is true, I can answer you with no fear of infamy.'

51
The "flame" in these lines may represent Prufrock's inner self to whom he is making a confession of his true state. This inward flame would not enter into communion with him if it thought that it conversed with "someone who would ever return to earth". Implicit in this remark is the inner self's hope that, after his disillusionment with the world of sense, Prufrock would never re-turn to earthly desires. The epigraph thus indicates that Prufrock is heading towards a stage in his spiritual evolution where he would merge into, say, the protagonist of Ash-Wednesday who does not hope to turn to earthly passions:

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn... 4

Secondly, the inner self is also aware that "no one has ever returned alive from this gulf", that the fires of lust are all-consuming. The fact that Prufrock is turning to his inner self is proof enough that, even though he is surrounded by the fires of lust, he has not entered this inferno, that his conscience is alive and awake. And, lastly, there is indeed no fear of infamy involved in admitting one's weaknesses and failures, one's ignominies and shames, to one's own inner self.

Coming to the poem proper, the use of "then" in the opening line is crucial. The "you and I", the two selves of
Prufrock, venture out in quest of love in spite of the knowledge that the social ambience is not conducive to this quest. The 'then' is indicative of the foreknowledge that Prufrock is doomed to failure in his mission. Nevertheless, he resolves to explore the possibility. An echo of this can be heard in Eliot's 'Little Gidding':

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started...  

The next two lines spell out the ambience against which Prufrock has to contend. The evening is under the hypnotic spell of ether which is emblematic of desire. As a result, the evening's consciousness is paralysed. It is in a state of stupor. This idea finds expression in 'East Coker' where the mind 'under ether' is conscious but 'conscious of nothing'. The ambience of desire is not only all-pervasive but also ranged 'against the sky', the latter representing the higher impulses of life.

And Prufrock, apparently an indistinguishable part of the ambience, is essentially an odd man out. His sensibility is different. He can perceive how the fog of desire operates in a slow, quiet and sly manner. The yellow fog, the yellow smoke, like a cat (another image of desire) rubs its back and muzzle upon the 'window-panes', blurring the faculties of human perception, impairing the sense of what Eliot called in
his essay on Baudelaire "moral Good and Evil which are not natural Good and Bad or puritan Right and Wrong". The fog does here what the "lunar incantations" do in *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*:

Dissolve the floors of memory  
And all its clear relations,  
Its divisions and precisions...

And when memory is affected, perception suffers for "memory is to perception as the pool to the ripples." The fog envelops the evening in its sensuous folds, licks into its corners, and puts it to "sleep":

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!  
Smoothed by long fingers...

The "yellow fog", turning into "yellow smoke", lingers "upon the pools that stand in drains". These are the pools of lust which stagnate and stink. The revellers in lust, however, blinded by the yellow smoke, partake of this sickly fare. Their blind act is reminiscent of the image of morbid lust in *Rhapsody*:

"Remark the cat which flattens itself in the gutter  
Slips out its tongue  
And devours a morsel of rancid butter."

The reference to "smoke" and "chimneys" is indicative of the fires of lust. The resulting "soot" paves the way for, what the poet calls in *Preludes*, "The conscience of a
blackened street. The 'yellow' of the fog and smoke is also indicative of a state of decay. It is this blend of fog and smoke (the smoke carrying added connotation of these relationships of lust ending in smoke) that 'steals' furtively, 'pounces' upon its prey, and finally, settles in a state of 'slumber'. The fog is part of the symbolic landscape, meant to provide insights 'without the extraneous aids of rhetoric or logical reflection and statement'.

Having observed his social ambience from close quarters and over a long span of time, Prufrock sees through the underlying reality of

The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells...

The image of 'sawdust' gets amplified in Preludes where it signifies the dissolute women who are 'trampled' by insistent feet. The women are likened to 'oyster-shells', shiny and polished from without but quite empty within. It will not perhaps be inapt to recall the Indian poet Tagore writing of ignorant people as naive children playing with empty shells on the seashores of the world:

They build their houses with sand, and they play with empty shells....children gather pebbles and scatter them again. They seek not for hidden treasures...

Endowed with a philosophic bent of mind, Prufrock contemplates the nature of 'half-deserted' streets. They
appear to him to be as dubious as the argument that prompts one to take recourse to them. The "argument" of "insidious intent" could easily be an allusion to the Freudian argument that places sex at the core of human consciousness as the primary driving impulse and pleads against repression of desire. It is a consideration of this argument that leads Prufrock to his "overwhelming question" which recurs repeatedly in the poem.

The lines "In the room the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo" do not merely describe the scene. They make a telling comment on the nature of these women. The women here "come and go" implying thereby that they do not enter into an enduring relationship. It is ironical that they talk of art and artists who endure. The elegant talk of art, moreover, is only an expression of their vanity, for their life is not inspired by any artistic vision. They talk high but act low. This hypocrisy is evident from their base use of Michelangelo as a standard only to measure man's physical potency, for the great Italian artist had painted human figures of enviable physical vitality and strength. Prufrock who is growing old, who has "a bald spot" in the middle of his thinning hair, and whose "arms and legs" too are thin, has little chance of success with them. No doubt, their eyes fix him "in a formulated phrase" and Prufrock suffers the ignominy of "wriggling on the wall" like a worm.
The passage beginning 'And indeed there will be time' does not focus so much upon Prufrock's tendency to procrastinate (which is the general thrust of critical argument) as upon the inevitability of certain stages in the course of man's encounter with desire. Prufrock has experienced the inexorability of these stages. The passage, therefore, is a distillation of this wisdom in general philosophical terms. The echo here of lines from the Bible 'To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven...' indicates that these observations have the sanction of the Scriptures. This is one of the many instances in the poem that show that Prufrock's mind is saturated with scriptural learning. Such instances underline the moral framework of Prufrock's attitude to life.

Explicated in this light, the passage would signify that there will always be a time and a stage for the 'yellow fog' slyly to work its way upon one's psyche ('window-panes'). There will be time, under its impact, when one would try to look glamorous to the object of one's desire. The phrase 'works and days of hands' could easily be a sly reference to a 'time' when, unable to contain desire, one resorts to acts of self-abuse. Remarkably, in 'The First Debate between Body and Soul', written in 1910, Eliot calls upon the Absolute to rescue him from demeaning physical
senses and distractions like masturbation. That is the 'time' to commit acts of self destruction (time to 'murder') as also 'time' to create dreams (evident in Prufrock's vision of the mermaids). The inexorability of these early acts of self-destruction will make one ponder over the compulsions of desire, thus lending weight to the Freudian argument. It will also make one ponder over the 'question' (some food for thought -- on Prufrock's plate, if he likes) if it is possible to abjure desire. And there will be time for much prevarication on the subject. One will be on the horns of a dilemma -- torn between scriptural 'visions' (instilling in one's mind the fear of sin) and 'revisions' (in view of the futility of fighting against desire). It is these apprehensions and fears that account for Prufrock's state of indecision. They loom large in his love song.

Critics may fight shy of taking this line of argument vis-à-vis 'the works and days of hands' but it enables us to explain Prufrock's complex about his physical adequacy and competence evident from the lines:

Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?

