THE REDEMPTIVE WOMAN IN THE EARLY
POETRY OF T. S. ELIOT

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This thesis attempts to describe a consistent development in the attitudes adopted toward women in the poetry of T. S. Eliot published between 1917 and 1930 and to identify certain philosophical changes which influenced this development. It suggests that a tendency toward the affirmation of an ideal woman underlies the apparently incongruous attitudes toward women in Eliot's poetry of this period. Three stages in the poet's progression toward an affirmation of an ideal woman are suggested and described.

The first stage in Eliot's progression toward affirmation consists in the speaker's consistent rejection of real women in Prufrock and Other Observations. The tones of satire and condescension which the speaker in Eliot's first volume of poetry maintains toward women implies an affirmation of an unseen, ideal woman against whom real women are measured. The philosophy behind these poems is one of romantic expectation; much of the speaker's bitterness derives from his disappointed expectation that life would provide him with his ideal.

The second stage in Eliot's increasing tendency toward the affirmation of an ideal woman consists in the limited affirmation given women by speakers in several poems
published between 1917 and 1922. Speakers in "Dans le Restaurant," "La Figlia che Piange," and "The Waste Land" are obsessed with their memories of a childhood experience in which a young girl imparted to them a moment of ecstasy. Although the speakers affirm the significance of the young girl, their affirmation is limited by memories of frustration; the experience was unfulfilled. The romantic expectation which underlies these poems is evident in the speakers' tones of nostalgia; they had expected that life would permit fulfillment in the episode.

Eliot's philosophy of romantic expectation was to change, before the publication of "Ash Wednesday" in 1930, to a philosophy which he has termed "the Catholic philosophy of disillusion." The records of this change are to be found in "Dante," an essay published in 1929. The Catholic philosophy of disillusion, borrowed from Dante, expected little from life; it looked to the visionary world beyond the boundaries of life and death for fulfillment.

The third and final stage of Eliot's increasing affirmation consists in the appearance of the lady of "Ash Wednesday." Derived from the visionary world, she bears a strong resemblance to the Virgin and to Dante's Beatrice. In the six sections of "Ash Wednesday" the speaker affirms this lady and her spiritual power of intercession.

The apparently disparate attitudes toward women in T. S. Eliot's early poetry are unified by a tendency toward
the affirmation of an ideal woman. An awareness of this tendency is especially helpful in understanding "Ash Wednesday" as a poem of affirmation rather than of penitence. The implied or explicit affirmation in all the poetry of the period 1917-1930 suggests a heretofore unnoticed consistency and interrelatedness in Eliot’s early verse.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

One critic has written that the unity of T. S. Eliot's poetry "depends . . . on the definition of the human goal as salvation through the affirmation of symbols."1 Eliot's poetry published between the years 1917 and 1930 reveals an increasing tendency on the part of the poet to approach spiritual reality through the affirmation of the symbol of a woman. This tendency places Eliot within a long established literary and spiritual tradition.

The movement towards the affirmation of a woman has three discernible stages in Eliot's poetry of 1917-1930. Behind each stage, and partly responsible for the progress towards affirmation accomplished there, lies a changing philosophy.

The movement begins, paradoxically enough, in the speaker's rejection of women in the 1917 volume, Prufrock and Other Observations. The tones of satire and condescension which the speaker of these early poems adopts towards the real women of his experience both mark his rejection of real women and imply an affirmation of another,

more ideal woman, whose being is but briefly described in these poems. There is a painful, frustrating distance between the ideal and the real in these early poems, and this distance suggests that Eliot's philosophy of this period was essentially romantic.\(^2\)

A situation which recurs in several poems of the years between 1917 and 1922 reveals a limited progression towards the affirmation of a woman as spiritually significant. Speakers in "Dans le Restaurant," "La Figlia che Piange,\(^3\)" and "The Waste Land" are obsessed with the memory of a childhood experience in which a young girl imparted to them a moment of ecstasy. Their potential affirmation of the episode and of the young girl is limited by their memories of their failure to respond to her. Remorse colors their recollections of the experience, and—-in "Dans le Restaurant" and "The Waste Land"—-a disastrous fate overshadows them as a result of their failure.

In these poems, as in the poems of Prufrock and Other Observations, the real and the ideal are painfully distant. Life, which in the poems of Prufrock is seen to deprive the speaker of any significant relationship, is seen in these


\(^3\)Although "La Figlia che Piange" appeared in Prufrock and Other Observations, it will be considered in this thesis with some later poems with which it bears a more proximate thematic correspondence.
poems to deprive the speakers of any fulfillment in a significant relationship. Eliot's philosophy in these years continued to be essentially romantic.

Eliot's progress towards the affirmation of a woman culminates in "Ash Wednesday." Published in 1930, "Ash Wednesday" is a poetic statement of discovery; the broken, halting speech patterns of the poem suggest the excitement and surprise of discovery. The object of the speaker's discovery is the lady whose figure dominates the landscape of the poem. Taken neither from life nor from memory, the lady of "Ash Wednesday" derives from the world of vision. Borrowing her significance from Christian tradition, she symbolizes the redeemed and redeeming life of intercession—in short, the state of beatitude.

Eliot's philosophy changed in the years between "The Waste Land" and "Ash Wednesday" to a philosophy which was antiromantic; this change is evidenced in the appearance of the lady of "Ash Wednesday." There is no gap between the real and the ideal in "Ash Wednesday" because the dramatic action of the poem takes place within the world of vision which knows no such distinctions. Eliot had adopted a philosophy which he defines and names in his essay "Dante" (1929). This philosophy was "the Catholic philosophy of disillusion... which is antiromantic" in that it does

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not "expect more from life than it can give or more from human beings than they can give. ..."\(^5\) This philosophy aspired "to look to death for what life cannot give."\(^6\)

Eliot's tendency to approach spiritual reality through the symbol of a woman places him within a tradition which Charles Williams has described in his work *The Figure of Beatrice*. Williams traces the two spiritual traditions of the western world:

> It is an accepted fact that there have, on the whole, been two chief ways of approach to God defined in Christian thought. One, which is most familiar in the records of sanctity, has been known as the Way of Rejection. It consists, generally speaking, in the renunciation of all images except the final one of God himself. . . .

