

T. S. Eliot and "The Horror! The Horror!"

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For, in certain moods, no man can weigh this world, without throwing in something, somehow like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance.

—Herman Melville

IN HIS REVIEW of Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse*, Melville confesses his fascination with that "mystical blackness" which pervades Hawthorne's work as though it were "a touch of Puritanic gloom." Not only does Melville admire "the infinite obscure of his background," but also he connects it with Shakespeare's "quick probings at the very axis of reality," probings that Melville drew heavily upon when his own "hypos" got the upper hand. T.S. Eliot also recognized the "blackness" in Hawthorne and once approvingly remarked in a lecture on Hawthorne's "profound sensitiveness to good and evil" and his uncanny ability to "convey horror."¹ Unfortunately, these qualities have become rarer and rarer to the point that, in much postmodern literature, they are virtually non-existent. One finds instead a pervasive sentimentality that robs humanity of its capacity for illimitable "blackness," treachery, and tragedy. This irrational sentimentality has done much to weaken the portrayal of character and has driven writers further and further from any intellectually respectable, referential confrontation with "the axis of reality" into ever more vague forms of nihilism, nominalism, and other

modes of artistic castration. Although many young poets are choosing to go even further into the prosaic, they would be wise to look more closely at Eliot's "background" instead of rejecting him out of hand, as has too often been done during the last thirty years or so. His sense of "blackness," of horror, remains unequalled by any other poet of this century. It allows him to struggle with and confront the evil within his own soul and to see the external chaos for what it is — a manifestation of the internal. His Christian faith not only gave intellectual depth to his life and work but also gave him a sound perspective from which to view the social upheavals of his time.

Many have acknowledged Eliot's sense of horror but usually only as the insignificant element that he rushes past on his way into the blinding light of redemption. Some observers, however, have been more perceptive. E. M. Forster, for one, indicated his awareness that there "is much more in his work than black followed by white."² Paul Elmer More in 1932 was more explicit though uneasy about the same thing when he referred to "a cleft in Mr. Eliot's career" between the poet who sees chaos and the critic who sees "the

steady decrees of a divine purpose."³ Eliot was well aware of the charge of inconsistency and answered More in *After Strange Gods*:

My friend Dr. Paul Elmer More is not the first critic to call attention to an apparent incoherence between my verse and my critical prose. . . . It would appear that while I maintain the most correct opinions in my criticism, I do nothing but violate them in my verse; and thus appear in a double, if not a double-faced role. . . . I should say that in one's prose reflexions one may be legitimately occupied with ideals, whereas in the writing of verse one can only deal with actuality. Why, I would ask, is most religious verse so bad. . . . Largely, I think, because of a pious insincerity. . . . People who write devotional verse are usually writing as they want to feel, rather than as they do feel. Likewise, in an age like the present, it could only be poetry of the very greatest rank that could be genuinely what Dr. More would be obliged to call "classical"; poets of lower ability — that is all but such as half a dozen perhaps in the world's history — could only be "classical" by being pseudo-classical; by being unfaithful and dishonest to their experience. It should hardly be necessary to add that most of us would not recognize a classical writer if he appeared, so queer and horrifying he would seem even to those who clamour for him.⁴

Here Eliot states clearly that poetry must honestly "deal with actuality," with the "blackness," while prose may contemplate "ideals." But what is of more interest in this passage is his describing the classical writer as "queer and horrifying," a description that can be profitably compared with Eliot's allusion in 1916 to T.E. Hulme's belief that "The classicist point of view has been defined as essentially a belief in Original Sin."⁵ Eliot, in effect, is suggesting that More has failed to recognize the appearance of a poet in the classical tradition and has been seduced

by what is actually the main virtue of his work: the conscious choice not to commit sentimental, "pious insincerity."

Eliot revealed the same thinking in his statement about I.A. Richards's charge, which Eliot thought was wrong, that *The Waste Land* effected "a complete severance between poetry and all beliefs":

It [Richards's charge] might also mean that the present situation is radically different from any in which poetry has been produced in the past: namely, that now there is nothing in which to believe, that Belief itself is dead; and that therefore my poem is the first to respond properly to the modern situation and not call upon Make-Believe.⁶

This statement is by far the most, if not the only, illuminating one that Eliot ever made about *The Waste Land*. It patently connects the poem to the unique historical situation of the twentieth century, to the loss of what Matthew Arnold called the "Sea of Faith" (in Derrida's vaguer terminology "the loss of the center"). This excerpt also demonstrates Eliot's refusal to fabricate a system, "Make-Believe," as Yeats did, to replace it. For Eliot would have the horror of "actuality" or nothing.