It also helps us to account for his subsequent remorse:

Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
The phrase in question is a typical instance of borrowed material used not so much for its original meaning as for the new insight it seems to have awakened in the poet's mind in a changed context.

To proceed with the poem, the repetition of the lines "In the room the women come and go..." indicates that Prufrock is perturbed by the women's constant refrain of Michelangelo, for he knows its dubious implications. He visualizes them measuring him in physical terms and rejecting him. Perhaps under the impact of the yellow fog, they cannot but act as they do. He wonders if it is possible to bring about a change in their attitude. It seems futile to attempt such an impossible task. His hopeless question, "Do I dare/disturb the universe?" finds elaboration in Gerontion:

What will the spider do,  
Suspend its operations, will the weevil  
Delay?  

Disgusted by the hopelessness of his venture, Prufrock thinks of turning back in despair.

The bleakness of his prospects is also affirmed by what he has all along seen and known. He has spent his whole life drinking coffee, reflecting on the nature of these women and their relationships. He has heard

...the voices dying with a dying fall  
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how shall he presume that there is any other motive of their relationship than that of lust?

Prufrock can also guess their motive from the way they spread the tentacles of their physical charm. Their arms "that are braceletted and white and bare", arms that lie seductively along a table or wrap about a shawl, and the perfume from their dress leave Prufrock in no doubt. So how shall he presume that they will be receptive to his proposal of love?

And how shall he proceed? May be he can begin by drawing their attention to the plight of "lonely men in shirt-sleeves", in Shakespearean phraseology, "cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd" in the inferno of their isolation, boredom and emotional starvation.

Prufrock seems to be overwhelmed by the thought of the "lonely men" whose pathetic condition reflects his own state of emotional deprivation. His agony seems to rise to a pitch. He attributes this agony to the fact that he is a thinking being possessed of a moral consciousness. He would be immune to this pain if he had been some mindless creature, "a pair of ragged claws" as he puts it, so that he could rest content with quietly devouring the objects of his physical hunger.
Prufrock has another look at his ambience where consciousness is put to sleep, "Smoothed by long fingers'. He is not sure though, if these women are indeed in a state of 'sleep' or they merely pretend to be so. It is this streak of doubt that revives his hope. May be they can be made to understand his need for love.

As usual, Prufrock is assailed by doubts about his physical and moral strength. He seems to have made futile attempts at self-discipline: he has 'wept and fasted, wept and prayed'. He feels quite incapable of either physical or moral courage, much less of any heroic sacrifice. He can at most visualize himself in the role of John the Baptist and see his head brought in upon a platter for censuring people for their sin of lust. Prufrock admits that he is not made of the stuff of which the great prophet was made: 'and here's no great matter'. He recalls having encountered moments, when his state of moral uprightness was threatened, when, as in Portrait of a Lady, his self-possession guttered. And, unlike the prophet, he is mortally afraid of death.

Prufrock doubts if these women can be made to see that it is not love but lust that impels their lives. Nor perhaps can they be made to realize the sinfulness of lust. For even if he were to plunge headlong into a relationship with one of them, 'bite off the matter with a smile', and
then tell her that he is none other than Lazarus come from
the dead to apprise her of her state of sin, she would yet
dismiss his idea as preposterous and deny that hers was an
act of lust, saying:

"That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all.'

For the likes of her King Lear said:

Behold yond simp'ring dame
Whose face between her forks presages snow,
That minces virtue and does shake the head .
To hear of pleasure's name -
The fitchew nor the soiled horge goes to't
With a more riotous appetite."

Prufrock is put off by the ladies' sheer hypocrisy in the
matter.

Prufrock's 'overwhelming question', at last, is if it
would be worthwhile to go through a gamut of activities and,
at the end of the day, discover that one has only been
dealing with falsehood, chasing a mirage. He ends up asking
'not a lover's question but a metaphysical one, suggested by
Bergson, about the point of man's accumulated experience.'

The 'magic lantern' in this passage could be Eliot's metaphor
for poetic imagination which discerns, during moments of
sudden illumination, patterns of meaning behind feelings
which are otherwise in a state of chaos.
Prufrock's constant state of indecision, his moral scruples and hesitations would suggest a strong comparison between him and prince Hamlet. But Prufrock has no such misgivings. He clearly understands that he was not meant to be Hamlet who, in pursuit of his moral quest, abjured love. Prufrock is in quest of love though it is part of his moral quest too. However, being incapable of taking heroic stands, Prufrock visualizes himself only in the role of a wise counsellor. Prudence seems to him to be his characteristic element. That is why he proceeds rather cautiously, takes mild initiatives but withdraws, or adds his bit to an argument already in progress. Nevertheless, he is not lacking in positive human traits. He is kind, courteous and helpful. And he likes to look meticulous and smart. However, his grave moral tone and lofty statements sometimes leave him a little open to ridicule and make him at times look rather like a Shakespearean Fool.

Prufrock is oppressed by the thought of the old age catching up with him. Time is fast approaching when he will wear the bottoms of his trousers rolled. He seems to be reminded of the old man's lot in Shakespeare's 'All the world's a stage':

His youthful hose well sav'd, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank...
Prufrock possesses a streak of the ascetic in his nature. He seems to have gone to the extent of eschewing all worldly pleasures. This could have resulted from his tendency to reflect upon the traditional wisdom of the Scriptures that enjoin upon man to abjure desire. In the Orient, it was Gautama the Buddha who had considered desire as the cause of man's misery. Prufrock seems to have internalized ideas such as this. He, therefore, wonders if he can enjoy such simple pleasures as that of parting his hair behind or eating a peach. And even when he will give in to his desire of wearing 'flannel trousers', they must be 'white' for he aspires to be pure. May be it is because of his innate purity of heart and soul that he has had access to the vision of the mermaids singing.

Prufrock has a vision of the mermaids 'riding seaward on the waves'. Their loveliness is said to be submarine, pure and uncontaminated by the touch of the earth. That is why, when the wind blows the water 'white and black', they choose to comb the 'white' hair of the waves.

This vision, and the memory of it, make Prufrock acutely conscious of his own predicament. He has a painful realization that, instead of the mermaids, it is the dissolute women, the modern-day 'sea-girls' (counterparts of the modern-day nymphs in The Waste Land) in whose base company he has lingered in the seas of sensuality. These sea-
girls adorn themselves only with the weeds of this sea, i.e. with vanity and hypocrisy. Their vanity is evident from their presumptuous but hollow talk of Michelangelo and their hypocrisy from their denying the truth of their lustful intentions. The 'red and brown' weeds are also discernible in their colourful skirts that 'trail along the floor' and in their 'light brown hair'. Prufrock has lingered in these chambers (in the rooms where the women come and go) and reflected upon the nature of these sea-girls. He cannot be 'a mindless body, seduced by mermaids he does not respect'.

Prufrock is woken from his reverie by the voices around him. The communion with his inner self is thus disrupted: 'and we drown.'

II

Critics have by and large been too critical of Prufrock's character. Overwhelmed by what they view as his 'hypertrophy of intellect' or 'overscrupulousness', his 'cowardice' and 'irresolution', they tend to lose sight of his more positive attributes -- his poetry, his philosophy, his moral consciousness and his high idealism. As for their accusations, they had better view them in the light of what Eliot says in Gerontion:

...Think
Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices
Are fathered by our heroism.
The contrast between Prufrock's sensibility and that of the women who surround him is all too obvious. Just as the evening is spread out "against the sky", the women seem to be ranged against him. Their state of moral depravity is ranged against his moral uprightness, their lust against his love, their vanity against his humility, their hypocrisy against his pure motive.

