

Tone And Tenets Of Indian Philosophy In Eliot's Poems

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Abstract

An American by birth and a British by long residence, T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) is the literary icon of the Modern era. Primarily a poet, he is also well known as a playwright and critic. He became famous overnight with his long poem, *The Waste Land* (1922), a pessimistic poem about the deplorable condition of the contemporary post-World War I society. In *The Hollow Men* (1925) was expressed the same note of bitter cynicism. The tone changed in *Ash-Wednesday* (1930), in which Eliot asserted his Dantesque faith: 'Our peace in His will. This faith culminated in his magnificent magnum opus, *Four Quartets* (1935-1942): "And all shall be well and/All manner of thing shall be well." His mystical faith was declared exactly in the four poems: *Burnt Norton* (1936), *East Coker* (1940), *The Dry Salvages* (1941) and *Little Gidding* (1942). These four poems (entitled *Four Quartets*) are literary works of the highest order turned into vision by imagination. We find poetic images and philosophic statements so welded together that we can not say which is philosophy and which is poetry, for the two become one.

Keywords : Dantesque faith, peace, *Four Quartets*, cynicism.

T.S. Eliot's poetry is well known for its allusiveness and references to a wide range of historical and literary subjects. Through the medium of his poems he has rendered the torturing impact of a great metropolis on the human soul, the anguish, the ennui, the boredom, the neurosis which such a life generates. But he is not merely a representative poet, he is also a critic of his age, a gadfly, a great irritant to thought. In his own way, he is the physician of his age who tries to cure "the strange disease of modern life" through a pitiless exposure. Not only that, he universalises contemporary predicament, and shows it to be a part of the human predicament in every age and country. "His great claim to originality", says A.G. George, "consists in his recognizing, the artistic possibilities of the belief that anguish and sinfulness are intrinsic to human nature".

Eliot's poetry is a curious mixture of tradition and individual talent. He was a poet of encyclopedic erudition and his poetry is the outcome of varied influences, too numerous to be recounted. The English Metaphysical tradition, the French Symbolist Movement, the poetry of Dante, Existential philosophy, the philosophies of the Orient, Hindu, Buddhist and others, Christian tradition and theology, and ancient myths and legends, are only a few of the many influences which have gone into the making of his poetry. Eliot is a complex product of

diverse influences. Of these the literary influences include Dante, the French Symbolists, Ezra Pound, the Elizabethans, and John Donne. Of the non-literary influences, one of the most notable is eastern thought. Eliot studied Hinduism and Buddhism as part of a course of Indology at Harvard. One of his teachers, Irving Babbitt, was an enthusiastic champion of Buddhism, and Eliot was an admirer of Babbitt. There was a time when Eliot seriously thought of becoming a Buddhist.

Buddhism and Hinduism have certain features in common. As in Hinduism, the first of the two doctrines fundamental to Buddhism is that of Reincarnation. The second important doctrine is that of Karma. Thoughts and actions react upon the individual soul according to whether the motive is constructive or destructive. There are other common traits as well. Hence it is difficult to determine whether a particular element in Eliot's poetry is derived from Hinduism or Buddhism. The four noble truths of Buddhism are: existence is suffering; the origin of suffering is in desire; suffering ceases when desire ceases; the way to reach the end of desire is by following the noble eightfold path like that of right comprehension. Eliot was especially impressed by these four noble truths and he also believed that the final goal of the religious man is to escape from existence into blissful non-existence, that is, Nirvana.

Though the entire corpus of Eliot's poetry abounds in references to Indian religions and mysticism, the more obvious ones are found in *The Waste Land*, *Four Quartets*, and *The Cocktail Party*. The *Bhagavad-Gita* describes special mention in this connection. In his essay on Dante Eliot describes the *Gita* as "the next greatest philosophical poem to the *Divine Comedy* within my experience". *The Dry Salvages* begins its third section with the line: "I Sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant." The reference to the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* at the end of *The Waste Land*, and the concluding words of the poem *Shantih, shantih, shantih*, show how vital is the role that Hindu scriptures play in Eliot's writings.

For the conception of Flux that we come across in *Four Quartets*, generally attributed to Heraclitus, Eliot might have been indebted to Buddhist thought as well. For Buddhism teaches exactly the Heraclitean conception of flux, describing it as *anicca*, the transitoriness of all things. However, the focus of the *Dhammapada*, the Buddhist Bible is not on the outer cosmos. But on the human world, upon man with his yearning and his suffering, his immense complexity, his striving and movement towards transcendence. Such sort of note finds full expression in Eliot's poetry. Free from all dogmas and inscrutable claims to authority, the Dhamma is founded solidly upon the bedrock of Buddha's own clear comprehension of reality, and it leads the one who practices it to that same understanding of the knowledge which extricates the roots of suffering. The most general counsel the Dhamma gives is to avoid all evil, to cultivate good and to cleanse one's mind.

By successful re-incarnations, the Buddhistic wheel can be transformed into an ascending spiral. Eliot also entertains the very same idea in his poetry, especially in the image of the winding stairs of Ash-Wednesday. The purgatory mount of Dante is brightened up with Oriental splendour. As long as human beings climb up the stairs or turn on the wheel, they have to suffer. Eliot's idea that suffering is inherent in life derived its sustenance from, among other sources, Buddhistic philosophy. Buddha's Fire Sermon, to which Eliot alludes in *The Waste Land*, gives us an account of the sterile and painful burning of the senses, of desires and thoughts, and of all their objects. Eliot's pessimistic outlook had nurtured itself on such ideas. Only when we remember this background will it be possible for us to trace the origin of the death-wish expressed in poems like *The Waste Land*, *Ash-Wednesday*, and *A Song for Simeon*?