> The other Way is the Way of Affirmation, the approach to God through these images.\(^7\)

Williams further notes that "in the literature of Europe the greatest record of the Way of Affirmation is contained in the work of Dante Alighieri."\(^8\) It is hardly surprising, then, that Eliot's most pervasive debt in his poems which follow the "Way of Affirmation" should be to Dante, the master of that approach to spiritual reality. Eliot's debt to Dante increases in his poetry of the years between 1917 and 1930 until,

\(^5\)Ibid., p. 235.  
\(^6\)Ibid., p. 235.  
\(^7\)Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice* (New York, 1961), pp. 8-9.  
\(^8\)Ibid., p. 11.
in "Ash Wednesday," the landscape of the poem itself is Dantesque, and the lady of the poem strongly reminiscent of Beatrice.

It is the purpose of this thesis to trace the tendency in Eliot's early poetry towards the affirmation of a woman as signifying spiritual reality.
The speaker-observer in *Prufrock and Other Observations* consistently rejects the women whom he observes. His tones of satire and condescension towards the women of his experience mark this rejection. Yet it is possible to see in the attitudes which this speaker-observer adopts towards women the beginning of a movement in Eliot's poetry towards the affirmation of a woman as signifying spiritual reality. The tones of satire and condescension which the speaker adopts towards women imply the presence in the speaker's consciousness of an ideal against which the real women of his society are measured and rejected. This chapter will examine the attitudes adopted by the speaker-observer of *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) and suggest in what ways these attitudes constitute an implied affirmation of an ideal woman.

The unifying principle of *Prufrock and Other Observations* is the speaker-observer in each poem. Sometimes leaning towards middle age, as in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," sometimes speaking from youth, as in "Portrait of a Lady," the speaker in the 1917 poems is invariably possessed of all the idealism of youth which waxes into a satiric, pessimistic
tone as he considers the texture of his private social world and catches glimpses of the life of the city. And nowhere is the idealistic speaker more pessimistic, more satirical, than in his examination of the women who populate the salons and furnished rooms of both worlds.

George Williamson, writing of Eliot's early poetry, has suggested that

... his satiric observation of life, which includes most of his early poetry, is less important than the feelings which support it, or find expression in it. Here the shortcomings are less momentous than the things they come short of. And we shall be well advised to seek in this world of appearance the hidden reality that matters. In general the objects of his satiric observation gall him at his most sensitive points; he does not write of things about which he does not care or has not cared.\(^1\)

This advice is particularly well applied to Eliot's satirical tone towards women; in his essay on Baudelaire he was to write that "... a woman must be to some extent a symbol ...",\(^2\) and just what the modern woman symbolizes is a very "sensitive point" in Eliot's work. As early as the Prufrock volume Eliot assigned that role to women which was later systematized by his adoption of the Grail myths: the role of bringing the male to spiritual fulfillment. And the fact that women do not perform this function in modern society—indeed, that

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they have forgotten it—accounts for much of the satirical bitterness of the 1917 poems.

Just what is "the hidden reality that matters" which Williamson advises the reader to seek in Eliot's satirical treatment of women? Two pieces of evidence suggest that the ideal woman against whom Eliot measured the real women of his society is Dante's Beatrice.

The first piece of evidence which suggests the identity of Eliot's ideal woman is found in the epigraphs to his unpublished Clark Lectures.³ Although these lectures were given several years after the publication of the Prufrock poems, they are valuable for the reader of that volume who is puzzled by the satirical tones adopted by the speaker towards women; the epigraphs provide a glimpse not only of the modern woman but also of the ideal woman against whom Eliot tended to measure the real women of his society.

In the epigraphs Eliot juxtaposed some lines from a popular song with a passage from Dante's Vita Nuova. The lines from the song suggest an attitude characteristic of modern women:

I want someone to treat me rough.
Give me a cabman.⁴

The passage from the Vita Nuova, on the other hand, reveals

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the spiritual significance of Dante's ideal woman, Beatrice: 
Dante speaks these lines in the Vita Nuova in reply to some women who had questioned him concerning Beatrice:

Madonne, lo fine del mio amore fu gia il saluto di questa donna, di cui voi forse intendete; ed in quello dimorava la mia beatitudine, che era fine di tutti i miei desiderii. ["Ladies, the end of my love was once the salutation of this lady whom you appear to mean; and in that dwelt my beatitude, which was the end of all my desires." {sic}]

The "pertinent contrast" which Eliot achieved by juxtaposing these two quotations in 1926 suggests the identity of the ideal woman who is not specified in the 1917 volume of poetry. The possibility that the ideal woman in the 1917 volume might be Beatrice is not surprising; Eliot's tendency to borrow from Dante is evidenced in both the epigraph to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and in the dedication of the entire volume.

The other piece of evidence which suggests that Eliot's ideal woman in the Prufrock poems is Beatrice is found in a passage from the fourth of the "Preludes," poems of the 1917 volume:

I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.

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5Ibid., p. 7.
6Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 7.
To the reader aware of Eliot's tendency to contrast the modern woman with Beatrice, Dante's "most gentle lady" who suffers by interceding for sinners, the identity of the "infinitely gentle/Infinitely suffering thing" is clear.