Prufrock's Love Song is, to quote from Robert Bridges' lyric *The Nightingales*:

> The voice of desire that haunts our dreams,
> A throe of the heart, whose pining visions dim,
> Forbidden hopes profound,
> No dying cadence or sigh can sound. 

Superficial circumstantial differences apart, Prufrock is the *alter ego* of Eliot himself. The range of his awareness is unbounded. His mind teems with allusions to Hesiod, Hamlet, Lazarus, Falstaff, entomology, eschatology, John the Baptist, mermaids. 

Nor are there any "subtleties to which he would not have aspired." Prufrock also shares with Eliot his puritanic austerity, his distrust of sex, his reticence. That Prufrock shares the poet's sensibility should be evident from a perusal of Eliot's early poem *In the Department Store* which could as well have come from Prufrock:

> The lady of the porcelain department
> Smiles at the world through a set of false teeth
> She is business-like and keeps a pencil in her hair
But behind her sharpened eyes take flight
The summer evenings in the park
And heated nights in second storey dance halls
Man's life is powerless and brief and dark
It is not possible for me to make her happy.\textsuperscript{27}

One can detect here 'a subtle note of sadness and a sense of helplessness on the part of the speaker',\textsuperscript{28} aspects reminiscent of Prufrock's love song.

Critics also tend to be oblivious of the fact that Prufrock is a dramatic character (his Song being in the nature of an interior monologue) and, by virtue of this, all the nuances of poetic perception and articulation rightfully belong to him just as the rhetorical virtues of Antony's speech belong to Antony even though it is Shakespeare who has authored the speech. Viewed in this light, Prufrock is a poet \textit{par excellence}. He is well-versed in the language of symbols and shares with his author that "mechanism of sensibility,"\textsuperscript{29} which can give sensuous incarnation to ideas. Mark his portrayal of desire and its operations in terms of the vivid metaphor of 'fog'. He too aspires for a poetic articulation wherein, to quote from 'Little Gidding', "Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning."\textsuperscript{30} Mark how he sums up the women in two pithy lines:

\begin{center}
In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo
\end{center}

It is insights such as this that mark the end of one phase and the beginning of another in Prufrock's spiritual growth.
The concluding lines of his Love Song are indeed in the nature of "an epitaph" on his life-time's experience of these women (uttered almost with a sigh of despair):

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

The interaction with debased humanity has awakened him to its deceptions. It is this realization that unites him with his inner self so that the 'you' and 'I' merge.

Part of the critical error, however, arises from the misapplication, to Eliot's poetry, of the philosophy of subject-object correspondence propounded by F.H. Bradley who, undeniably, was a major shaping influence on Eliot as a poet-critic. Taking their lead from the notion, critics have tended literally to equate Prufrock with the objects of his perception so that the 'streets, the yellow fog, the drains, the coffee-spoons are Prufrock; the 'evenings, mornings, afternoons' are Prufrock, as much so as the voice which says, 'I have known them all already, known them all.' This approach is untenable since Bradley had warned against solipsistic interpretations of immediate experience: "It would not follow...that all the world is merely a state of myself." In point of fact, it is Prufrock's perception of these objects that is subjective. Thus to him, the 'fog' presents the image of desire, the chimneys, the smoke and the
soot indicate the fires of lust, and the evening like 'a patient etherised upon a table' represents the social ambience under the hypnotic spell of desire. The objects and situations appear to his highly perceptive mind as symbols which illumine for him the underlying reality of his social scene.

That Prufrock is inspired by high ideals is amply substantiated by his searching, nay searing analysis of his social ambience and of his own self. Indeed, the dramatic intensity of the poem resides in 'the crisis of sensibility and awareness' \(^{34}\). For in terms of sensibility, Prufrock is one in whom the sordid aspects of an urban alley produce 'distraction and dejection' \(^{35}\). He may even be considered as 'a personification of 'Life' as a balding and graying man, fastidiously attired and mannered, waiting with self-conscious correctness as a caller upon the 'Absolute'.' \(^{36}\) And his monologue represents 'in epitome the whole dilemma of spirit and flesh for one entertaining the ideal of their fusion and finding them, in reality, at odds.' \(^{37}\) The conflict is, indeed, hopeless.

What needs to be recognized is that Prufrock's encounter with the states of untruth is a negative but necessary stage in his spiritual evolution. He has spent his life contemplating the dark world of lust. He has suffered the onslaughts of desire. In the midst of his vacillation and
confusion, however, he has come by moments of epiphanical revelation. As if in the light of a 'magic lantern', he has seen his chaotic nerves in patterns. These patterns indicate his meaning and underline the vanity and futility of earthly desires. Assessed in terms of his volitions and inner convolutions, one can visualize him, in the subsequent stages of his inner growth, merging into the protagonists of Eliot's later poems like *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*.

**PRUFROCK-PORTRAIT-PRELudes-RHAPSODY:**
The Evolving Christian Consciousness

Eliot's growing interest in consciousness first came to him in December 1908 through his reading of Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* which presented the artist in the role of a privileged seer.¹ The passage through *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, *Portrait of a Lady*, the *Preludes* and the *Rhapsody on a Windy Night* makes the reader apprehend the consciousness of Eliot's quintessentially symbiotic protagonists. His *Prufrock* proceeds from the protagonist's initial consciousness of his own pain. Gradually, in the course of the *Portrait* and the *Preludes*, he is seen moving towards a realization of others' pain. And by the time we reach his *Rhapsody*, the protagonist, having developed a sense of deep empathy for the sufferers, seeks their release from pain.
In the epigraph of *Prufrock*, the image of Count Guido in a prison of flame is emblematic of Prufrock's own suffering self. It is his soul that is tormented by the flames of lust in the human inferno. An emotionally starved Prufrock is seen in search of some enduring relationship of love which may fill the void in his heart. What he comes across, however, are the women who 'come and go' -- the pithy phrase suggesting the fleeting nature of their relationship. And though they talk glibly of art and artists, and have much sophistication of mode and manner, they are hollow within. Their intellectual pretence is a thin veneer beneath which prowls the beast that stalks Prufrock. He suffers the ignominy of 'wriggling on the wall' like a worm, fixed in 'a formulated phrase'. Surrounded by the fires of lust, Prufrock's predicament is not unlike St. Augustine's when he came to Carthage\(^2\), though Augustine, unlike Prufrock, sought after divine rather than human love. Nevertheless, like Augustine, Prufrock has prayed for divine help to rescue him from the temptations of desire, and from the prevarications of his will that 'flickered' like a candle. If Prufrock had not possessed an acute and overbearing consciousness of moral 'good' and 'evil', evident from his trust in Biblical truths, if he had no moral hassles, he would have rested content with devouring the objects of his physical appetite. But he is the odd man out, suffering emotional starvation in the absence of the positive human emotion of love. The experience of the
poem is one of Prufrock's emotional torment in an ambience of unrelieved lust. His song, however, centres round his own personal suffering. There is only a hint, at this stage of his consciousness, of the sufferings of others in a similar predicament, evident in the image of 'lonely men in shirt-sleeves'. Nonetheless, the single, unmitigated note of the poem is one of self-pity.

