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THE CONVERSION OF T.S. ELIOT

LORD HARRIES OF PENTREGARTH

Introduction

Eliot (1888-1965) was born in St Louis, but his roots were in Boston where his family were leading Unitarians. He studied at Harvard, the Sorbonne and Oxford before joining Lloyds Bank in 1917. He founded *The Criterion* and placed it at the cutting edge of European literature. He published *The Waste Land* in 1922, which made a bigger impact than any other 20th century poem. It was seen as the voice of a disillusioned generation, but no less expressed the pain and distress of Eliot's first marriage. Eliot was also the most discerning critic of the time, the great arbiter of taste who shaped people's evaluation of poetry and poets for generations to come. This was further reinforced when he became a director of Faber and Faber. In 1927 he was baptised and adopted a disciplined life as an Anglo Catholic Christian. This was reflected in his poetry and culminated in *The Four Quartets* (1935-42) the major Christian poem of the century, rivalled only by the less well-known *Horae Canonicae* of W.H. Auden. Eliot attempted to revive poetic drama and *Murder in the Cathedral* is still staged but his West End plays suffered in comparison with the very different kind of play being performed after World War II. After the death of his first wife he found happiness in a marriage to Vivian Fletcher who guarded his legacy and meticulously edited his correspondence.

Out of hell into the peace of His will

In his forward to *For Lancelot Andrewes*, published in 1928, Eliot announced to a startled world that his general point of view could be described as "classicist in literature, royalist in politics and anglo-catholic in religion." The previous year, on 29 June 1927, he had been baptised behind locked doors in the church at Finstock near Oxford, later the church of Barbara Pym, and the following morning had been confirmed at Cuddesdon by the Bishop of Oxford, Tommy Strong. The restless, literary clergyman who baptised him, W.T. Stead, was sworn to secrecy. "I hate spectacular 'conversions'" wrote Eliot.¹

I approach that conversion with three interlinked questions in mind. From what was he converted? Why did he convert? What was the immediate effect of that conversion? The 7 volumes of Eliot's letters so far published are a helpful way into some answers. I will end by considering briefly how his new-found faith is reflected in some of the poems he wrote at the time.

From what was he converted?

Eliot was brought up in the heart of New England Unitarianism. His mother's father-in-law, Walter Greenleaf Eliot, a leading light in the movement, was a great hero and family role model, and the whole family held a prominent position in the church. Eliot later described them as "the Borgias of the Papacy",² though anything less like the Borgias in moral character would be hard to imagine. For this Unitarianism was characterised by a strong sense of moral duty, high mindedness and the importance of education. From an early age he had instilled into him the ideals of unselfishness and public service not least through the Unitarian church the family attended on Sundays. This exacting demand pressed heavily on him throughout his life. But emotionally and

¹ Letters, Vol 3, p. 404 and 572

² Letters, Vol 3, p. 412



spiritually this form of religion had no appeal to young Tom and when he went to Harvard as a student he was indifferent to the church.

Even as a young boy Eliot had read a life of the Buddha and at Harvard he read widely in Eastern philosophy and mysticism and learnt Sanskrit and Pali. His latest biographer, Robert Crawford, sets out in some detail the extensive range of these courses.³ Later when he was doing further study at Oxford this deep interest in mysticism continued.⁴ He responded very positively to Tagore and he read Evelyn Underhill.

This interest was not just theoretical. From about the time of his graduation ceremony from Harvard he had the first of a few experiences, the memory of which was to haunt him all his life. As Lyndall Gordon put it

“While walking one day in Boston, he saw the streets suddenly shrink and divide. His every day preoccupations, his past, all the claims of the future fell away, and he was enfolded in a great silence.”⁵

In June 1910 he wrote a poem called ‘Silence’, which is now in print as one of his previously uncollected poems. In this he wrote of everything becoming still, but it was a terrifying peace.⁶

A little later in Paris he tells of a ring of silence which closed round him and sealed him off in a state of beatific security from the floods of life. Interestingly he did not immediately interpret these experiences in religious terms, even though as I have noted he was at the time deeply into Eastern mysticism.⁷ They are reflected in the *Wasteland* where he wrote of “Looking into the heart of light, the silence.”

Later, in the first of *The Four Quartets*, Eliot’s poetry reflects a visit he paid with Emily Hale to a Cotswold manor house, Burnt Norton, and in particular the moment when they stood by the empty swimming pool. An experience that previously he had interpreted in very general terms he there incorporated into a Christian framework.

Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light

Another thread in the background to Eliot’s conversion, was the fact that he had had a Roman Catholic nanny to whom he was devoted. She used to take him on occasions to the colourful Church of the Immaculate Conception, which he said, “I liked very much.” Also, as he said later, he remembered a theological argument about God as first cause “being put to me, at the age of six, by a devoutly Catholic Irish nursemaid.”⁸

This attraction towards Roman Catholicism re-emerged much later in intellectual form when he was reflecting on the nature of tradition. As is well known, Eliot came to think that you could only be truly modern if you were deeply steeped in a tradition, otherwise you were simply in danger of repeating the past by being swept up in the fads of the present. Indeed he said that anyone who wanted to continue as a poet beyond their thirtieth year had to write with the whole sweep of European literature, from Homer onwards in their bones.

It is clear from Vol 2 of Eliot’s letters covering the period 1923-1925 that in his editing of *The Criterion* at the time he was looking for a clear moral and intellectual point of view to set against the ramshackle, hedonistic culture of the 1920’s. He was also being drawn to read Thomas Aquinas. He knew his Aristotle and appreciated the Aristotelian element in Aquinas but believed that Catholic philosophers like Maritain had been too

³ Robert Crawford *Young Eliot: from St Louis to The Waste Land*, Cape, 2015, p. 168-71

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 220

⁵ Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot’s Early Years*

⁶ T.S. Eliot, *The Poems of T.S. Eliot, Vol 1, Collected and Uncollected Poems*, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, Faber, 2015, p. 243. Cited as *Poems*

⁷ Eliot’s early years, p. 39

⁸ Letters, Vol 3, p. 24



emotional. He wanted to pick his way slowly and with great exactitude, aware of the problems posed by modern psychology, especially to what he called the problem of religious belief. As well as reading a number of other Roman Catholic theologians he suggested, when reflecting on contemporary poetry in 1917, that people read a 19th century Papal encyclical on tradition. He was not a member of any church, and he mocked “the true church” in his poem *The Hippopotamus* but he used to visit Anglo Catholic City churches in his lunch hours and he was conscious of Catholicism as “The only church which can even pretend to maintain a philosophy of its own, a philosophy, as we are increasingly aware, which is succeeding in establishing a claim to be taken quite seriously.”⁹

There is another aspect of this emphasis on tradition too. Delivering some extra mural lecture on French literature in Ilkley, in order to earn more money, he stressed the need for form and restraint in writing. In contrast to romanticism “A classicist in art and literature will therefore be likely to adhere to a monarchical form of government, and to the Catholic Church.” This is because “At the bottom of man’s heart there is always the beast” and therefore “man requires an askesis”, that is, strict spiritual self-discipline.¹⁰

Another element in the movement of his mind and heart was his reading of Lancelot Andrewes, Donne and Herbert from 1918 onwards as part of his consideration of the sermon as “Perhaps the most difficult form of art.”¹¹ In the same way that C.S. Lewis found himself hugely attracted to Christian authors some time before he himself converted, Eliot was being drawn in the same way.

There is one further consideration about Eliot’s pre-conversion outlook. His scepticism. Eliot always had a questioning, critical mind. It was one of the aspects of his character that fed into his great sense of mischievous humour, which he retained even in his darkest period. Then when he was studying at Oxford he became particularly interested in sceptical attitudes which called any dogmatic point of view into question. This corrosive scepticism went along with his developing interest in mysticism.¹² As he put it to a friend “I have had for several years a distrust of strong convictions in any theory or creed which can be formulated ... One must have theories, but one need not believe in them!”¹³ His scepticism was not only directed towards the beliefs of other, but more relentlessly to his own.¹⁴

This then was the background from which Eliot was converted. First, from his Unitarian upbringing he retained a strong sense of duty but reacted against its dry, over-optimistic view of life. As he put it “Unitarianism is a bad preparation for brass tacks like birth, copulation, death, hell, heaven and insanity.”¹⁵ Secondly there was his developing interest in Eastern religions and mysticism together with some powerful experiences of heightened awareness, which at the time he did not interpret in religious terms. Thirdly, his reaction against individualism and romanticism leading him not just to see the importance of tradition in literature but the strength of Catholic Christianity with its realistic understanding of the seed of evil in the human heart and the consequent need for askesis. Fourthly, there was a sceptical side to him by nature which was reinforced by his philosophical studies. As we shall see, this remained part of him even after his conversion.