The discrepancy between the reality of the women in Prufrock's world and the ideal against which he measures them is a part of what Grover Smith has termed "Eliot's romantic heritage." In the two most substantial poems of the 1917 volume, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady," the stance of the speaker is one of a romantic isolation, cut off from the debilitating relationships described in the poems. And the posture is more isolated, more romantic, because the reader is led to believe—at least in "Prufrock"—that the rejected relationships are the only ones possible in the limited social world of the speaker. These poems, despite their satirical overtones, possess a sadness which Eliot has traced in his essay "Baudelaire": "... in much romantic poetry the sadness is due to the exploitation of the fact that no human relations are adequate to human desires..."11

And yet the poems of Prufrock and Other Observations, satirical and romantic in their rejection of the women

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10Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 3.

whom life provided to an idealist of the upper classes, mark the beginning of a movement in Eliot's poetry which was to culminate in the appearance of the lady of "Ash Wednesday," whose signification—as this thesis will suggest—was to have no tinge of the bitter disappointment from which both satire and the romantic attitude grow. These early poems are connected through the speaker's rejection of their ladies and prostitutes, to what Eliot, in that same essay has termed "the poetry of flight"; they achieve through that rejection what Eliot attributes to the genre in French poetry: "a dim recognition of the direction of beatitude."^1

It should be noted before proceeding to an examination of the Prufrock poems that several of the explications which follow have an emphasis somewhat different from the emphasis given the poems by most Eliot critics. The object of this study—to examine the significance of the women in these poems—has fostered this difference by requiring a concentration upon the objective reality of the Prufrock world. Whereas most critics have explicated "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady"—to consider the most important of the 1917 poems—through a descriptive analysis of the subjective vacillations of the "Prufrockian temperament," the nature of this study has demanded an approach to the poems through a consideration of the relatively objective figures

\[\text{12}^{\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 343.} \quad \text{13}^{\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 343.}\]

\[\text{14}^{\text{Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 29.}}\]
of Prufrock's world. The difference in the two approaches consists in the amount of credibility the reader allows the speaker in accounting for his situation in the poems. The approach taken in this examination of the Prufrock poems allows the speaker full credibility for his accounting.

The "way in which Eliot endeavors to portray 'human action and human attitudes'" should be noted before considering "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the first poem of the 1917 volume. The reader unacquainted with Eliot's method of characterization could readily conclude from a reading of the poems in question that the women depicted there are insufficiently realized to justify a lengthy discussion. For such a reader F. O. Matthiessen's explanation of Eliot's methods is necessary:

He sets out to make his characters actual by confining his description of them to a fully perceived significant detail or characteristic gesture. . . . What 'happens' in Eliot's shorter poems is frequently no more than a single observed impression. . . . Yet, as also in James, there is something both pictorial and dramatic in this single impression, something acutely revelatory of the people described.

It is these "fully perceived significant details" and "characteristic gestures," taken together with the observable

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15 The approach taken here is similar to the position described in the concluding remarks on "Portrait of a Lady" in Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 15.


17 Ibid., pp. 68-69.
effect of the characters upon the speaker, that constitute the evidence for the argument that follows.

The observable effect of the women in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" upon the speaker becomes evident if the significance of the epigraph and first line of the poem is considered in relation to what follows in the poem. Williamson warns the reader that "the epigraph is never to be ignored in Eliot; for while it is not an essential part of the poem, it conveys hints of the significance or even genesis of the poem." The epigraph to "Prufrock," taken from the twenty-seventh canto of the Inferno, reveals a startling fact about Eliot's poem: "Prufrock" is a kind of postmortem on the speaker's relationships with women. An examination of the epigraph makes this clear.

The occasion for the lines of the epigraph, spoken by a damned soul in the Inferno, is Dante's request to the soul to tell the travellers (Dante and Vergil) his name. The reply of the damned soul constitutes the epigraph: "'If I thought my answer were to one who would ever return to the world, this flame should stay without another movement; but since none ever returned alive from this depth, if what I hear is true, I answer thee without fear of infamy.'" The import

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19 Dante Alighieri, Inferno, Vol. I of The Divine Comedy, translated by John D. Sinclair, 3 vols. (New York, 1948), p. 337. All other references to The Divine Comedy will be to this work.
of these lines for Eliot's poem depends upon an analysis of Prufrock's first line, "Let us go then, you and I..." The "I," the speaker of the poem, is Prufrock's rational self, which is resigned to an isolation corresponding to the "deep" of the epigraph. "The 'you' is the amorous self, the sex instinct, direct and forthright...." The epigraph should be read as if the "I"--the rational self--were speaking the words to the disturbing sex instinct.

Read in this way, the epigraph makes certain facts about the initial posture of the speaker apparent; these facts in turn define the scope of the poem. The speaker in "Prufrock," like the speaker in the Inferno, is resigned to an undisturbed isolation. Both speakers reply only because they are sure that doing so will not alter their situations. The entire length of "Prufrock," except for the last section of the poem, is an extended, illustrated explanation to the passionate self of just why another attempt "to declare himself to a lady" is not feasible. And the poem is no more than an explanation; Prufrock never makes the journey suggested in "Let us go ..."; he only imagines--aided by memories from past journeys--what would happen if he were to "go." The action of "Prufrock" is "limited to the interplay of impressions, including memories, in Prufrock's mind."^23

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^22 Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 18.
^23 Ibid., p. 16.
This position of isolation is the observable effect of the women of Prufrock's world upon him. For, while Prufrock is to a certain extent the victim of his own "timidity," he is also the victim—as his extended soliloquy will show—of women who make his environment "inane and stifling and self-satisfied."  

The "characteristic gestures" of these women reveal the sources of Prufrock's difficulty. His first memory of the women suggests their inane, superficial concerns:

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michaelangelo.  

There are hints in Prufrock's memories that the society of these women demands hypocritical postures and practices social viciousness:

There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate. . . .