In the Portrait of a Lady, however, the protagonist moves from a stance of detached indifference to one of vague empathy for those who suffer quietly and die. The poem alters the external situation of Prufrock. Instead of the man, it is the lady here who seeks a relationship of love, and it is the young man who is indifferent to her need. Critics have found it easy to fault the young man of wanton incursion into a lady's privacy without any intention to reciprocate her love. They have accused him of being cruel to her. That, however, is not the whole truth.

The lady is one of 'the set', and has the character of Prufrock's 'women' who talk of art and artists. This lady talks glibly of Chopin, the Polish music maestro and of his powers to lift one out of this world. The young man, however, sees it for what it is -- a sop to seduce him. He is quick to perceive how 'the conversation slips' among 'carefully caught regrets'. The lady begins by admiring in
him the qualities upon which friendship thrives. In subsequent meetings, however, she makes subtle moves to seduce him, prompting him to reach his hand "across the gulf". The young man, interested in nothing more than friendship, keeps her overtures at bay, with calculated indifference. The relationship ends rather poignantly, with the young man taking her leave before going abroad.

It is only later, in a mood of retrospection, that the protagonist is disturbed by the thought of her death. An old loner, sitting by herself, or serving tea to friends -- that seems to have been her lot. The vision of her life-long spell of emotional vacuity, isolation and boredom, of her lonesome death, make the poet's heart throb to a different note. His apathy gives way to sympathy or even pity. It shows the presence in his character of the spirit of "old-fashioned Yankee rectitude" though he laughs away the emotion in the manner of Laforgue.

In the Preludes, the protagonist gains further insight into human grief. There is the shabby ambience of poverty, deprivation, squalor and dirt as well as grimy sensuality. The poet imagines a woman, at the lowest rung of society, contemplating the "thousand sordid images" which constitute her demeaning existence. It has been a life of "sparrows in the gutters". The poet's empathy is complete. The image of the woman, lying on her back visualizing her
bitter lot, is juxtaposed with that of the poet's soul, 'stretched tight', suffering relentless onslaughts of the 'insistent feet' of a 'blackened street'. It is for the first time that a protagonist of Eliot is so overwhelmingly and profoundly moved by the agonizing notion of 'some infinitely gentle/Infinitely suffering thing'. It is thus that he gains the capacity for understanding and compassion.

It is with the same sense of empathy and concern that the protagonist in *Rhapsody on a Windy Night* observes the dark life of a dissolute woman. Typical of her class, she seems to have lost her 'memory' which alone has 'the key' to her salvation. She is marooned without hope. To the unscrupulous perpetrators of her tragedy, however, she is no more than one of the objects of their sexual hunger -- 'twisted things' to be eaten 'smooth and polished'. Having lost her consciousness along the reaches of 'the street', she plies her business in a mechanical manner. Her strength is sapped. Like a broken spring, rusted, she is ready to snap. Any yet, the predators of lust devour her as a cat devours 'a morsel of rancid butter'. But the woman harbours no grudge; she has lost her memory.

In this manner, the poet sketches a pathetic picture of 'sunless dry geraniums' drowned in nocturnal smells of 'shuttered rooms'. There is no emotional equation between
them and their night visitors who are no more than numbers to them. It is four o'clock when the last customer ('another number') stands at the door. The poet would rather wish it to be the last affair of this sordid sequence when she would leave behind the unclean life of dark drudgery ('Put your shoes at the door'), sleep to this life, and perhaps awaken to a new one. He seems to pray that the agony of this life may be her last ordeal.

This is how, by the time we reach the end of the Rhapsody (mark the intensity of tragic irony implicit in the title), the protagonist has come a long way from his initial position of Prufrock. He has progressed from the self-centred concern for his own private sorrow and self-pity to share the woe of others. Instead of regressing into his own aggrieved lot, he delves into the depths of human suffering. It is a measure of his humanity that, Christ-like, he does not loathe and shun the sufferers. He seeks them out as instruments to awaken mankind from its sinful state of 'Tumid apathy' towards people reduced to the life of 'gutters'.

One may deduce from the poems discussed so far that Eliot makes his early poetry a medium to unravel before us the murky side of human life. He seems to do so with the fervent and yet quiet hope that it may waken his readers from their smug complacency, widen their understanding of the human predicament, and move them to pity the hapless victims.
of human exploitation. In doing so, the early poetry of Eliot serves a truly Christian end in no small measure, though it does so without the reader becoming suspicious of its didactic intent. Instead of preaching from a lectern, the poet does so through a vivid image, an apt example. His imaginary characters dramatize "but in no obvious form, an action or struggle for harmony in the soul of the poet'. Like Baudelaire, the poet here is "a wayfarer, an intercessor, an intermediary, because of whom we are able to feel related to forces that surpass our minds. Because of him, the universe perceived by our senses, seasons and cities, men and their wretchedness, are loved attentively and fervently and knowingly." Like the French poet too, he is led by an implicit urge to discover for himself certain religious values - of which compassion is one - and, in his poetry, make their necessity felt in the modern world.

Significantly, in a broadcast talk in 1941, 'Towards a Christian Britain', Eliot was to stress the need for Christian 'prophets' who would alter the social consciousness of the people.
In some of the poems written in 1915 when he was at Oxford -- Cousin Nancy, The "Boston Evening Transcript", Morning at the Window and Aunt Helen -- Eliot recalls his impressions of the Bostonians. He had a disturbing experience of New England as a society in decline. Emerson had earlier denounced the cultural deadness of the place as the worst blight left by waning Puritanism,\(^1\) while Walt Whitman had chosen to describe the barren chaos of American life as a sort of "dry and flat Sahara".\(^2\) John Jay Chapman, a contemporary critic, located the moral blight in the pervasiveness of the commercial mind in America which was indifferent to truth, to love, and to religion -- all things which Eliot tried to recover.\(^3\) Eliot who conceived of his life as "a religious quest" and who "measured life by the divine goal" ever since his student days in 1910 and 1911\(^4\), found the New England culture dry and lifeless. He was disgusted with the wide-spread "hollowness at heart".

*Cousin Nancy* is a telling comment on the decaying moral order in "New England" at the turn of the century. The place name, however, comprehends, by implication, the new world culture everywhere. The poem shows how man's private behaviour is profoundly affected, both by the atmosphere of moral perplexity within which he lives and by the expansion
of the public realm which characterizes our age. It describes how Nancy reacts in a bold and fierce manner against the 'emotional inertia' and the 'timid inhibitions' of her class:

Miss Nancy Ellicott
Strode across the hills and broke them,
Rode across the hills and broke them --
The barren New England hills --

In analysing the lines, one must however be careful with Eliot's use of the imagery. For, the outward scene is the backdrop for a set of symbols through which the poet's imagination comprehends 'the quality of a civilization'. The 'hills', thus, that Nancy 'strode across' and 'broke', signify the moral veneer of her class which the younger generation in America found to be repugnantly 'authoritarian and taboo-ridden'.