Eliot announced his new belief in 1928 in a sudden peremptory manner. But of course the various elements just mentioned were fermenting and mixing along the way. In 1910 he wrote some blasphemous poems, which is indicative because he regarded blasphemy as stemming from the “partial belief” of a mind in a peculiar and unusual state of spiritual sickness and it might even be “a way of affirming belief.”¹⁶ Then in 1914 he was to write some visionary lines that over the years developed into *The Wasteland* finally finished in 1921. The poem was later dismissed by Eliot as a personal grouse against life but was of course seen by others as the voice of a disillusioned generation. Though Sanskrit in some of its wording and Buddhist in some of its imagery, it is a poem that not only contains Christian themes but has a strong sense of the Christian imperative to lead an

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 192

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 257

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 336

¹² *Ibid.* p. 177

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 221

¹⁴ Letters, Vol 7, p. 751

¹⁵ Letters, Vol 3, p. 41

¹⁶ Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot’s early years*, OUP, 1977



exemplary life pressing through it. Then in 1926 to the surprise of his brother and sister-in-law who were with him on a visit to Rome, Eliot suddenly fell on his knees before Michelangelo's Pietà. About the same time he was struck by the number of people kneeling in the City churches he visited. An aunt of his had written to a friend who had joined the Episcopal Church "Do you kneel down in church and call yourself a miserable sinner? Neither I nor my family will ever do that." But that gesture of abasement and worship was increasingly what Eliot did want to do, and which he did the following year when he was baptised. This was followed some months later by his first confession. Eliot wrote to W.T. Stead, who had helped him on his way to baptism, that he had an extraordinary sense of surrender and gain as if he had crossed a very wide, deep river, never to return.¹⁷

Why did he convert?

So we come to the second question: why did Eliot convert? And the clue is given in the very stark and definite way in which he describes his new commitment as classicist, monarchist and Catholic. He wanted more than a vague mysticism and more than a self-sufficient moralism. He wanted something with a clear structure and discipline to it. Classicism might be defined in a number of ways, but one thing that is for certain is that it is opposed to what Eliot describes as the undisciplined squads of emotion which drive so many of our words. Again royalism can be variously understood but at the least it indicates structure and degree, and as Shakespeare put it in *Troilus and Cressida*, "Take but degree away, **untune that string, And, hark, what discord follows!** each thing meets in mere oppugnancy."

Barry Spurr's thoroughly researched book shows the influence of T.S. Eliot's very clear and definite Anglo-Catholic beliefs and practises on his poetry and other writing at the time. He argued that it is impossible to engage with Eliot's poetry without a knowledge of the very particular religious *milieu* in which Eliot found his spiritual home, as it existed from the 1920's to about 1955 and he describes it for those unfamiliar with it today. Indeed it is part of Spurr's thesis that this particular Anglo-Catholic world no longer exists and needs explanation as much as any other past period of history.

The immediate background to the conversion and why the need for a definite structure and discipline was so urgent was the fact that Eliot's life was a desperately unhappy mess. The anguished, hellish marriage for both Tom and his wife Vivien, together with trying to do his job at the bank and later at Fabers, keep up his serious literary work and earn enough money to pay for his wife's heavy medical expenses was taking an increasingly heavy toll on him. He was barely coping, indeed was on the edge of a breakdown. He needed something to hold his own life together and similarly it was the desire to find something more solid than the individualism, relativism and emotionalism that he thought was rotting Western Civilisation. He was looking for a secure political order that could be sustained by an objective moral realm. He was later to write, "The Christian scheme seemed the only possible scheme which found a place for values which I must maintain or perish (and belief comes first and practice second), the belief, for instance, in holy living and holy dying, in sanctity, chastity, humility, austerity."¹⁸ It was for this reason that he much regretted "the intellectual breakup of Europe and the rise of Protestantism", and why he preferred the outlook of the 13th century to the 17th. All this helps us to understand why he was drawn to the French thinker Maurras, now of dubious reputation, who though an atheist was also looking for an ordered alternative to the chaos of Western culture as it then stood.