In these lines the tone of satire can just be heard; satire is not a dominant tone in "Prufrock," because Prufrock's plight is too self-consciously tragic to allow the events leading to his isolated posture the emotional distance of satire.

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24 Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 15.


27 Ibid., p. 4.
Prufrock knows that his deteriorating physical condition has classified him in the eyes of these women, and it has been this classification which has caused him to doubt his ability to assert himself:

They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!"
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin--
They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!"
Do I dare
Disturb the universe?28

In the three passages which follow, Prufrock reveals the fact that his inability to assert himself is due not only to his familiarity with the "monotonous"29 voices and "hostile"30 eyes but also to their familiarity with him, which has assigned him "his place in the accepted order":31

And I have known the eyes already, known them all--
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?32

Prufrock's problem, which he never overcomes in the poem, is just how to "begin" to address these women. He has considered revealing his loneliness to them by describing other "lonely men"33 whom he has observed:

28Ibid., pp. 4-5.
29Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 19.
30Ibid., p. 19.
33Ibid., p. 5.
Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?\textsuperscript{34}

But when Prufrock has gone so far as to imagine the response of one of these women, his courage has succumbed:

Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am Lazarus, come back from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"--
If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all."\textsuperscript{35}

The woman in this imagined confrontation has the ability to deal Prufrock's idealism the death blow; Prufrock is not willing to chance that disaster. It is important to note that even in this early poem of Eliot the woman has the ability to create or destroy the spiritual life of a man. The Prufrockian idealist, as if lost in a dream of medieval lore, turns instinctively to a woman as if to pledge her his spirit; the tragedy occurs when he realizes that his confrontation is with a modern woman.

Prufrock's explanation to his passionate self ends before the last textual break in the poem. In the last section of the poem he speaks of his present and his future. Prufrock, disappointed by real women, takes refuge in creatures of the imagination, mermaids. But although he is anticipating a return to the beach, to imaginative fantasy, he is aware of

\textsuperscript{34}Ibid., p. 5. \textsuperscript{35}Ibid., p. 6.
the dangers inherent in a life of fantasy which is threatened by reality:

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

Judged by the criteria of their observable effect upon the speaker and of "characteristic gestures," the real women of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" are destructive and pathetic. Their effect upon the speaker has been to drive him—inaudiently, perhaps—to a position of complete isolation. Their gestures show them to be shallow, catty women, limited by their own blindness to their potential significance.

Prufrock has rejected these women; his isolation makes this fact apparent. But his rejection is not of a wholly negative character; in his flight from reality there is a kind of "romantic nostalgia" like that which Eliot finds in the poetry of Baudelaire. "The Love Song" belongs to that genre whose origin Eliot locates in Baudelaire's memoirs: "the poetry of flight." In its rejection of reality the poem points in "the direction of beatitude," and affirms an ideal woman who is not seen.

"Portrait of a Lady," the next poem in the 1917 volume, contains a "character . . . conceived in rounder form than
that of any other Eliot personage who is not a 'central intelligence.' This is the lady in the poem, who adds a sustained speaking role to the ways in which Eliot realizes character. Information about the lady is transmitted, in the three separate sections of the poem, in a consistent way: a speech by the lady is followed by the speaker's observations of her effect upon him. "Characteristic gestures" also help to locate her character.

The tone of the poem has a satiric quality only dimly heard in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." This satiric quality is apparent in the ironic tone of the epigraph from The Jew of Malta (Act IV, Scene I), which "cannot be announcing a literal fact." The epigraph reads:

Thou hast committed--
Fornication: but that was in another country,
And besides, the wench is dead.

The epigraph is ironic because there is no fornication in the poem; only from the point of view of the lady, who suffers an emotional disappointment, is the accusation feasible. This grossly exaggerated description of what takes place in the poem and the fact that the accusation implied in the epigraph is feasible only from the point of view of a character who is herself the object of satire give the poem an ironic tone.

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40 Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 10.
41 Ibid., p. 14.
The poem consists of three visits paid to an elderly woman by the young man who is the speaker. The visits are made in different seasons, and the way in which the seasons turn marks a note of pessimism in the poem. "The seasonal cycle in the poem begins with winter, and after the brief scent of spring it declines again to the dead season. . . ."43

It is important to remember here that Eliot's own judgment was that ". . . a woman must be to some extent a symbol. . . ."44 Despite the foibles of their own personalities, the speakers in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady" depend upon the women whom society can provide to them for their own development. It is fundamentally erroneous, then, to view the young man in "Portrait of a Lady" as "one perplexed about how to keep unscathed while rejecting what he has no use for,"45 as one critic has described him. This view overlooks both the sincerity of the speaker and the evidence which he offers that his own stature has been diminished as a result of the failure of the relationship.

In the first section of the poem, set "among the smoke and fog of a December afternoon,"46 the lady's speech to her

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43Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 12.
45Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 11.
young visitor reveals her to be a type of "the sensitive person from whom life has been withheld." Speaking from her room, which has "an atmosphere of Juliet's tomb," she attempts to secure the young man's friendship by dwelling upon how much she values her cultivated friendships:

"You do not know how much they mean to me, my friends; And how, how rare and strange it is, to find In a life composed so much, so much of odds and ends, [For indeed I do not love it... you knew? you are not blind! How keen you are!] To find a friend who has these qualities, Who has, and gives Those qualities upon which friendship lives. How much it means that I say this to you— Without these friendships—life, what cauchemar!"

There is something pathetic about the woman's dignified attempt to secure human companionship. She represents that segment of society from which Eliot himself came—the cultured aristocracy—and she represents its worst aspects. Matthiessen quotes Eliot's description of that society as being "quite uncivilized, but refined beyond the point of civilization." No phrase could better describe the lady of the "Portrait," whose lack of vitality repulses the young man. For, though he obviously belongs to her social class—as do all the speakers in the 1917 poems—he differs from her "in his awareness of his plight."