Nancy's revolt, however, is not 'a passionate Puritan rebellion' against the moral blight of the times, such as Eliot's is in The Waste Land. It is, on the contrary, an assertion of the modern secular spirit which disdains the very moral basis of life. In her stance, therefore, the poet reads 'the anti-religious mood of his age'. Acutely sensitive as he was to 'the sinister power of evil', the poet, like Henry James, has 'the imagination of disaster'. He had been alerted by Irving Babbitt, his teacher at Harvard, to the dangers of the modern secular world.
Viewed in this perspective, the lines 'Riding to hounds/Over the cow pasture' seem to be laden with ominous implications. For, in chasing temporal happiness, Nancy is going to the dogs, and ferocious ones at that, which, like Actaeon's, will ultimately tear her apart. And just as the cows fattened on green pastures are taken to the slaughter-house, so will Nancy be led to her spiritual damnation by her unrestrained indulgence in the sensuous pleasures of life.

The poet seems to view Nancy's bohemian life-style, manifest in her 'arid acts of will' like smoking, drinking, and riding across the New England hills, as an assertion of her false 'individuality', involving the elevation of the 'ego or spurious self'. It shows a complete departure from the Eliot family's moral ideal of 'Puritan uprightness, social conscience, and self-restraint'. The distortion in Nancy's surname from Eliot to Ellicott, therefore, appears deliberate, intended to imply her boycott of the Eliot norm.

There is studied sarcasm in the expression 'And danced all the modern dances'. It signifies an indiscriminate surrender to the secular impulses of modern thought which could be soul-destroying. In using the term 'modern' here in a pejorative sense, the poet emerges as 'the enemy of those abstractions which have clogged our consciousness as a result of the rationalistic, positivist tradition'. However, he
feels into situations rather than subjecting them to rational and therefore extroverted analysis. In Nancy's instance, he has tried to define 'the implications of human experience' through the emotive complexities of language.

The poet is highly critical of Nancy's aunts who, governed by the Unitarian code with its optimistic 'notion of progress', gloss over unpleasant changes in American life. Like 'the great unthinking', they are little perturbed by intimations of 'chaos' and 'multiplicity' such as afflicted Henry Adams. That they 'were not quite sure how they felt about it' intimates their state of moral confusion and perplexity.

The 'glazen' shelves of the aunts, like their superficial religion, are adorned by Matthew and Waldo, two 'neglected heretics' who, ironically, are the 'guardians of the faith'. A sharp contrast to this would have been provided, in the poet's mind, by the genuine piety of his mother whose mantlepiece was 'draped with a velvet cloth on which rested a painting of the madonna and child'. And, on her wall there hung 'an engraving of Theodosius and St. Ambrose, illustrating the triumph of holy over temporal power'. In the closing line of the poem, therefore, the poet asserts the supremacy of the moral law. The oblivion of temporal heresy is set against the everlasting: 'The army of unalterable law'.
The "Boston Evening Transcript"

Eliot, says Lyndall Gordon, "was one of those rare beings who have a sense of their own age when its images are yet incomplete and secret".¹ For him, the dramatic reality of a "waste land" belonged to the Boston of his early youth. In his religious imagination, the place was corrupted by the people's exclusive occupation with what he considered to be the debasing world of sense. An encounter with it produced in his mind what he called in the Portrait of a Lady "a dull tom-tom", "hammering a prelude of its own".² It wearied his soul so that he yearned "to nod good-bye" to it.

In The "Boston Evening Transcript", the poet experiences a world immersed in sensual pleasures. Even as evening "quickens faintly in the street", it is time for the "eruption of demonic forces"³. While it wakens in some "the appetites of life", to others, it brings the Boston Evening Transcript which is their "substitute for life"⁴. A transcript, in effect, of the sensual life of Boston, it seems to inebriate them with full-blown desires which sway in the wind like "a field of ripe corn". The image is redolent with strong sexual innuendo.

The poet, however is "a bit of a recluse"⁵. As he admits later in Ash-Wednesday, he is just not made to "strive towards such things", for he is acutely conscious that "there
is nothing again'. When he climbs the steps to cousin Harriet's flat to deliver the paper, he is overcome by a deep sense of spiritual ennui. It is a moment when the poet experiences, in Bergson's phraseology, 'only the fluid consciousness and intuitions in the making'. Consequently, mounting the stairs here is emblematic of making an arduous spiritual ascent. The bell he rings to the flat takes on the character of a call to the Absolute. La Rochefoucauld becomes symbolic of a 'waste land'. Parting mentally from the place, the poet is 'rather worn, as though traversing the Boston street were like wading through time'. It is as Baudelaire had put it: 'In certain almost supernatural states of the soul, the depth of life is revealed in ordinary everyday happenings. The ordinary life then becomes the symbol so that the images from the external world correspond to the poet's own inner life, loaded with deep spiritual meanings.'

Eliot's poetry may be viewed as a collocation of epiphanical moments like the one in this poem, in the course of which he sees into the lifelessness of the temporal reality which Coleridge in his Ancient Mariner described as 'The Nightmare Life-in-Death'. It is as a result of experiences such as this that, quite early in his career, the poet dreamt of 'living by his own vision beyond the imaginative frontiers of his civilization.' No wonder, he had, eventually, the eremitic vision of
the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea...11

or of

...the uncertain hour before the morning
Near the ending of interminable night
At the recurrent end of the unending...12

The present poem also vindicates Eliot's belief that
the act of poetic composition is not something consciously
controlled, that its roots are deep down in the
unconscious.13 In this respect, intuition and perception
were, doubtlessly, the greatest strengths of Eliot's poetic
and religious sensibility in his entire poetic oeuvre.

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Morning at the Window

This poem presents the poet's murky vision of the
housemaids living along the frazzled edges of metropolitan
cities like Boston as mere objects of man's lust. In the poem
they are the objects of the poet's pity. Their unremitting
labour begins with the onset of day, at the 'basement
kitchens' catering to the baser hungers of mankind. Such
'kitchens' are the city slums found along the margins of
'civilization'. The 'edges of the street' are those 'trampled
by insistent feet'.¹ The street, therefore, is akin to one in the Preludes where it has a 'blackened conscience'.² The souls of the housemaids are damp because of their 'muddy' lives. As a result they 'sprout', which seems to be a metaphor for their becoming pregnant. Their inward corruption is manifest in their 'muddy skirts'.

The brown waves of the fog lend the place an infernal character. They may be emblematic of the drives of desire that toss up 'Twisted faces' from the bottom of the street, as from some infernal pit. The 'Twisted faces' evoke comparison with 'A crowd of twisted things; / A twisted branch upon the beach / Eaten smooth, and polished' in Rhapsody on a Windy Night. They fling a blank and meaningless smile at the customers looking out of hotel windows (cf. 'one-night cheap hotels' in Prufrock). The smile lingers in the air for a while, to tempt, soon to vanish along 'the level of the roofs'. This phrase is apparently Eliot's metaphor for the unrelieved monotony of city civilization, as also for the absence of higher values from life.