The epigraph from Joseph Conrad that Eliot initially chose for *The Waste Land* also connects the poem to "actuality" much more effectively than the one he eventually selected. Eliot himself was reluctant to delete it and, of course, sought to convince Ezra Pound of its worth by referring to it as "much the most appropriate that I can find, and somewhat elucidative." Leonard Unger's comments on the general importance of Conrad's story to Eliot are applicable to the epigraph as well:

Eliot has said of *Heart of Darkness* that it is an eminent instance of the literary evocation of evil, and we can see how it might be regarded as a representation of the concept of original sin in fresh and secular terms.⁷

There can be little doubt that Eliot regarded the story and the epigraph in this way.

More emphatically than Unger, Lyndall Gordon asserts that the epigraph indicates Eliot's "... horrifying discovery of innate depravity and the associated fear that few have the stature to transcend it."⁸ The impact that such a reading has on *The Waste Land* is tremendous, and it transforms the poem from "a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life," or against Eliot's first wife, Vivien, or the absurd and groundless speculation surrounding Jean Verdenal, into a profound and devastating "probing of the axis of reality." This reading is also what Helen Gardner has in mind when she writes of *The Waste Land* that

The peace invoked at the end as a blessing is the peace that comes from discovery and acceptance of the truth in all its horror: the truth of human failure and of human need.⁹

Eliot's career can be properly viewed as a sustained attempt to recognize and portray the shortcomings of human nature.

Despite the "peace invoked at the end," *The Waste Land* deals almost exclusively with such shortcomings by presenting concrete examples of dryness, infertility, and those who are "Distracted by distraction from distraction." These range from the implacable memories of "The Burial of the Dead" to the cloying relationship of "A Game of Chess" with its own "planted corpse": "The chemist said it would be all right, but I've never been the same"; to the increasing awareness in "The Fire Sermon" of the all-consuming inferno of lust and complicity: "But at my back in a cold blast I hear/the rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear"; to the dousing of the fire of dryness in "Death by Water"; and, in what is perhaps the most terrifying passage in Eliot's poetry, the horrifying evocation of "blackness" shortly before the blessing of the thunder:

What is that sound high in the air
Murmur of maternal lamentation
Who are those hooded hordes
 swarming
Over endless plains, stumbling in

cracked earth
Ringed by the flat horizon only
What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the
 violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal

The "Murmur of maternal lamentation," which suffuses the entire poem, is the ancient lamentation for the horror of the "whole human condition" as embodied by the primitive "hooded hordes," who perceive only "the flat horizon" that rings, encircles, imprisons them in their bestial state, whether on "the endless plains" or in the "Unreal" and "Falling" cities.¹⁰ This cracking, reforming, bursting lamentation manifests itself at every stage of Eliot's career, and it is not one that he restricted only to his verse.

The lamentation exists more subtly in Eliot's earlier poetry but can be found there nonetheless. For example, in "Portrait of a Lady" a hostess squirms under the cruel, detached observation of a young visitor. To him she reveals momentarily her true belief about her life that is composed of vapid "odds and ends": "[For indeed I do not love it . . . you knew? You are not blind! How keen you are!]" Although she attempts to moderate the disclosure through irony, she knows that she, as well as he, is alone in a tomb which, with or without friends, is "*cauchemar*!" As if in recognition of primitive mysteries, under his own social superfluities, inside his own brain "a dull tom-tom begins." This same nightmare pervades the "Preludes," which especially strip away the "masquerades" of time: "One thinks of all the hands/That are raising dingy shades/In a thousand furnished rooms." The horror of these lines comes from the synecdoche of "hands" and from the metaphorical identification of "dingy shades" with cheap, sordid "rooms" or lives. These "images" symbolize the condition of humankind: "The notion of some . . ./Infinitely suffering thing."