Another factor in his move to Christian faith was the thinness of Bertrand Russell's arguments. He wrote to Russell, who was an old friend, about his pamphlet on Christianity to say that it was a piece of childish folly and that the arguments in it had been familiar to him at the age of six or eight. He took serious atheism very seriously and said that "Atheism should always be encouraged for the sake of the Faith."¹⁹ But about Russell (and to Russell), he said "What I dislike is the smell of the corpse of Protestantism passing down the river."²⁰

¹⁷ Letters, Vol 4, p. 96

¹⁸ Letters, Vol 3, p. 572/3 note 1

¹⁹ *The Letters of T.S. Eliot; Vol 3*, p. 424

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 739. See also p. 568 where he writes to tell Russell "Why don't you stick to mathematics?"



Eliot had a very pessimistic view of human nature, his own and other people's. All human relationships, he thought, turned out to be a delusion and a cheat. However "the love of God takes the place of the cynicism which otherwise is inevitable to every rational person." On the basis of this love of God, then every human love is enhanced and can be celebrated. The reference to cynicism is from a very important letter to Geoffrey Faber, who had accused him of being too austere, in which Eliot beautifully sets out the right relationship between the love of God, and the most material of pleasures.²¹

Of particular interest in volume 6 of the collected letters is Eliot's correspondence with Stephen Spender in connection with his 1932 broadcasts in which Eliot discloses something of how his mind moved towards faith. As mentioned, he said he needed to hold to values without which he would perish but values, in his view, depended on religion. Those values would be expressed in highly disciplined Christian living.²² He had nothing but scorn for the average product of the English school system which sought, he believed, to turn out gentlemen rather than Christians, the two being antithetical.²³ He also argues that the real choice to be made is between Christianity and Communism, though he certainly did not want to be aligned with the usual anti-communists. He said he loathed both communism and the society in which he was then living. He reserved further scorn for the Conservative party of the time which he saw as nothing more than an unsavoury alliance of liberalism and laissez-faire economics. He looked for an alternative, Christian way of ordering society, an idea which took book form some seven years later. For now he needed a structure and a discipline to hold his own life together. The Anglo-Catholicism of the 1920s provided just that. The puritan element from his new England upbringing could find an outlet in the rigours of self-examination and confession, his mystical yearning could find its true goal and fulfilment in adoration of the God who became incarnate, the defining difference for him between his new creed and his Unitarian background. In Anglo-Catholicism this came in sacramental form with a sense of mystery and awe in which his desire to worship could find proper expression. His belief in the importance of tradition found its home in his sense of belonging to the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

There is of course the question as to why he became an Anglican rather than a Roman Catholic. It would have been very natural for him to become a Roman Catholic given what became his Thomistic philosophy of life and because of his wide knowledge of and deep sympathy for European culture. But he valued the greater freedom of thought provided by the Church of England and the more moderate *via media* it provided to religious excesses. When he had first started to read sermons in 1918 for their literary form he had been excited by Donne, later however it was the sober, approach of Lancelot Andrewes with the settled resolute will to holiness that drew him.²⁴ Then, not least, was his consciousness of his English family forebears and fitting naturally into their continuing life as an English Christian not just a European intellectual.

What was the effect of his conversion?

This leads to the third question: what was the immediate effect of the conversion? The answer again is quite clear; a new discipline of life. As mentioned, he made his first confession and that discipline continued. Indeed he sought a new confessor, one who would be much more severe with him.²⁵ He became a nearly daily communicant and agreed to be church warden of St Stephen's, Gloucester Road, a role he held for 25 years. There is a telling anecdote by Herbert Read who was staying with Eliot in the spare bedroom when he said he was woken up in the morning by a slight noise. He saw a hand sliding through the door to reach first an umbrella and then a bowler hat, before the door slipped shut again. It was Eliot going off to early morning communion. It was the first indication he had that Eliot had become a Christian. Some lines from *The Four Quartets* succinctly sum up this approach to life. Eliot refers to those moments in life when we are taken out of ourselves, for example, by music, but as he writes these are only hints followed by guesses. What matters are the basic disciplines of the Christian life, prayer and observance, thought and action.

²¹ Letters, Vol 3, p. 711-13

²² Letters, Vol 6, p. 156-71 and notes there

²³ Letters, Vol 6, p. 290

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 125

²⁵ Letters, Vol 4, p. 128



There is a revealing letter to Paul Elmer More in which Eliot refers to people who seem to have no need of religion.