In this brief vignette, we can see the poet in the role of a 'privileged seer' who, in response to Arthur Symon's call, discards the 'old bondage of exteriority' and conjures every symbol by which 'the soul of things can be made visible'.³
Aunt Helen

Studied against the backdrop of Eliot's moral fervour and quest for the Absolute, the Boston poems reveal the poet's acute sense of the 'moral blight' which afflicted members of his own class. Already, in The First Debate between Body and Soul (1910) Eliot felt that the sanctuary of the soul is violated by the insistent material facts -- twenty leering houses in a shabby Boston square.¹ Henry James in The American Scene described how in Back Bay, innumerable windows watched one another hopelessly for revelations and indiscretions which never disturbed the peace.² "The smug righteousness and propriety of Beacon street, of the Eliots, Millses, Bullards, Coolidges, and Parkmans was the triumph of a bourgeoisie without the shadow of an aristocracy to worry it."³ A society 'quite uncivilized', Eliot called it, 'but refined beyond the point of civilization'.⁴ No doubt, it engendered in Eliot, as in Henry Adams, a loathing for mankind.

Aunt Helen's is a typical case. She chooses to live in a fashionable area of the city and 'contrives all her life to shut out the world by observing the secret codes of her milieu'.⁵ The only important things in her life are her four servants, her small house, her pets and her Dresden clock. The poet, who was nurtured on his grandfather's ideals of piety and selfless service to the community, was struck by

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the absurdity of this lady's oblivious, self-serving habits'.

"Now when she died there was silence in heaven'. The pithy line reveals the poet as "a connoisseur of the ridiculous, an ironical commentator of human folly'. It hints at his scorn of the Unitarian concept of a benevolent heaven which, unmindful of the moral hollowness of the aunt's life, grieves at her death. The poet would rather envision a wrathful heaven where 'depravity' and 'damnation' are inexorably interlinked.

The "silence in heaven', however, is offset by the bathetic "silence at her end of the street' which intimates the absence from the scene of a noisy and garrulous old lady. Nevertheless, the line does not merely hint at a personal eccentricity. It is symptomatic of a wide-spread social malady of an age which was, to quote from Henry James's The Bostonians: "a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solicitudes and coddled sensibilities...".

The repeated allusion to "silence' could, however, have for the poet a much vaster and more philosophic implication. For, amongst Eliot's 1910 poems which are mostly 'rejections of Boston life', there is one titled 'Silence'. To the poet, Silence was antithetical to the world
of 'sound and fury'. It dispersed and obliterated ordinary reality. According to Lyndall Gordon, the idea was perhaps reinforced by Laforgue's invective against the pitiful world and its wretched history: 'And thou, Silence, pardon the Earth: the little madcap hardly knows what she is doing.'

The appellation 'the little madcap' seems to befit aunt Helen. There is scathing sarcasm in the lines:

The shutters were drawn and the undertaker wiped his feet - He was aware that this sort of thing had occurred before.

The family prided itself on 'virtue and ancient lineage'. The poet might, however, want to ask with Bertrand Russell, 'what constitutes the amazing virtue they are so conscious of -- they are against Wilson, against Labour, rich, over-eating, selfish, feeble pigs.' The line about the 'dogs' being handsomely provided for is reminiscent of the mis-directed charity of Chaucer's Prioress. It only serves to show up the muddled values of the class.

The subsequent passing away of the 'parrot' and the continued ticking of the Dresden clock on the mantlepiece seem to be deliberately juxtaposed to convey the poet's 'horror of time and decay' and his eventual feeling that 'the temporal world had to be transcended'.

The last lines about the blatant vulgarity of the footman and the second housemaid underscore the fact that the
lady's thin veneer of gentility had failed to inspire the 
faintest notion of moral restraint in her servants. They were 
just as wicked when she was alive, though a little more 
discreet.

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Mr. Apollinax

Modelled on Bertrand Russell¹, Mr. Apollinax 
fascinated Eliot as a paradoxical character in whom he 
discovered the antinomies of 'the fleshly and the 
spiritual'.² A blend of Apollo and Apollyon, Mr. Apollinax is 
more Dionysian than Apollonian.

Eliot who attended Russell's logic course at Harvard 
in 1914 seems to have derived his insight into this complex 
character from his reading of Russell's essay on 'A Free 
Man's Worship' which appeared in the Independent Review 
(December 1903), as also from hearing him speak on Mysticism 
and Logic. It should be interesting to read about the genesis 
of the latter in Ronald Clark's biography of Russell:

As he dealt with philosophy, he was also writing what 
became one of his best-known papers, "Mysticism and 
Logic". Its genesis lay in the discussions on 
religion with Ottoline when, for a while, she had 
almost made him believe it was possible to reconcile 
himself with a God. Scepticism had eventually won
that battle, but it had been an indecisive victory, "I don't at all discard what belongs to mysticism, but I feel it is rather an inspiration & a refuge in great moments than a mood to live in while one has difficult work to do," he had once written to her. "It rises up, at the last moment, when I might go to the devil, & turns me the other way instead."

The Epigraph:

The Greek epigraph from Lucian, "What a novelty! By Hercules, What paradoxes! What an inventive man!" neatly sums up Eliot's view of Mr. Apollinax. It should, however, be illuminating to decipher it in the light of Russell's argument in the two essays mentioned above.

The following lines from "A Free Man's Worship" must have struck the poet as illustrative of the qualities mentioned in the epigraph:

In this lies Man's true freedom: in determination to worship only the God created by our own love of the good, to respect only the heaven which inspires, the insight of our best moments. In action, in desire, we must submit perpetually to the tyranny of outside forces; but in thought, in aspiration, we are free, free from our fellow-men, free from the petty planet on which our bodies impotently crawl, free even, while we live, from the tyranny of death.

The following passage from the same essay would have been a revelation to Eliot. It would have made a special appeal to his religious instinct as a gospel truth which would much rather form the basis of his poetry and life:

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Except for those rare spirits that are born without sin, there is a cavern of darkness to be traversed before that temple can be entered. The gate of the cavern is despair, and its floor is paved with the gravestones of abandoned hopes. There Self must die; there the eagerness, the greed of untamed desire must be slain, for only so can the soul be freed from the empire of Fate. But out of the cavern the Gate of Renunciation leads again to the daylight of wisdom, by whose radiance a new insight, a new joy, a new tenderness, shine forth to gladden the pilgrim's heart...

Lines such as these may have provided Eliot with a blueprint for his *Ash-Wednesday*.

In *Mysticism and Logic*, the thrust of Russell's argument was, however, not altogether Apollonian. For the preponderance of the Dionysian strain must have detracted from his philosophy what good Eliot found in it. The argument in favour of mysticism may, however, have sounded musical to Eliot's ears:

......There is an element of wisdom to be learned from the mystical way of feeling..... this emotion, as colouring and informing all other thoughts and feelings, is the inspirer of whatever is best in Man.

However the following thought would have appeared untrue:

The argument for the contention that time is unreal and that the world of sense is illusory must, I think, be regarded as fallacious.

To Eliot for whom what we do must be either good or evil in the moral sense of the term, the divorce of
philosophy from morality in Russell's thought, would have seemed, Dionysian:

...good and evil are subjective...\textsuperscript{10}

In this way the distinction of good and evil, like them, becomes a tyrant in this philosophy of mysticism and introduces into thought the restless selectiveness of action...\textsuperscript{11}

...the ethical interests which have often inspired philosophers must remain in the background...\textsuperscript{12}

Since, in the poem, Mr. Apollinax has been delineated purely in terms of the various shades of his laughter without reference to the content of his thought, this background of Russell's ideas is expected to provide fresh insight into the poem in which, Eliot as usual, has adopted the poetic mode of suggestive hints and allusions which he expects his readers to unravel for themselves.