Primitive mysteries also "tom-tom" below the surface of "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," in which "Every streetlamp . . . / Beats like a fatalistic drum, / And through the spaces of the dark / Midnight shakes the memory." This "fatalistic drum" is akin to those in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and similarly shakes up the memory, returns to consciousness the repressed and "supreme moment of complete knowledge." This is the meaning of the exclamation "Memory!" near the end of the poem and the matter-of-fact recognition "You have the key." Eliot's statement that *The Revenger's Tragedy* expresses "an intense and unique and horrible vision of life" applies equally well to this poem: "I could see nothing behind that child's eye." This same perception is made by Webster in "Whispers of Immortality," in which he sees "the skull beneath the skin; / And breastless creatures under ground / Leaned backward with a lipless grin." Donne is privy to a similar insight:

He knew the anguish of the marrow
The age of the skeleton;
No contact possible to flesh
Allayed the fever of the bone.

Although these lines are intended to have sexual connotations and draw on Eliot's idea of the "dissociation of sensibility," they also exude horror at "our lot" and at the unlikelihood of ever allaying the "fever" and "anguish of the marrow." And the Sweeney poems are worth mentioning in passing as good examples that exude these same ideas regarding "our lot," while more than a trace can also be found in poems that follow *The Waste Land* but precede *Four Quartets*.

Often *Four Quartets* have been treated as the culmination of a "lifetime's effort" in the sense of Eliot's having attained to spiritual peace and calm. Though this would not be an inaccurate description of Eliot's attitude, they retain much more of his sense of "actuality" than is sometimes acknowledged. For instance, in "East Coker" the same fire that rages in "The Fire Sermon" is symbolically evoked:

Until the Sun and Moon go down
Comets weep and Leonids fly
Hunt the heavens and the plains
Whirled in a vortex that shall bring
The world to that destructive fire
Which burns before the ice-cap reigns.

The pathetic fallacy of the comets' weeping suggests irremediable cosmic woe as well as disruption of the natural order. This idea is developed further in the vortex that shall bring creation to the destructive inferno. This idea may be echoed partly in the subsequent description of "the quiet-voiced elders" whose wisdom was "only the knowledge of dead secrets / Useless in the darkness into which they peered / Or from which they turned their eyes." Melville also knew there were those who either skimmed the pages or turned from what they could not face. In another section the poem returns to this theme:

Our only health is the disease
If we obey the dying nurse
Whose constant care is not to please
But to remind of our, and Adam's curse,
And that, to be restored, our sickness
must grow worse.

Stephen Spender believes that the nurse symbolizes the Church.¹¹ Therefore, Eliot's choice of the adjective "dying" is not fortuitous but in accordance with his loathing for "Make-Believe," which he proves again by not turning his eyes away from "our, and Adam's curse." The "sickness" that must grow worse, in Kierkegaard "the sickness unto death," is the one that leads from the destructive flames to the "purgatorial fires."

Leonard Unger's comments on "The Dry Salvages" illuminate the nature of this malady:

An argument, so to speak, of "The Dry Salvages," is that man is incapable of seeing his relationship to the super-natural world because he refuses to see his true and unchanging relationship to the natural world. Morally and theologically this may be stated (as Eliot has in effect stated it) as man's in-

ability to believe in the existence of the good (and hence of God) because he refuses to admit and to recognize the existence of evil.¹²

Eliot stated it similarly in *After Strange Gods*: "The perception of Good and Evil — whatever choice we may make — is the first requisite of spiritual life."¹³ "The Dry Salvages" begins with the natural world by describing the river as a brown god which is "sullen, untamed, and intractable," "first recognized as a frontier," a region of experience that is largely unexplored. Once men learn to circumvent and refuse the river, it quickly becomes "almost forgotten," though it endures to serve as a "reminder/Of what men choose to forget." Spender appropriately identifies this river with Rilke's "hidden guilty river-god of the blood" since Eliot suggests this in the hemistich "The river is within us." The natural world is further described in Eliot's typical primitive sea imagery of starfishes, hermit crabs, whale bones, pools, sea anemones, and so on.

The second section of "The Dry Salvages" relates that there is no end "To the drift of the sea and the drifting wreckage" of mariners upon it. These cycles approach the same symbolic meaning as the river itself and gloss further what "is almost forgotten by the dwellers in cities":

I have said before
That the past experience revived in the
meaning
Is not the experience of one life only
But of many generations — not forgetting
Something that is probably quite
ineffable:
The backward look behind the
assurance
Of recorded history, the backward
half-look
Over the shoulder, towards the primitive
terror.

