



## Ash-Wednesday

“Teach us to care and not to care  
Teach us to sit still.”

— *Ash-Wednesday*, I

I discovered the poetry of T. S. Eliot at the age of thirteen, a skinny kid in small town Montana who had, for some strange reason, a love of poetry, the novels of Dickens, the music of Mozart, and the art of Andrew Wyeth. All of these are an inter-mingled mystery, even in hindsight, and I suppose they really remain so, as the attraction of great literature and art is a mystery bound to The Mystery. I’m quite certain that my first Eliot poems were *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *The Hollow Men*—the former darkly exotic (“the yellow smoke that slides along the streets”) and the latter oddly apocalyptic (“This is the dead land”).

The attraction, first and foremost, was the language, the beguiling and strangely captivating flow and rhythm, followed by the stark, immediate, and elusive images: “Like a patient etherized upon a table” and “We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men”. There was also the raw but measured anxiety, both deeply emotional and quietly contained. In those earlier Eliot poems I heard a voice I could relate to, especially as I often struggled with my Christian faith, which was Fundamentalist, rather anti-intellectual, and impatient with mystery and musing.

In my fourth year of college, my second year at Bible college, I finally read—that is, really read—*Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*. (I’ll have to quickly confess to spending far less time with *The Waste Land*.) Both were revelatory, but *Ash-Wednesday* became something of an obsession, and I ended up writing a paper on it for a literature class—out of my depths in many ways, but quite happy to try to enter a bit more deeply into a poem

that is, I think, filled with rich intimations and profound paradoxes.

*Ash-Wednesday*, as is widely acknowledged, is a far more simple and immediate poem than, say, *The Waste Land*, but it is a deceptive simplicity, which proves increasingly elusive with repeated readings. There is a focus on stillness that is not only expressed directly—“Teach us to sit still”—but conveyed in a number of scenes, if you will, that involve a lady and three white leopards, bones in the desert, rocks and a yew tree, and a stair of ascent and trial. Yet there is also a finely constructed restlessness, a spiritual yearning and tension evident right from the start:

Because I do not hope to turn again  
Because I do not hope  
Because I do not hope to turn  
Desiring this man’s gift and that  
man’s scope  
I no longer strive to strive towards  
such things

Hope. Turning. Desire. Striving. Not striving. Some immediate context is found, of course, in the title, to that first day of Lent in the Western liturgical calendar, and thus to Christ’s forty days in the desert and our own fasting, penance, and contemplation of sin, mortality, and salvation. The “turning” refers to repentance, as the two are closely intertwined throughout Scripture: “Repent therefore, and turn again . . .” (Act 3:19). Eliot, in a June 1930 letter to Paul Elmer More, stated that his poem “is really a first attempt at a sketchy application of the philosophy of [Dante’s] *Vita Nuova* to modern life”, and the influence of Dante can be seen throughout.

But the theme of repentance comes, in many ways, from the Anglican bishop and

scholar Lancelot Andrewes (1555–1626) who, in his 1602 Ash Wednesday sermon—and Eliot studied his sermons closely—asked, “shall I continually ‘fall’ and never ‘rise’? ‘turn away’ and not once ‘turn again?’” Eliot’s 1926 essay on Andrewes reveals just how much Eliot’s post-conversion poetry was shaped by those sermons, which Eliot praised as having three “conspicuous qualities” of style: “ordonnance, or arrangement and structure, precision in the use of words, and relevant intensity”. Put another way, Eliot revered Andrewes as a mystic possessing both remarkable powers of communication and spiritual discipline, and those characteristics are certainly two that *Ash-Wednesday* aims to contain or embody.

Turning is repentance, then, and so it is also conversion, which in turn requires humility. Conversion is an essential theme—a reality—in Eliot’s life and work, and not just in the obvious way, as in his entrance into the Anglican Communion in June 1927. In October 1929, in a letter to his brother, he said, “I have begun life three times: at 22, at 28, and again at 40; I hope I shall not have to do so again, because I am growing old.” He was referring, respectively, to leaving America as a young man, getting married, and then becoming Anglican. All three acts were of deep and lasting importance; there is a reason, then, that this poem begins with “Because . . . Because . . . Because . . .”

The six sections of the poem (three published as stand-alone poems before 1930) are like acts in a play, and the entire poem moves quickly—paradoxically, considering its sense of stillness. “From node to node of its own structure”, wrote Hugh Kenner in *The Invisible Poet* (1959), “from zone to zone, the poem moves swiftly like a swallow, and without flutter. Arrived in each zone, it circles and searches before passing on. . . .”

The scene in Part II, for instance, is a riveting vignette that combines the prophetic starkness of Ezekiel 37 and its valley of the bones with the deeply Dantean Lady who “honours the Virgin in meditation”. There is a palpable sense of both *eros* and *agape* here, bringing to mind the “Romantic Theology” of Charles Williams, whose own interest in Beatrice and Dante paralleled that of Eliot. Most striking to me three decades ago was the litany-like song to the Lady:

Lady of silences  
 Calm and distressed  
 Torn and most hole  
 Rose of memory  
 Rose of forgetfulness  
 Exhausted and life-giving  
 Worried reposeful  
 The single Rose  
 Is now the Garden  
 Where all loves end

By the end of *Ash-Wednesday*, this mystical ardor, tinged as it is with conflicted and earthly longings, will have achieved some plane of purification:

Blessèd sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden,  
 Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood

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Teach us to care and not to care  
 Teach us to sit still  
 Even among these rocks,  
 Our peace in His will

This is, ultimately, Marian in nature: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). Such an impression—and, really, this is a poem of successive impressions—flows from Part IV, which is a sort of commentary on the Prologue to the Gospel of John:

And the light shone in darkness and  
 Against the Word the unstilled world  
 still whirled  
 About the centre of the silent Word.

The silent Word, of course, being both the Christ child and the beckoning Savior, whose invitation to “those who walk in darkness” is not accompanied by coercion but by the promise of struggle and continual tension. That struggle is captured in the short and rapid-fire Part III, where the three turnings of the stair correspond to Dante’s hill of Purgatory:

Now I petition you, by that kind  
 Power  
 Escorting you to the summit of the  
 staircase,  
 At the appropriate time, recall my  
 pain. (*Purg.* XXVI, 145–57)

Kenner writes that the “function of the journey” described in the poem “is to arrive at a knowledge of the modes and possibilities of temporal redemption sufficient to prevent our being deluded by a counterfeit of the negative way”. As I see it, Eliot avoids a shallow, pietistic (and false) asceticism that fails to admit the inherent, rich goodness of creation. He also avoids a sort of equally shallow skepticism that rejects the hard demands of renunciation for the sake of beatification: “Where all love ends.”

In fact, Eliot manages to give a captivating glimpse of robust Catholic spirituality “When the apophatic and cataphatic integrate”, notes David W. Fagerberg in *Consecrating the World* (2016), “emptiness is fullness”. That is the paradox Eliot understood and struggled to convey, even while he consistently downplayed the merits of *Ash-Wednesday*, telling one friend, “I don’t think the poem is really first rate, but I do think that it just does escape insincerity, somehow.” To another friend he explained that he believed “there is a very important field still very unexplored by modern poets—the experience of man in search of God, and trying to explain to himself his intenser human feelings in terms of the divine goal. I have tried to do something of that in *Ash-Wednesday*”. I am forever thankful he did so.

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