“They may be very good or very happy: they simply seem to miss nothing, to be unconscious of any void. The void I find in the middle of all human happiness and all human relations and which there is only one thing left to fill. I am one whom this sense of void tends to drive towards asceticism or sensuality, and only Christianity helps to reconcile me to life, which is otherwise disgusting. But the people I have in mind - the good ones are much more puzzling than the bad - have an easy and innocent acceptance of life that I simply cannot understand. It is more bewildering than the “problem of evil.””²⁶

Some people when they convert become narrow and intolerant in defence of their new faith. Almost the opposite happened to Eliot. He became if anything even more intellectually open to a range of truth. He continued to select or commission articles for *The Criterion* on the same grounds as before. Nearly all the people he knew were shocked and appalled by the new turn in Eliot’s life, but he remained remarkably unphased by their attacks on him, and he continued to have good relations even with people who had sharply, and for the wrong reasons, savaged his faith. He remained friends with people who had very different views of life to his own (nearly all the people he knew) continuing to offer objective literary judgements about the literary worth of their writing. There was no insecure defensiveness about him. This was because he had first faced in himself all the worst things that others might say. Conrad Aiken, for example, had criticised *For Lancelot Andrewes* as showing “A thin and vinegarish hostility to the modern world...a complete abdication of intelligence” etc. to which Eliot replied “You may be right. Most of these criticisms I had anticipated or made myself. Thrice armed is he who knows what a humbug he is. My progress, if I ever make any, will be purging myself of a large number of impure motives.”²⁷ More widely, he welcomed the new hostile situation in which Christians now found themselves, for it released the Christian faith from what had burdened it since the 18th century, namely being a badge of respectability for the English middle classes.

We get an idea of the kind of intellectual culture in which Eliot moved in a letter he wrote to Paul Elmer More who had followed a somewhat similar route to Eliot himself. Eliot wrote, “I might almost say that I never met any Christians until after I had made up my mind to become one.”²⁸ He knew that his conversion would expose him to “ridicule” but this did not daunt him. As he said, “anyone who has been moving in intellectual circles and comes to the Church, may experience an odd rather exhilarating feeling of isolation.”

His new faith was a definite one, in the sense that it fully adopted the creed and outlook of the Anglo-Catholicism of the day and was hostile to any liberalising tendencies.²⁹ We find this at its most startling in his attitude to Paul Elmer More’s views on hell. He liked and respected More but found his view of hell too liberal. “Is your God Santa Claus?” he asked and continued “to be damned for the glory of God” is sense, not paradox.³⁰

Throughout the letters of the period there are the same strong, lucid opinions on a whole range of subjects, literary, political and religious; stern and uncompromising in tone, yet also self-mocking and caring of the recipient. They indicate the kind of difference becoming a Christian and in particular a Catholic Anglican made to his life. “I know just enough - and no more - of ‘the peace of God’ to know that it an extraordinarily painful blessing.” Again “faith is not a substitute for anything: it does not give the things life has refused, but something else; and in the ordinary sense it does not make one happier.”

I mentioned Eliot’s sceptical cast of mind. This did not change with his conversion. He continued to be highly critical of Western culture and religion, of course, but neither did he allow the fundamental questions about faith to go away. Rather, he believed that in one sense they intensified. One of the reasons that Eliot was drawn to Pascal was he said that he “faced unflinchingly the demon of doubt which is inseparable from the spirit of

²⁶ Letters, Vol 4, p. 432/3

²⁷ Letters, Vol 4, p. 572 See also p. 567

²⁸ Letters, Vol 4, p. 267/8, note 1.

²⁹ Letters, Vol 3, p. 572/3 note 1

³⁰ Letters, Vol 5, p. 209/10 and p.292/3



belief.”³¹ Again, “Every man who thinks and lives by thought must have his own scepticism, that which stops at the question, that which ends in denial or that which leads to faith and which is somehow integrated into the faith which transcends it.”³² As he wrote, “The more conscious becomes the belief, so the more conscious becomes unbelief: indifference, doubt and scepticism appear ... A higher religion imposes a conflict, a division, torment and struggle within the individual.”³³

As Eliot brought out in his letter to Geoffrey Faber he relished the ordinary pleasures of life and indeed found them enhanced by his religion. Later on in life, with his second marriage, he was to discover an unexpected happiness in love. But for this period of his life what he discovered through his faith was something tougher.