The speaker does not commit the error so common among the city-dwellers. His intention is not to escape the "past ex-

perience," "the hidden guilty river-god," but to glance towards "actuality," "the primitive terror." That many generations have shared in this experience authenticates it and exposes "the assurance/Of recorded history." The preserving of the guilty past, however, requires recollecting the "bitter apple and the bite in the apple," for it is this "ragged rock" that looms always threateningly in the sea despite the best machinations to glaze over or conceal it — that ancient rock remains "what it always was."

F.O. Matthiessen said of *Four Quartets* that "Essential evil still constitutes more of Eliot's subject-matter than essential good. . . ." ¹⁴ This is especially true of "Little Gidding," even though it focuses on "the redemption of men and nations from the fire of hell by the fire of purgation and from the fire of purgation by the fire of love."¹⁵ One passage which brings out the purgatorial burning of essential evil is the magnificently rendered meeting with "some dead master," who dwells in "purgatory, if not hell."¹⁶ The meeting occurs in a world of fire — both the scourge of the destructive air raids and the scourge that refines. The latter fire presupposes elemental wrong through which the "exasperated spirit/Proceeds." Despite the well-intentioned admonitions of the "dead master," the interlocutor betrays that his nature is similar to that of the city-dwellers in "The Dry Salvages" by stating from the first, "speak:/I may not comprehend, may not remember." On the sounding of the air horn, the old master fades — unheeded — back into the "waning dusk," the shadow world from which he came.

The black undertone is again sounded in the next section of "Little Gidding" in the words "Sin is Behovely"; that is, necessary, inevitable, wrapped in the very marrow and heart of existence for the predetermined reason of driving man out of the world and leading him to the refining fire:

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare

The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre —
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.

The fire that rages throughout "The Fire Sermon" and many of the earlier poems is again identified with a pervasive, primordial fire that burns deep in the heart of creation. This "intolerable shirt of flame" cannot be removed, though it may be ignored or "almost forgotten." The dove that descends is contrasted with the pernicious dove, the dive-bomb of destruction in an earlier section. The dove as Pentecostal flame strikes terror into existence because of its horrifying annunciation. The dark tones that hedge in the shadowed regions quail and despair before this knowledge — a knowledge too terrible for many to bear. Eliot, however, discloses his own horror by his choice of words: "torment" and "intolerable."

Eliot again handles this theme of terrible knowledge in *Murder in the Cathedral*. In fact, the subject of the play is precisely "Original Sin."¹⁷ Although much of the play revolves around Becket's involvement with the four tempters and four knights, they all actually function to dramatize Becket's own internal battle with temptation and pride. Similarly, the chorus of women of Canterbury, who are devoted to Becket, unveil, by their horrified reaction to the tempters and knights, Becket's increasing knowledge of humanity. Eliot pours into one speech by the chorus all the primitive sea imagery that he had been perfecting for decades and then has the chorus go to the heart of the matter:

It was here, in the kitchen, in the
passage,
In the mews in the barn in the byre in

the market-place
In our veins our bowels our skulls as
well
As well as in the plottings of potentates
As well as in the consultations of
powers.
What is woven on the loom of fate
What is woven in the councils of
princes
Is woven also in our veins, our brains,
Is woven like a pattern of living worms
In the guts of the women of Canter-
bury.

The pronoun "it" has no clear antecedent in context but is preceded by about thirty lines of lobsters, crabs, whelks, and other haunting imagery. Obviously what the women are recognizing is "In our veins our bowels our skulls" and in the intrigues of despots as well as in the well-intentioned consultations of legitimate, respectable powers. To see such things in the "guts" of the world, Becket tells them, is to see and "accept" their "share of the eternal burden."

After Becket has been killed by the knights, the chorus recoil in horror:

We are soiled by a filth that we cannot
clean, united to supernatural vermin,
It is not we alone, it is not the house, it
is not the city that is defiled,
But the world that is wholly foul.
Clear the air! clean the sky! wash the
wind! take the stone from the
stone, take the skin from the arm, take
the muscle from the
bone, and wash them. Wash the stone,
wash the bone, wash the brain, wash
the soul, wash them wash them!