The Poem:

When Mr. Apollinax visited the United States
His laughter tinkled among the teacups.

The laughter, signifying Mr. Apollinax's irresistible vitality, falls into awful relief vis-a-vis the United States' thin upper-class veneer of gentility and pretentiousness, with its dry, intellectualized distrust of emotions. It was partly this tendency in American life 'to become arid and bleached at the top'\textsuperscript{13} which paved the way
for what Eliot considered to be a spiritual waste land. Russell too was struck by the vacuity of the cultivated classes. As to Harvard, his verdict was damning: "Nobody here broods or is absent-minded, or has time to hear whispers from another world".14

In *Mr. Apollinax*, Eliot describes, in a rather light-hearted manner, Russell's assault on the gentility of the hosts ("In the palace of Mrs. Phlaccus, at Professor Channing-Cheetah's") with his passionate talk, his grinning face, and easy laughter.15 The immediate situation, however, has for the poet a wider and representative value.

The poet detects two distinct strains in the laughter: the sensual and the spiritual. What, however, comes to the fore is Mr. Apollinax's sensual self. Eliot who might have seen his tutor "horribly starved and rasped", "triggered off by any pretty woman within chatting-up distance",16 thinks of

> Priapus in the shrubbery  
> Gaping at the lady in the swing.

Here, the contrast between the shy Fragilion and the gaping Priapus is one between the poet's own shy Prufrockian 'spiritual' temperament and the 'aggressive crudity' of a shocking sensualist like Mr. Apollinax.17 It is indicative of 'the helplessness of sensitivity and idealism against matter-
of-factness. The Priapism of Mr. Apollinax, therefore, meets with the poet's moral disapproval:

He laughed like an irresponsible foetus.

Nevertheless, there is admiration for another, contradictory strain in the laughter which the poet discerns as

Submarine and profound
Like the old man of the sea's
Hidden under coral islands
Where worried bodies of drowned men drift down
in the green silence,
Dropping from fingers of surf.

It is interesting to observe here that "Eliot was to return again and again to the sea for scenes of crisis and revelation in his poetry." His imagination fastened on the strange and unexpected revelation in the overall secular figure of Mr. Apollinax, "a heroic quester living on the thin edge of mortality." Beneath the external layer of a Priapus, the poet discovers the prophetic Proteus, possessed of a spiritual vitality which is timeless and eternal. It seems to make a mockery of human mortality and grief. The lines seem to echo Russell's thought in "A Free Man's Worship":

To take into the inmost shrine of the soul the irresistible forces whose puppets we seem to be -- Death and change, the irrevocableness of the past, and the powerlessness of man before the blind hurry of the universe from vanity to vanity -- to feel these things and know them is to conquer them....
To abandon the struggle for private happiness, to expel all eagerness of temporary desire, to burn with passion for eternal things — this is emancipation, and this is the free man's worship.  

In Eliot's lines, as in Russell's, the ironic laughter of thought is "timeless and bodiless and all-pervasive, existing before birth and after death." For, the "coral islands" are emblematic of eternity. They contrast sharply with the "worried bodies of drowned men". The soft modulation of the verse rhythms here is conducive to the reader's apprehension of the spiritual core of Mr. Apollinax's vitality.

Mr. Apollinax's hosts, however, fail to perceive the spiritual strain in his laughter. What registers with them, rooted in their "self-complacent egotism" as they are, is the cutting edge of his derision. The poet visualizes Mr. Apollinax meeting the fate of John the Baptist for his impudence. He looks for his head rolling under a chair, or, getting transformed after death into a Proteus-like figure wearing a crown of seaweed, grinning from a screen at the world's vanity. Heedless of the disconcerting impact of his laughter, Mr. Apollinax perseveres with his scintillating discourse:

I heard the beat of centaur's hoofs over the hard turf
As his dry and passionate talk devoured the afternoon.
Despite the spiritual undercurrent that leavens his laughter, the poet sees Mr. Apollinax taking a strong empiricist stance, upholding in his 'dry and passionate talk' the claims of instinct and reason symbolized in the half-animal, half-human figure of a centaur.

The poem concludes with the varied responses to Mr. Apollinax's talk. There are some who are charmed by his manner, some are mystified or puzzled by the complexity of his ideas. While some consider him 'unbalanced', others do not entirely agree with him. The dowager Mrs. Phlaccus and the Professor and Mrs. Channing-Cheetah, 'bewildered but at all costs correct', concentrate on 'a slice of lemon, and a bitten macaroon'.

Professor Grover Smith's remark that the 'ebulliently vigorous' Mr. Apollinax 'appears the more absurd the more he is mythologized', seems misplaced. In point of fact, described in terms of myth, the central character rises from the individual to acquire a universal and timeless dimension. Indeed, he turns into an archetype of the central paradox of man as a blend of the antithetical qualities of the vulgar and the sublime. Nor would one agree with the view that the epigraph from Lucian implies that 'any novelty, however ridiculous, will draw a crowd'. Or that Mr. Apollinax remains 'humorous rather than perturbing'. For, it is a sad reflection on the temper of our age that the spiritual
dimension of human personality goes unnoticed. There is, in the poem, "the ominous and ironic indication that a hidden world, "submarine and profound' confronts us even as we turn away from its meaning".28

The poem is a fine illustration of how through the poetic mode, i.e. through "the union of idea, emotion and sensation in the symbol and image; the mastery of rhythmic variation; the dramatic structure of antithesis; the expansion of the surface of the occasion into a symbolic pattern of wider issues; and the economy and concentration with which that pattern is projected",29 Eliot attains his ends in social, moral and spiritual revelation.

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**Hysteria**

The poem is demonstrative of Eliot's perception of woman as the "eternal enemy of the absolute".1 For her, man is no more than an instrument of her procreative urge, particularly when the hysterical fit seizes her. Eliot who has a horror of the sensual, describes the protagonist's discomfiture caused by the woman's hysteria, as it distracts him from his nobler pursuits.
Eliot may have based the poem on some personal experience as also upon his reading of Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock* where the earthly and the sublime passions are juxtaposed in the gnome's salutation of Spleen:

Hail wayward Queen!
Who rule the sex to fifty from fifteen:
Parent of vapours and of female wit,
Who give th' hysteric, or poetic fit...

In dealing with the woman's hysteria, Eliot may also have been influenced by Plato according to whom, "The animal within woman has a passion for procreating children.... causing all varieties of disease, until finally the desire of the woman and the love of the man bring them together". This phenomenon is "hysteria" in the literal sense, for the Greek word for womb was "hysteria".

The protagonist of *Hysteria* is overwhelmed by the sheer physicality of the lady's passion which is all-consuming. He is "drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary recovery, lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat..." To him, it seems to represent the demonic force. He perceives it as the basis of degeneration and decay, evident in the metaphor of the woman's teeth being "only accidental stars". The woman's "talent for squad drill" will later be evident in the pathetic case of Lil in *The Waste Land*. 
He'll want to know what you done with the money he
gave you
To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.
You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,
He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.