“To me, religion has brought at least the perception of something above morals, and therefore extremely terrifying; it has brought me not happiness, but the sense of something above happiness and therefore more terrifying than ordinary pain and misery; the very dark night and the desert.”³⁴

In 1927, the year of his conversion, Eliot wrote *The Journey of the Magi*. He wrote it quickly between church and lunch one Sunday morning with the aid of half a bottle of gin. The imagery, much of it based on Lancelot Andrewes’ Christmas sermon of 1662 describes a long hard journey to Bethlehem. Some of the imagery clearly draws on the New Testament, some of it, though highly evocative, seems obscure. Eliot remarked that a scene might mean much to a person, but little to the poet, or vice versa, nothing to the person but much to the poet. Some of the imagery in this poem is of the latter kind.

The poem as a whole clearly reflects Eliot’s own journey to faith and the long journey that lay ahead. As he put it to his friend Paul Elmer More, “Most critics appear to think that my Catholicism is merely an escape, an evasion ... (one was) supposed to have settled oneself in an easy chair, when one has just begun a long journey on foot.”³⁵ He already knows that this journey, though it involves the recognition of a birth, means for him a personal death; a displacement of the self, a prising away of the self’s attachments of so much he had valued before. Afterwards the Magi leave the Christ child to return home but “no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation.”

So as Eliot put it elsewhere, “We are certainly a minority, even in what are called Christian countries; we find the minds of the people about us growing more and more alien, so that on vital matters we often find we have no common assumptions.”³⁶

The next poem he wrote about this time, in 1928, was *A Song for Simeon*. This describes a world being destroyed, in imagery taken from words of Jesus, with the repeated liturgical refrain, “Grant us thy peace” taken from the Agnus Dei. It switches at the end to “Grant me thy peace”, with the words about Mary “And a sword shall pierce thy heart also” added. It ends, as does the Nunc Dimittis, said every day at Evensong with “Let thy servant depart/ Having seen thy salvation”. This reflect Eliot’s own new found salvation, but is full of premonition for the pain ahead and a desire to depart this life.

This poem is another expression of Eliot’s long-standing conviction about the need to stand in a tradition, which was deeply reinforced by becoming a Christian. For this brings, for the Catholic and Orthodox Christian, a sense of Christians in every age belonging together, the liturgy of the church being the voice of the whole body of Christ.

In 1929 he wrote *Animula*. The first bold words “Issues from the hand of God, the simple soul” come from Dante’s Purgatory. But as the poem goes on the soul is revealed as far from simple. Eliot had previously criticised Wordsworth and others for indulging in the imagined radiance of childhood. The soul may be simple

³¹ T.S. Eliot, “The Pensées of Pascal”, *Selected Essays*, Faber, p. 411

³² *Ibid.*

³³ T.S. Eliot, Notes towards the Definition of Culture, p. 67

³⁴ Letters, Vol 5, p. 209/10 and p. 292/3

³⁵ Poems, p. 762

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 765



as it comes from God but very different when it emerges in time when it is irresolute and selfish unable to go forward or retreat.

In such a world, as Eliot found, the only peace is in preparing for death. As one line goes “Living first in the silence after the viaticum”, the viaticum being the last rites a person receives when they know they are dying.

Again the poem ends in a prayer, the words of the Angelus but with a difference, not “Pray for us now and at the hour of our death” but “at the hour of our birth” in this disordered and disfigured world.

The key poem for the light it sheds on what the conversion meant to Eliot emotionally and spiritually is *Ash Wednesday*. Although published in its present form in 1930, the four sections were all completed by 1928, some of them published separately. The themes had obviously been in his mind before the key date of 1927 when he announced his new faith to the world. He disliked it being called a religious, let alone a devotional poem, rather he said it marked a stage in a person’s life. To put it in very prosaic terms, it is a poem of renunciation, a resolve not to turn back to what the world values, a determination not to look back with longing, regrets or nostalgia. It is a poem in which all hope is given up because in the words of John of the Cross which he used later in *Burnt Norton*, “hope would be hope for the wrong thing.” So *Ash Wednesday* begins with the hope that he would not have to turn again.

The key opening line comes from Cavalcanti, the 13th century Italian poet whom Eliot, like Pound, much admired: “perch’io non spero di tornar già mai”. The line lodged itself in Eliot’s mind and he could not rest until he had used it. The poem is full of other borrowing, borrowing, rather than allusion being Eliot’s method; borrowings from the psalms and other parts of scripture, the liturgy and prayers of the church. These references are often clear in themselves, but people complained then and continue to do so about the poem’s obscurity. Eliot believed a poem should be obscure. Like life or any living thing it needs to be appreciated for the mystery of itself, in itself. It is not a conundrum to be solved.³⁷ Some of the imagery, he admitted, like the yew tree and the veiled sister, even came from his recurrent dreams. They give the poem a hallucinatory, film like effect, and this combined with its incantatory tone, endows it with a haunting quality.