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47 Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 10.
Matthiessen does not cite the source for the quotation.
51 Drew, The Design of His Poetry, p. 32.
Her effect upon the speaker is described in musical terms: "the windings of the violins/ And the ariettes/ Of cracked cornets"\textsuperscript{52} which musically symbolize her speech effect a response in the speaker of "a dull tom-tom."\textsuperscript{53} The speaker escapes; he resorts to "the masculine escape to externals".\textsuperscript{54}

\begin{quote}
--Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance, 
Admire the monuments, 
Discuss the late events, 
Correct our watches by the public clocks. 
Then sit for half an hour and drink our bocks.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

It is important to note what Williamson calls "the bathetic character of these externals,"\textsuperscript{56} because it is by means of these self-consciously ridiculous activities that the speaker communicates the fact that he has been diminished by the inadequacy of the lady.

In the next section, set in the spring, the lady's blindness to her own potential significance is developed by irony:

\begin{quote}
Now that lilacs are in bloom  
She has a bowl of lilacs in her room  
And twists one in her fingers while she talks.  
"Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know  
What life is, you who hold it in your hands"; 
(Slowly twisting the lilac stalks). . . . \textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{52}Eliot, \textit{The Complete Poems and Plays}, p. 9.  
\textsuperscript{53}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 9.  
\textsuperscript{54}Williamson, \textit{A Reader's Guide}, p. 71.  
\textsuperscript{55}Eliot, \textit{The Complete Poems and Plays}, p. 9.  
\textsuperscript{56}Williamson, \textit{A Reader's Guide}, p. 71.  
\textsuperscript{57}Eliot, \textit{The Complete Poems and Plays}, p. 9.
The point of the passage is obvious enough; it is the lady herself who significantly holds life in her hands. She is the blind one; she is not aware of her potential significance for the life of the young man--here perhaps symbolized by the lilac stalks. Nor is she aware of his debilitated posture without significant relationships with women; as she continues to speak she admires his strength with envy:

You are invulnerable, you have no Achilles' heel,
You will go on, and when you have prevailed
You can say: at this point many a one has failed.
But what have I, but what have I, my friend,
To give you, what can you receive from me?
Only the friendship and the sympathy
Of one about to reach her journey's end. 58

It is part of the pathos of the situation that she does not know what she has to give the young man. Her society, "the thin upper-class 'culture,'" 59 has both robbed her of any real dignity and prevented her from assuming the traditional role of the woman "about to reach her journey's end": the role of spiritual guide for the young.

The speaker is again reduced to "bathetic activities":

You will see me any morning in the park
Reading the comics and the sporting page.
Particularly I remark
An English countess goes upon the stage.
A Greek was murdered at a Polish dance.
Another bank defaulter has confessed. 60

It is noteworthy that "the sensational items represent

58Ibid., p. 10.
various kinds of desire and offense which do not disturb him."\textsuperscript{61}

What does disturb the speaker are hints of a better destiny; the images used to convey these hints are to recur in Eliot's later poetry, where they have the same evocative meaning as they do here:

\begin{quote}
I keep my countenance,
I remain self-possessed
Except when a street piano, mechanical and tired
Reiterates some worn-out common song
With the smell of hyacinths across the garden
Recalling things that other people have desired.\textsuperscript{62}
\end{quote}

The speaker is able to live a self-possessed life except when an old familiar song and the smell of hyacinth remind him of his need for fulfillment with a woman.

In the last section, set in the approaching winter of October, the speaker is already "ill at ease\"\textsuperscript{63} as he mounts the steps to the lady's apartment. He no longer has any hope for the relationship: he is going abroad. The lady's reaction to this news is consistent with her past behavior; she makes a final attempt at securing that type of emotional liaison which is so valuable in her limited world:

\begin{quote}
"I have been wondering frequently of late
(But our beginnings never know our ends!)
Why we have not developed into friends."
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
"For everybody said so, all our friends,
They all were sure our feelings would relate
So closely! I myself can hardly understand.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{61}Williamson, \textit{A Reader's Guide}, p. 73.
\textsuperscript{62}Eliot, \textit{The Complete Poems and Plays}, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{63}Ibid., p. 10.
We must leave it now to fate.  
You will write, at any rate.  
Perhaps it is not too late.  
I shall sit here, serving tea to friends."64

Her last words involve her in the most common of her "characteristic gestures," the most vital process in which her society has permitted her to engage: the ritual of serving tea.  
The effect of her last words upon the speaker is "a kind of dehumanization":65

And I must borrow every changing shape  
To find expression . . . dance, dance  
Like a dancing bear,  
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.66

This is the ultimate effect of the woman and her society upon men: the reduction to animal states.  

In the last stanza of the poem the speaker muses upon the imagined death of the lady.  He asks himself whether her death would not actually give her an advantage over him; this curious question is clarified in the next line, "This music is successful with a 'dying fall.'"67  "This music" refers to the aristocratic society in which they both live; the rest of the musical analogy suggests that only death can transform life in this society and make it successful.  The lady would have an advantage over the speaker because her death would make her life "successful," whereas the speaker--

64 Ibid., p. 11.


67 Ibid., p. 11.
still unfulfilled—would have to linger on in a life composed of trivialities.

"Portrait of a Lady" imparts as pessimistic a view of life as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." And, like "Prufrock," the pessimism in the poem derives from the speaker's frustrated expectations of the women in his society. Both poems end with the speaker alone, resigned to solitude.