It is the irony and futility that permeate the last four lines which make them particularly effective. The chorus, overwhelmed by terror, seek to extricate the "brown guilty river-god" from the dark crevices in which it abides. Of these choruses Spender writes that Eliot "touches the utmost depths of horror that he knows, which we find in "Prufrock," *The Waste Land*, *Sweeney Agonistes* — indeed, throughout his work."¹⁸

We can also find these "depths" in *The Family Reunion*, which has often been read as a gloss on *The Waste Land* and Eliot's life in general. Harry or Lord Monchensey imagines he has pushed his wife off an ocean liner, though it is eventually disclosed that he suffers from a feeling of guilt for having contemplated doing it many times. The darkness thickens when it is uncovered that his wish for her death parallels his own father's sin of wishing for his mother's death. Harry, therefore, bears the unacknowledged burden of sin from the past that haunts him and his entire family:

It's not being alone
That is the horror — to be alone with
the horror.
What matters is the filthiness. I can
clean my skin,
Purify my life, void my mind,
But always the filthiness, that lies a
little deeper. . .

Regardless of whether or not Harry expresses Eliot's distaste for women and marriage, the play does hinge on the inescapable guilt of the past driving a man to seek expiation.

The charge regarding the "cleft in Mr. Eliot's career" between the verse and the prose cannot, however, be made about all the prose. There are many instances in which the seeming incoherence does not exist — many instances in which "actuality" plays as large a role as in the verse. We have already looked at Eliot's dismissal of the charge in *After Strange Gods*. Later in the same book his critical remarks on Ezra Pound again evince his belief that poetry must not commit "pious insincerity" by glazing over the dark depths:

With the disappearance of the idea of Original Sin, with the disappearance of the idea of intense moral struggle, the human beings presented to us both in poetry and in prose fiction today . . . tend to become less and less real. It is in fact in moments of moral and spiritual struggle depending on spiritual sanc-

tions . . . that men and women come nearest to being real. If you do away with this struggle, and maintain that by tolerance, benevolence, inoffensiveness and a redistribution or increase of purchasing power, combined with a devotion, on the part of an élite, to Art, the world will be as good as anyone could require, then you must expect human beings to become more and more vaporous. This is exactly what we find of the society which Mr. Pound puts in Hell, in his *Draft of XXX Cantos*. . . If you do not distinguish between individual responsibility and circumstances in Hell, between essential Evil and social accidents, then the Heaven (if any) implied will be equally trivial and accidental. Mr. Pound's Hell, for all its horrors, is a perfectly comfortable one for the modern mind to contemplate, and disturbing to no one's complacency: it is a Hell for the *other people*, the people we read about in the newspapers, not for oneself and one's friends.¹⁹

It is possible that Eliot may have been influenced here partially by Robert Browning's interest in "the soul under stress" and what decisions and choices are made. Regardless, this passage remains perhaps the best criticism of Pound that has ever been written and is applicable to much of modern and postmodern literature — for with the disappearance of the idea of Original Sin, or as Melville put it, "something, somehow like" it, "human beings" have indeed become "more and more vaporous." Eliot's concern in Pound with the lack of what Matthiessen calls "essential evil" implies that Eliot regards the chaos, even in his prose, as deep within "our veins our bowels our skulls" and that it cannot be left out of the balance when a writer seeks to create a character that even remotely approximates the dynamic struggle that constitutes life. Writers like Pound who commit sentimental simplification of the foundation of our being, the contemporary lie that evil is entirely outside us and not

within, prostitute themselves to a banal complacency that seeks only to be released from its share of the burden of guilt and horror that seethe deep in the "guts" of "actuality."

Shortly after this extract on Pound, Eliot makes some insightful remarks on W.B. Yeats:

Mr. Yeats's "supernatural world" was the wrong supernatural world. It was not a world of spiritual significance, not a world of real Good and Evil, of holiness or sin, but a highly sophisticated lower mythology summoned, like a physician, to supply the fading pulse of poetry with some transient stimulant so that the dying patient may utter his last words.²⁰

Despite Yeats's affected "Theory of Evil," Eliot perceptively detects the sentimentality that lies at the bottom of Yeats's theories and visions. The only effect of Yeats's dualism has been to free some of his less perceptive readers from the burden of guilt and complicity that is theirs. Of course, another effect was the creation of some of the most "vaporous" characters and ideas of this century.