That said, Eliot is quite clear what the poem is fundamentally about, for he said it was a “deliberate modern *Vita Nuova*” of Dante.³⁸ In that book Dante’s sight of Beatrice kindles his love and that love leads him to the Virgin Mary and onward up the mountain of purgatory. Eliot seems to have had his own Beatrice in Emily Hale, an American friend with whom he corresponded over the years. Once Eliot discussed with W.T. Stead how Dante’s love for Beatrice had passed over into the love of God in the *Vita Nuova*. “I have had that experience,” said Eliot eagerly and rather shyly and then lapsed into silence.³⁹ It was Emily Hale who went with Eliot to Burnt Norton in September 1934, a visit which inspired not only the title of the poem but a mystical moment by the empty pool described earlier. Before that moment in the poem had come the thought of paths not followed.

The persona of the poem is in the desert, Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones, everywhere is desolation, disillusion; the air is dry, and all is dead. But a lady appears who points to Mary who leads him out of the desert. As Eliot wrote, “I have found my own love for a woman enhanced, intensified and purified by meditation on the virgin.”⁴⁰

But it was in the desert he had found the secret of peace, again from Dante, this time *Paradiso III e la sua volontate é nostra pace*, “our peace in his will.” The poem ends

Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden,
Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Even among these rocks.

³⁷ *Poems*, p. 730

³⁸ *Poems*, p. 750

³⁹ Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot’s New Life*, OUP 1988, p. 12

⁴⁰ *Poems*, Vol 2, 8-10, p. 743



Our peace in his will
 And even among these rocks
 Sister, mother
 And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
 Suffer me not to be separated
 And let my cry come unto thee⁴¹

Then finally, there is *Marina* published in 1930. It is, I have to admit, a poem that had rather passed me by until Rowan Williams and I shared a day speaking on Eliot and he remarked that it so moved him, he was not able to read it aloud in public. It is also noteworthy that Eliot said it was his favourite poem. The dominant image is based on the recognition by Shakespeare's *Pericles* of his supposedly lost daughter Marina. But there is an implied contrast with Seneca's *Hercules Furens* in which Hercules comes to and finds he has killed his children for it is addressed to "O my daughter."⁴² The boat on which the poet sets sail is an old one, much repaired, and the poem is full of the imagery of Maine, which meant so much to Eliot and which comes to full flower later in *The Dry Salvages*. But here the imagery is not for that coast itself, but for a reconnection with something in himself set off by Emily Hale, already mentioned in my discussion of *Ash Wednesday*. Emily Hale, his Beatrice, not only channelled his love towards God but also acted as a muse in releasing his poetry. Hers is a face through which grace comes and that grace/face is "dissolved in place." On this voyage he "Made this unknowing, half conscious, unknown, my own", living in time beyond time with

The awakened lips parted, the hope, the new ships
 What seas what shores what granite islands towards my timbers
 And woodthrush calling through the fog
 My daughter.⁴³

It is interesting that Eliot admitted that his desire for progeny had once been very acute.⁴⁴ So like *Pericles*, Shakespeare's play which Eliot much admired, the poem is about recognition. Eliot recognised that his pent-up desire to love could be channelled towards God by his newly awakened feelings for Emily as symbolised in his childhood memories of the Maine coast. Maine was the scene of Eliot's most ambitious sailing ventures. As Lyndall Gordon puts it

"It is there, in imagination, that his voyager is "awakened" as the longed-for call comes through the fog and suppressed emotion for the long-lost yet familiar woman breaks out in a cry of recognition."⁴⁵

This was the intense new life that Eliot lived behind the carapace of successful publisher, man of letters and austere celibate Christian. It was a life out of hell into the peace of His will.

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This lecture is based on a forthcoming book *Haunted by Christ: modern writers and the struggle for faith* (SPCK). There will be a launch at Gresham College on Thursday 25 October 2018 at 6 pm to which all are welcome.

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⁴¹ Poems, p. 96/7

⁴² Poems, p. 107/108

⁴³ "Marina", Poems, p. 107

⁴⁴ Poems, p. 775

⁴⁵ Lyndall Gordon, p. 14