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady" are the most substantial poems in the 1917 volume. In them the speaker not only provides the point of view; he is also a character in the drama of the poem. In those shorter poems of the volume which are significant for this thesis, the speaker is not always a character in the poem; sometimes he is simply the observer, providing always the ideals against which his observations are measured. Such is the case in the four "Preludes," which discover the speaker-idealistic observing another sector of society than his own. In the "Preludes" and the two poems which follow them in the 1917 volume—"Rhapsody on a Windy Night" and "Morning at the Window"—the observer examines the life of the lower classes in the city. Eliot's adolescent years were spent at schools in Boston and Paris where he probably caught glimpses of the sordid city life which provides the material for these poems. The aristocratic world portrayed in "Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady" and the underworlds of the city which are seen briefly in these poems constitute the totality of the speaker's social experience in the 1917 volume.
As in the poems which deal with the aristocratic world of the upper classes, the speaker in the poems which examine the life of the city is interested in the women of the society. But he does not expect from the women of the city what he expected from the women in the drawing room, for the souls of these city dwellers appear to be little different from their sordid surroundings. "... They cannot be, in the manner of Prufrock, romantic idealists because their consciousness embraces only what their senses can confront."^68 The tone of the speaker who observes these women is more condescending than satirical; responsible for this change in tone is the speaker's unfamiliarity with the world of the city. Satire can be employed only on the familiar, and the speaker is a stranger to this world.

The speaker finds nothing in the life of the city to alter his earlier finding that womankind had forgotten its potential spiritual significance. In each of the three poems in question he contrasts the sordid reality of the urban woman with images suggestive of his ideal.

The third of the "Preludes" finds the speaker observing one of these women:

You tossed a blanket from the bed,  
You lay upon your back, and waited;  
You dozed, and watched the night revealing  
The thousand sordid images  
Of which you soul was constituted. . . . 69

^68 Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 22.  
The speaker contrasts this dismal picture with his own idealistic musings in the next of the "Preludes":

I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.70

As noted above,71 this passage is the speaker's most nearly realized articulation of his ideal in the whole of the 1917 volume.

In "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" the speaker is involved again in the drama of the poem; but he is involved only as an ambulatory observer, roaming the streets of the city as the early hours of the morning pass. The sight of a prostitute evokes from the memory of the speaker an image appropriate for debased womankind:

The memory throws up high and dry
A crowd of twisted things,

A broken spring in a factory yard,
Rust that clings to the form that the strength has left
Hard and curled and ready to snap.72

"The woman and the moon are alike . . . "73 in the poem, and when the speaker turns to "regard the moon"74 he describes it with feminine images:

She winks a feeble eye,
She smiles into corners.

70Ibid., p. 13.
71See p. 9, above.
She smooths the hair of the grass.
The moon has lost her memory.
A washed-out smallpox cracks her face,
Her hand twists a paper rose,
That smells of dust and eau de Cologne. . . .

Like the women of the city, like the prostitute "who hesitates toward you in the light of the door," the moon has lost her memory; these women no longer remember the spiritual role once played by womankind. Symbolic of this loss of memory is the image of the "paper rose." The image of the rose, traditionally a symbol of the Virgin, the Mystical Rose, calls to mind the spiritual dignity to which women had aspired in the past. But the paper quality of this rose debases the memory of that dignity.

In "Morning at the Window" the speaker observes the awakening metropolis from his window. There are hints in the poem that Eliot had Dante in mind while writing the poem. The lines, "I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids/ Sprouting despondently at area gates," seem to contain a particularly Dantean image. And there is a second, more important parallel in the poem. The second stanza,

The brown waves of fog toss up to me
Twisted faces from the bottom of the street,
And tear from a passer-by with muddy skirts
An aimless smile that hovers in the air
And vanishes along the level of the roofs . . . .

recalls--by contrast--the episode of the lady of the window

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75Ibid., p. 15.
76Ibid., p. 14.
77Ibid., p. 16.
78Ibid., p. 16.
in Dante's *Vita Nuova*. There are significant differences; in Dante it is the lady who is at the window, for instance. But Eliot's tendency to contrast the signification of the modern women with the signification of women in Dante\textsuperscript{79} justifies the comparison.

In the passage from the *Vita Nuova* which Eliot may have had in mind, the young Dante, gazing upward from a street in Florence, is surprised to see "a gentle lady, young and very beautiful, who was looking at me from a window with a face full of compassion, so that all pity seemed gathered in it."\textsuperscript{80} By recalling this incident in Dante to the reader's mind in the similar situation of "Morning at the Window," Eliot achieves the effect of contrasting the aimlessness of modern relationships with the significance of those of Dante's age. While the smile tossed up to the speaker in Eliot's poem is "aimless," the exchange which takes place in Dante's work leads the young Dante to conclude, "'It cannot be but that with that compassionate lady should be a most noble love.'"\textsuperscript{81}

The women who are satirized in "The Boston Evening Transcript," "Aunt Helen," and "Cousin Nancy" are evidently "particular people"\textsuperscript{82} in Eliot's world. These short poems

\textsuperscript{79}See p. 9, above.
\textsuperscript{80}Dante, *The New Life*, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{81}Ibid., p. 77.
\textsuperscript{82}Smith, *A Study in Sources and Meaning*, p. 31.
do no more than record a few of the "characteristic gestures" which betray the shallow, lifeless world of several generations of New England ladies.

While the advent of evening stimulates "the appetites of life in some . . .,"\textsuperscript{83} to Cousin Harriet and her society it simply brings "The Boston Evening Transcript."\textsuperscript{84} The speaker suggests that the vitality of this society is circumscribed by the social news of the newspaper.