The melancholy strain of Buddhistic philosophy, however, is not the final note of Eliot's poetry. Human passivity is to be blended with human activity and human effort has to be blessed by divine grace. Paradoxical perhaps, but nonetheless true. So Eliot not only tells us to be still, and wait without hope, in the same breath he utters with complete confidence: "so the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing" (East Coker). Is there not an awful warmth about these words, which invests them with immortality much beyond one hundred years?

When in *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets* Eliot attempted to explore beyond the frontiers of ordinary consciousness, his immediate prompting and much of his reference was Dantean. The ambiguity of *Ash-Wednesday* is related less to the question of whether or not some kind of God might actually respond than to an open wonder at the epiphanies of a Christian God. It is a poem centered on the idea of 'quickening', of a painful awakening of the spirit in the midst of a mysterious landscape haunted by female figures (all of the types of Virgin Mary). The six sections of this poem are, however, given an almost liturgical character by the reiterated echoes of the prayers and metaphors of Anglo-Catholicism.

The intermixture of the secular, the topographical, and the mystical also determined the themes of Eliot's last major poems, *Burnt Norton* (1935) and its related successors, *East Coker* (1940), *The Dry Salvages* (1941), and *Little Gidding* (1942) — published together as *Four Quartets* in 1943. The poems treat with an almost mystical intensity of the search for the 'still centre', the quest for spiritual peace and assurance, which may lead through the dark night of the soul. Using material from St. John of the Cross and from other Christian sources and anchoring each poem in a local scene which gives a concreteness to the imagery and a point of reference from which the symbolic suggestions can move out and to which they can return, Eliot builds up his series of poems of spiritual exploration. He sometimes falls into flatness when he seeks quietness, and his desire to counterpoint the ordinary and the mystical sometimes leads him to step out of the poem and talk about it with a curious deadness, but in

spite of such passages Four Quartets represent an impressive achievement, perhaps the best religious poetry of its time .As their joint title implies, their form, their lyricism ,and their relative intimacy if communication, are akin to the effect of chamber music .

The Waste Land, published in 1922,went off with a bang. Notwithstanding it's excessive punditry and other obvious defects, it is an epoch-making work. To quote the Russian critic A.Zverrev in English translation:The Waste Land gives voice to the utter despair of modern man, witness to the fall of a civilization far far removed from culture, a civilization doomed like a mighty oak in whose withered trunk the vital sap of culture can no longer flow. The schizophrenic speaker of the poem half expresses and half suppresses his thoughts. The purpose is totally confused in a decadent world of Hollow Men whose life is marked by sick hurry and divided aims, and who are only partly living a fragmented life. The barren bleakness and uncanny despair are pervasive.

Taking as it's underlying pattern the Grail myth as interpreted by Jessie Weston, Sir James Frazer, and others, and weaving the themes of barrenness, decay and death, and the quest for life and resurrection which he found in these anthropological sources with the Christian story and with Buddhist and other Oriental analogies, and incorporating into the poem both examples and symbols of the failure of modern civilization_scenes of desolation, moral squalor, and social emptiness_which are in turn symbolically related to the anthropological and religious themes, Eliot endeavored to project a complete view of civilization, of human history and human failure, and of the perennial quest for Salvation. No modern poem has received so much comment and explication.

The Waste Land reflects Eliot's acute concern with the disintegration of European civilization. The poem has consequently been interpreted as 'an imperial epic', and as 'an image of imperial catastrophe '. * The 5th and the final section, What the Thunder said,gives us a picture of this very drought _the decadence and hollowness of modern life--voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells. It is in this section that we find many beautiful Indian associations, climaxing with the repetition of the Upanishadic expression Shantih (the peace which passeth understanding) at the ending of the poem. Here is Eliot's lyricism at its finest:

"Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
 Waited for rain, while the black clouds
 Gathered for distant, over Himavant.
 The jungle crouched, hummed in silence.
 Then spoke the thunder."

The lines just quoted from the poem are followed by DA(*Datta*, give), DA(*Dayadhvam*, be compassionate), and DA (*Damyata*, control yourselves) from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (5.2). The Upanishadic conclusion is not any cry of despair or exhaustion, or even annihilation. Nor is it deliberately enigmatic. Eliot's use of 'Shantih' implies that he had to look beyond the European tradition to find a word of adequate depth and resonance. Eliot spells 'Shantih' perhaps to reproduce accurately the pronunciation of the word in Sanskrit. It is not a mere word or consolatory formula which Eliot has learnt by rote and used. Not for nothing was he a pupil of Josiah Royce or Charles Lanman. Hieronymo may be mad again but the three *shantih-s* at the end of *The Waste Land* are no wild and whirling words. The Upanishadic wheel, which has started with the three DA's, is now come full circle with the three *shantih-s*. At last Eliot has finished with parodying and he means what he says. The light has been long struggling to emerge from the dark world of the poem, at last comes out blazing, and blossoms forth into a beautiful word-- repeated thrice for sonorous emphasis. The rest is, and can only be, silence. No wonder that Eliot thought that the final section of the poem was not only the best part, but the only part that justifies the whole, at all. **As Rajan points out, the final benediction may be read 'as reflecting the peace of enlightenment, or as indicating no more than exhausted subsidence into a consolatory formula, a termination rather than an ending.'

*Frank Kermode, *A Babylonish Dialect in The Waste Land : A Casebook*, pp 231, 234

** Letter of 15 October, 1923 to Bertrand Russell .

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