It is of this type of dualistic mistake made by Yeats and others that Eliot is thinking in the following excerpt from *The Idea of a Christian Society*:

We are accustomed to make the distinction (though in practice we are frequently confused) between the evil which is present in human nature at all times and in all circumstances, and the evil in particular institutions at particular times and places, and which, though attributable to some individuals rather than others, or traceable to the cumulative deflection of the wills of many individuals throughout several generations, cannot at any moment be fastened upon particular persons. If we make the mistake of assuming that this kind of evil results from causes wholly beyond the human will, then we are liable to believe that only other non-human causes can change it.²¹

Here Eliot is addressing the problem of Manicheism, or a variety of it, such as Yeats's, which looks only to the mechanical cycles and gyres to make their rounds. And within the overall discussion of Eliot's book, he may have been thinking of communism and fascism. Of course any polity is capable of the "cumulative deflection of the wills of many individuals throughout several generations." This emphasis on the will is precisely what prevents Eliot's thinking from falling into the intellectually flaccid determinism of Yeats's system. The human will, the capacity for volition, for choosing to acknowledge and accept the burden, always rules supreme in Eliot's thinking. Witness, for example, his earlier comment on Pound regarding "moral and spiritual struggle" and "individual responsibility." But, and this is the point of the preceding passage, the human will is always capable, egregiously capable, of "deflection" and self-deception.

This same capacity for self-deception is brought out again later in *The Idea of a Christian Society*:

He [the secular reformer or revolutionist] conceives of the evils of the world as something external to himself. They are thought of either as completely impersonal, so that there is nothing to alter but machinery; or if there is evil incarnate, it is always incarnate in the *other people* — a class, a race, the politicians, the bankers, the armament makers, and so forth — never in oneself.²²

By now it is evident that Eliot is applying in his prose the same principle that undergirds much of his poetry. The indictment of the secular reformer or revolutionist is identical with his indictment of Pound's Hell, which "is a perfectly comfortable one for the modern mind to contemplate" since the evil is all in "*other people*."

In 1949 Eliot published *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*. This book and *The Idea of a Christian Society* are the only works of social criticism by any poet of

this century that are still worthy of serious consideration because Eliot's balanced sense of literary, social, and religious concerns provides him with a sound and intellectually inviolable perspective from which to view "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."²³ As we have seen in *After Strange Gods* and *The Idea of a Christian Society*, even when Eliot writes in prose, his work retains "a touch of Puritanic gloom." *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* is no different:

What we ordinarily mean by understanding of another people, of course, is an approximation towards understanding which stops short at the point at which the student would begin to lose some essential of his own culture. The man who, in order to understand the inner world of a cannibal tribe, has partaken of the practice of cannibalism, has probably gone too far: he can never quite be one of his own folk again.²⁴

To this droll statement Eliot appends the note: "Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* gives a hint of something similar." No better gloss could be had than Spender's general observations on Conrad and Eliot: "The country of the mind described by Conrad is a country of pure horror. Eliot is usually thought of as a sophisticated writer, an 'intellectual.' For this reason, the feeling of primitive horror which rises from the depths of his poetry is overlooked."²⁵ One might add here, from the depths of his social criticism as well. For the "hint" that Eliot clearly has in mind is a glimpse of the unfathomable horror that resides deep below the surface of social superfluities. Both Kurtz and Marlowe in *Heart of Darkness* achieve this same recognition and are never quite one of their "own folk again." And this is so because to voyage into the heart of darkness is to come back metamorphosed. It is instructive that in this extract Eliot is discussing at the same time the confrontation of one culture with another and the dark light that may blaze out from the in-

terstices between them. Although Eliot never experienced a radically different culture, as Conrad and Melville had for instance, he spent extended periods in Europe and may even have felt the shaking of cultural facades in England. It is not unexampled for exposure to relatively similar peoples to culminate in such "hints"; how much more revealing is exposure to peoples who, though not in the least "primitive," observe conventions so dissimilar as to allow one to glimpse, with previously unknown clarity, the essential human nature that all men share.