The most notable effect of Aunt Helen's death, in the poem which bears her name, is the release of a rather sordid type of vitality:

\begin{verbatim}
Now when she died there was silence in heaven
And the footman sat upon the dining-table
Holding the second housemaid on his knees--
Who had always been so careful while her mistress lived.\textsuperscript{85}
\end{verbatim}

Miss Nancy Ellicott, "Cousin Nancy," demonstrates in her revolt against aristocratic decorum the superficialities of the younger women in this society:

\begin{verbatim}
Miss Nancy Ellicott smoked
And danced all the modern dances;
And her aunts were not quite sure how they felt about it,
But they knew that it was modern.\textsuperscript{86}
\end{verbatim}

There is no woman in Eliot's first volume of verse who satisfies the idealistic aspirations of his speaker-observer. The speaker is remote from the women of the two sectors of society which he has experienced. His dissatisfaction is

\textsuperscript{83}Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{84}Ibid., p. 16.
\textsuperscript{85}Ibid., p. 17.
\textsuperscript{86}Ibid., p. 17.
expressed in the satiric tone which he employs in descriptions of the lifeless, overprotected women of his own social class and in the condescending tone he uses in descriptions of the women of the city. Prufrock's resigned belief—that life cannot provide him with his ideal woman—is the most important discovery of the speaker in the 1917 poems. It is also the most significant fact for the Eliot canon. Defeated by life in his search for the ideal woman, the Eliot speaker was to search memory and death to discover her.
CHAPTER III

THE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE:

A LIMITED AFFIRMATION

The satiric and condescending tones which the Prufrock speaker adopts toward women disappear as speakers in three of Eliot's poems published between 1917 and 1922 recall a situation which reveals the poet progressing beyond the merely implied affirmation of an ideal woman in the earlier poems toward a more positive--though still limited--affirmation. Speakers in "Dans le Restaurant," "La Figlia che Piange," and "The Waste Land" recall from memory an experience of childhood in which a young girl, fraught with spiritual significance, imparted to them "a moment of power and ecstasy." The speakers who recall the incident are awed by the signification of the young girl; this wonder constitutes an emotional attitude toward a woman not apparent in Eliot's poetry until this time. And this attitude itself constitutes a limited progression in Eliot's increasing tendency to affirm the image of a woman as signifying spiritual reality. It is the purpose of this chapter to examine the significance of the young girl in the childhood episode and

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to identify the limited progression toward the affirmation of a woman which her appearance comprises in the Eliot canon.

The situation which appears most complete in details in "Dans le Restaurant," an experiment in French versification included in the 1920 Poems, has been summarized in its essential details as being "the frequently recurring episode of an ecstasy of love broken and frustrated in some vague period of childhood and youth, a scene in an arbour during a shower of rain, a girl with brown hair holding flowers in her arms." With varied details, this episode also appears in "La Figlia che Piange" and "The Waste Land."

The limited nature of Eliot's affirmation of a woman as spiritually significant in these poems is apparent in "Dans le Restaurant." The ecstatic episode is recalled in this poem by a "shabby old waiter" who narrates the experience to a "'respectable'" client. The episode occurred, the waiter explains, when he was but seven; the little girl involved was even younger. During a rainstorm they took cover in some hedges:

She was completely soaked, I gave her some primroses.

I tickled her, in order to make her laugh.
I experienced a moment of power and ecstasy.

A large dog came and bothered us;

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3Unger, Moments and Patterns, p. 71.
4Ibid., p. 71.
I was frightened, I left her halfway up the path.
What a pity. 5

The waiter's affirmation of the experience with the young girl is indicated, as Leonard Unger notes, "by the intensity with which the old waiter is haunted by this experience, so haunted that he must tell of it to an unsympathetic and complete stranger." 6

In the portion of the poem included above, the peculiar limitations of the waiter's affirmation are indicated only by the emotion of regret which colors his memory of the experience. Later in the poem, however, the poet's commentary upon the effect of the waiter's frustration suggests that death will curtail the old man's affirmation of the episode:

Phlebas, the Phoenecian, a fortnight dead,
Forgot the cry of gulls and the deep sea swell,
And the profit and the loss, and the cargo of tin:
A current under sea bore him far away,
Passing the stages of his earlier life.
Take note, he was a wearisome sort;
However, he was once a handsome man of tall stature. 7

Phlebas the sailor and the old waiter are identical in the poem. Because the waiter failed in the episode with the young girl he is fated to a death like that of Phlebas. This section of the poem, "the dramatic conclusion to its negative movement," 8 develops the effect of the experience in the

6 Unger, Moments and Patterns, p. 71.
7 Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 32. The translation is by this thesis writer.
garden in an intellectual direction; it universalizes the fate of those who, like the waiter, have failed in a moment of spiritual significance. The "Phlebas" passage reappears, slightly altered, as Part IV of "The Waste Land," where it is structured by the cause and effect sequence of the Grail legends. While the passage in the French poem has no such structuring myth, it is "an earlier exploration of the vein of thought and feeling that is plumbed in The Waste Land."\(^9\)

The obsessive quality of the waiter's memories affirms the significance of the experience with the young girl; the years which have intervened between the occurrence of the experience and the waiter's narration have not diminished the importance of the episode. But the nostalgic regret of the waiter and the ominous fate which looms before him limit his affirmation. It is possible to probe beneath these opposing forces of affirmation and limitation to discover the creative weakness at their source.

There is a fundamental obscurity in what the young girl of the childhood episode signifies. The importance which the waiter attaches to his experience with her and the disastrous fate which attends his failure in the episode are disproportionate to the actual appearance of the young girl in the poem, who is dismissed as soon as she is mentioned.

\(^9\)Ibid., p. 118.
The experience described by the waiter in "Dans le Restaurant" probably actually occurred in Eliot's youth; if so, the private nature of the experience could account for the obscurity of what the little girl signifies and for the disproportionate emphasis attached to an experience with her. Eliot was later to clarify what the young girl and the experience in the garden signified by attributing to her, in "Ash Wednesday," a religious significance like that of Beatrice in Dante's *Vita Nuova.* But in "Dans le Restaurant" and the other two poems in question no adequate intellectual significance is attached to the young girl; thus the waiter in the poem appears to suffer, in his posture of regret and in his ominous fate, from Eliot's failure to make apparent in the poem just what the young girl signifies.