You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.
(And her only thirty-one.)
I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,
It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.
(She's had five already, and nearly died of young
George.)

In `What the Thunder Said' too, the poet associates
the human inferno with the `Dead mountain mouth of carious
teeth that cannot spit'.
And in Ash-Wednesday, the dark stair that seems to descend into the bowels of hell is:

Damp, jagged, like an old man's mouth, drivelling
beyond repair...

The woman in Hysteria appears to be a victim of the
malady in its acute form. It is born, perhaps, out of her
extreme sense of insecurity in the absence of the assurance
of love. Her state seems to be not unlike the rich lady's or
Lil's in The Waste Land (`A Game of Chess') that invites
comparison with mad Ophelia.

At any rate, the protagonist in this poem has to
suffer great social embarrassment in coping with the
situation. It is only after he extricates himself from this
exclusive engagement with sensuality and stops being, what
Shelley called, "more beastly than any beast"\(^7\), that he will be able to devote himself to his poetic impulse of attempting to put together the chaotic fragments of life into a meaningful pattern.

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Conversation Galante

*Conversation Galante* is not simply an insignificant poem of "seriocomic banter" with "playful poetic speculations on the moon", nor is it made obscure by "excessive difficulty".\(^1\) In point of fact, it underlines, through apt example, the world's "utterly blank, indeed crass, failure" to grasp, much less appreciate, the spiritual anguish of the poet who bemoans the fact that the world, in its exclusive engagement with the surface reality of sense, embraces only that which is mutable and, with its "indifferent and imperious" air, rejects the poetics of "the absolute" as pointless. The poem also suggests that "the absolute", in a metaphysician's sense, is "the ground of art".\(^2\)

In the first stanza, the poet visualizes the sensual enchantments in terms of "the moon" who, by swaying the affective centres of man, lures him to his fatal rendezvous with the sensual pleasures which terminate in pain. In its
indictment of the moon as our 'sentimental friend', as 'an old battered lantern hung aloft/To light poor travellers to their distress', the poem reminds us of the 'Whispering lunar incantations' that 'Dissolve the floors of memory/And all its clear relations/Its divisions and precisions' in Eliot's *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*, of Donne's 'Dull sublunary lovers' 'whose soule is sense', and of Yeats's golden bird 'embittered' by the moon which enmeshes man in the 'fury and the mire of human veins'.

In the middle stanza, the poet indicates that only music can frame an 'exquisite nocturne' wholly expressive of man's spiritual anguish vis-a-vis the 'night and moonshine', realms of temporal desire. That explains why the poet draws upon music (cf. *Four Quartets*) to 'body forth' the inner 'vacuity'.

The lady's puzzled response to the poet's 'mad poetics' is typical of the modern secular world, 'devoid of the supernatural dimension. The poet thinks of her, in the last stanza, as the 'eternal humorist' who laughs away man's spiritual concerns as no more than idle fancies. In being so, she, along with the world she represents, is the 'eternal enemy of the absolute'.

The poem, thus, is a telling comment on the present world's state of complete spiritual bankruptcy. In view of
the poet's agonising experience of it evident in the poems of the Prufrock group that precede this poem, it would be wrong to surmise that, in this poem, "Eliot responded to Laforgue's metaphysical bias before he learned to develop his own reactions to enemies of the Absolute."\(^5\)

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**La Figlia Che Piange**

Inspired perhaps, by the example of the Provencal poet Arnaut Daniel, who in the twenty-sixth canto of Dante's *chef-d'oeuvre* leaps into the fires of purgatory as a penance for his lust, the poet here makes the supreme sacrifice of renouncing his beloved. In doing so, he places before himself the ideal of "that virtue which leads you to be topmost of the stair.\(^1\)

It was this act of renunciation which the poet was to equate with the Upanishadic wisdom of *Datta* in "What the Thunder Said" in *The Waste Land*:

What have we given?
My friend, blood shaking my heart
The awful daring of a moment's surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract
By this, and this only, we have existed...
This eremitic act of the poet may have been the result of certain insights he seems to have gained during his early encounters with life, when he felt desire fade before its bloom. Significantly, in the poems published in the Advocate, blooming and withering of flowers are recurrent images of love. It is this horror of time and decay which probably impelled the desire to transcend the temporal world. Added to this was perhaps the belief that "to satisfy love was to spoil it forever," which led to the poet's desire for what in Jungian phraseology may be termed as the "transformation" or the "sublimation" of the "impetuous, impulsive and compulsive character." The poet ardently wishes his beloved to turn, like Dante's Beatrice, into a symbol of the "high dream" and act as the "enlightener" in the process of his spiritual regeneration. The poem should be read in the light of what Eliot had to say, later in life, about "certain men, like Aeneas, who are elected to a special destiny". He suggested that Aeneas left Dido in obedience to his fate but he was not thereby relieved of feelings of shame or unhappiness -- he felt "a worm". Such a destiny does not make life easier but rather "it is a very heavy cross to bear."1

In the epigraph, the poet nostalgically recalls his enchantment at the first sight of his beloved in terms of Aeneas's address to Venus: "Maiden, by what name shall I
know you? The origin of such a relationship may appear to be physical and sexual, but 'the final cause is attraction towards God'. In the poem, the poet wishes to make human love 'a stage in the progress toward the divine'.

In the first stanza of the poem, the protagonist, who seems to be none other than the poet, visualizes an idealistic, and highly symbolic, manner in which his beloved should part from him. He would like to see her stand 'on the highest pavement of the stair' as an embodiment of perfection. Leaning on 'a garden urn' betokening the mortal nature of earthly beauty and love, she should allow the divine ('the sunlight') to suffuse her earthly beauty (her 'hair'). She should clasp the flowers (signifiers of earthly love) to herself and appear to be mortified at the sudden call to part with them. But she should heed the poet's advice (borrowed from Thomas Middleton):

I that am of your blood was taken from you
For your better health; look no more upon 't,
But cast it to the ground regardlessly,
Let the common sewer take it from distinction.

And in this manner, though not without a sense of fleeting resentment, she should embrace the divine: 'weave, weave the sunlight in your hair'.

The poet is, however, keenly aware of the acute mental and physical pain involved in this formidable act of self-abnegation:
So I would have had her stand and grieve,
So he would have left
As the soul leaves the body torn and bruised...

In its aftermath, the poet muses endlessly how they would have come together. All the same, he enjoys "the fantasy of the beautifully controlled, unmessy parting -- 'a gesture and a pose' -- which he may enshrine forever in his memory and his art." Nonetheless, the consciousness of pain is not entirely quelled:

She turned away, but with the autumn weather Compelled my imagination many days...

Sometimes these cogitations still amaze The troubled midnight and the noon's repose,

The memory of this renunciation and the pain that it engendered were to haunt the rest of Eliot's poetry. In "Burnt Norton", for instance, he was to write:

Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden.

The light irradiating La Figlia's hair reappears in "Burnt Norton" as miraculous "water out of sunlight" in the garden's dry concrete pool. With the passage of time, the persona of the lady gets apotheosized in the poet's religious imagination as a divine presence in "White light folded", who would intercede with God for those "who walk in darkness". The early poetry is thus like a lingering fragrance suffusing Eliot's later poetry.
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