Eliot was aware, though, that such glimpses were not contingent on travel. His essay on Baudelaire in 1930 focuses on basically the same recognition:

But actually Baudelaire is concerned, not with demons, black masses, and romantic blasphemy, but with the real problem of good and evil. . . . In the middle nineteenth century . . . an age of bustle, programmes, platforms, scientific progress, humanitarianism and revolutions which improved nothing, an age of progressive degradation, Baudelaire perceived that what really matters is Sin and Redemption. . . . the recognition of Sin is a New Life.²⁶

Perhaps it needs to be said that Eliot is cognizant of both sides and not merely the more lugubrious one. He is, like Baudelaire, concerned with "the real problem of good and evil." And he knew that the acknowledgment and the acceptance of sin are not a self-flagellating affair (debased and confused in the modern popular imagination with mental illness), but one that leads, through the refining fire, to a New Life. This recognition, however, is one that is easier in word than deed — for the soul is capable of the most pernicious stratagems and sophistries to gainsay its complicity and to extricate itself from the quagmire of its own actions.

Leszek Kolakowski summarizes well the classicist position that pervades Eliot's poetry and prose:

Christians have never been expected to believe in the story of the fall as retold and travestied by rationalists. It is not even material to genuine religious understanding whether or not they accepted in a literal sense the biblical account of what happened in the primeval garden. The history of Exile, one of the most powerful symbols through which people in various civilizations have tried to grasp, and to make sense of, their lot and their misery, is not a "historical explanation" of the facts of life. It is the acknowledgement of our own guilt: in the myth of Exile we admit that evil is within us; it was not introduced by the first parents and then incomprehensibly imputed to us. . . . Instead of devolving the responsibility for our misfortunes on a pair of ancestral figures we admit, through the symbol of our Exile, that we are cut out of

warped wood (to use Kant's metaphor). . . .²⁷

This "symbol of Exile" distinguishes Eliot from his sentimental contemporaries as well as the postmodernists, most of whom have bent every effort to conceal this dark but emancipating knowledge from themselves and from their readers. If postmodern poetry is to free itself from ever more banal forays into the prosaic and quotidian, if it is to confront the interminable ambiguities of human volition, it must return to the classicist perspective or "something, somehow like" it. Anything else is a dead end — one that results increasingly in a contemptibly trite, suburban solipsism. Only the realization that man is indeed a spiritual being fraught with complexity and compelled to struggle for mortal and infinite stakes can restore even a modicum of profundity and intellectual respectability to the literature of our time.

¹F.O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1958), p. 9. ²E.M. Forster in *T.S. Eliot*, ed. Leonard Unger (New York, 1948), p. 12. ³Unger, p. 27. ⁴T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods* (London, 1934), pp. 28-29. All subsequent quotations from Eliot's poetry and plays are from *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York, 1952). ⁵Quoted in Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot's Early Years* (New York, 1977), p. 71. ⁶T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933; rpt. London, 1980), p. 130. ⁷Leonard Unger, *The Man in the Name* (Minneapolis, 1956), p. 209. ⁸Gordon, p. 109. ⁹Helen Gardner, *The Waste Land: 1972* (Manchester, Great Britain, 1972), p. 25. ¹⁰Gardner, p. 18. ¹¹Stephen Spender, *T.S. Eliot* (1975; rpt. New York, 1976), p. 174. ¹²Unger, *Man in the Name*, pp. 208-09. ¹³*After Strange Gods*, p. 53.

¹⁴Matthiessen, p. 195. ¹⁵Grover Smith, *T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays* (Chicago, 1956), p. 288. ¹⁶Smith, p. 291. ¹⁷Louis MacNeice, "Original Sin," *New Republic*, 98 (3 May 1939), 384-85. ¹⁸Spender, p. 204. ¹⁹*After Strange Gods*, pp. 42-43. ²⁰*After Strange Gods*, p. 46. ²¹T.S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (New York, 1940), pp. 31-32. ²²*Idea of a Christian Society*, p. 100. ²³T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York, 1975), p. 177. ²⁴T.S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture: The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1940 & 1949; rpt. New York, 1968), p. 114. ²⁵Spender, p. 120. ²⁶T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York, 1950), p. 378. ²⁷Leszek Kolakowski, *Religion* (New York, 1982), pp. 50-51.