Eliot had probably not arrived at a satisfactory interpretation of the personal experience when he wrote "Dans le Restaurant." It seems plausible that he was searching in this period for a way in which to give adequate intellectual and imaginative expression to an experience which he felt emotionally. In "La Figlia che Piange," a poem written about the same time as "Dans le Restaurant," Eliot dealt directly with the problem of how to remember the experience.

The epigraph to the poem, taken from the Aeneid, sums up the problem dealt with in the poem, the problem of

confused recollection. The epigraph translates, "O maiden, how shall I remember thee?" In the poem itself, the speaker, who is both the "he" and the "I" of the poem, directs an imaginative reconstruction of the childhood experience. The speaker is an actor in the poem, as is the young girl; he directs both actors as if he were searching for a way in which to remember the experience.

In the first section of the poem the speaker-director recreates the experience of childhood with its recurrent images of the garden, "the little girl and the proffered flowers":

Stand on the highest pavement of the stair—
Lean on a garden urn—
Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair—
Clasp your flowers to you with a pained surprise—
Fling them to the ground and turn
With a fugitive resentment in your eyes:
But weave, weave the sunlight in your hair.

The reason for this recreation of the garden scene becomes apparent in the second section of the poem in which the speaker-director alters the separation of the actors:

I should find
Some way incomparably light and deft,
Some way we both should understand,
Simple and faithless as a smile and shake of the hand.

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11 Williamson, A Reader's Guide, p. 84.
13 Unger, Moments and Patterns, p. 72.
In the third section of the poem the speaker no longer directs; the imaginative reconstruction of the episode has ended. Here he muses upon his actual separation from the young girl and confesses that her memory still disturbs him:

She turned away, but with the autumn weather
Compelled my imagination many days,
Many days and many hours:
Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers.
And I wonder how they should have been together!
I should have lost a gesture and a pose.
Sometimes these cogitations still amaze
The troubled midnight and the noon's repose. 16

It should be noted that the romantic expectation which produced tones of satire and condescension in the Prufrock poems also lies behind "Dans le Restaurant" and "La Figlia che Piange." In these poems it is apparent in the regret and disappointment of the speakers who relate the childhood experience. Life is seen to be as much a source of frustration in these poems as it is in the poems of Prufrock; though life has not denied the speakers in "Dans le Restaurant" and "La Figlia che Piange" an experience with a spiritually significant woman, it has—and perhaps more cruelly—deprived them of fulfillment in that experience.

The most important appearance of the young girl in the childhood experience is in "The Waste Land," in which she and the childhood episode are incorporated into the framework provided by the Grail legend which structures the poem. In this framework the childhood experience is given an

16Ibid., p. 20.
intellectual meaning, and the young girl is given a name and a place within an intellectually apprehensible scheme. Elizabeth Drew has provided a helpful summary of the Grail legend:

The legend appears in various confusing forms in medi-
eval literature, but it always concerns a land which has been blighted by a curse so that it is arid and waterless, producing neither animal nor vegetable in-
crease. Its plight is linked with that of its ruler, the Fisher King, who, as a result of illness or of a wound, has become sexually impotent. The curse is re-
moved when a Knight appears who must ask the question as to the meaning of the Grail and Lance. . . . In some versions the mere asking of the question cures the King and saves the land. In others the knight must go through various ordeals, culminating in that of the Chapel or Cemetery Perilous. 17

Eliot did not employ the legend in all its details; as Smith notes, "The Waste Land summarizes the Grail legend, not precisely in the usual order, but retaining the principal inci-
dents and adapting them to a modern setting." 18

The incidents of "The Waste Land" receive their coherent status in the Grail framework as episodes remembered by the narrator of the poem, Tiresias. 19 "Since Tiresias . . . is . . . shadowy . . . , most incidents in The Waste Land seem immediate, not recollected, even though they constitute his reverie." 20 Tiresias is both Fisher King, in the present of the poem, and Grail knight in his memories. 21

The importance of the position which the childhood ex-
perience occupies in the scheme of "The Waste Land" depends

18Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 70.
19Ibid., p. 67. 20Ibid., p. 67. 21Ibid., p. 74.
upon its status as one of the two central incidents in Tiresias' memories:

The action of the poem, as Tiresias recounts it, turns on two crucial incidents: the garden scene in Part I and the approach to the Chapel Perilous in Part V. The one is the traditional initiation in the presence of the Grail; the other is the mystical initiation, as described by Jessie L. Weston, into spiritual knowledge. The first, if successful, would constitute rebirth through love and sex; the second, rebirth without either.22

The young girl of the waiter's memories in "Dans le Restaurant" becomes, in the garden scene of "The Waste Land," the hyacinth girl, the Grail maiden whose "function ... is dual: first, she directs the quester to the place of his initiation or blames him for his failure there; second, she appears in the castle and bears the Grail into the great hall."23 To achieve the restoration of the land, Tiresias, as Grail knight, would have had to ask the appropriate questions of the Grail maiden. But, in the Hyacinth garden, as in the arbor of "Dans le Restaurant," a failure occurs. Tiresias' memories of his experience with the hyacinth girl are memories of his failure:

--Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden, Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither Living nor dead, and I knew nothing, Looking into the heart of light, the silence.24

Both Tiresias and the hyacinth girl are victimized by his failure in the garden. The "Phlebas" passage from "Dans

22Ibid., p. 71.  
23Ibid., p. 74.  
le Restaurant," reappearing as Part IV of "The Waste Land," "writes the epitaph to the experience by which the quester has failed in the garden." The passage suggests the end to which Tiresias will come. The effect of his failure upon the hyacinth girl consists in her metamorphosis into "base imitations" of herself; after Tiresias' failure the girl "is reduced to neurosis; she is a charlatan fortune-teller and midwife, a vapid lady of fashion, a prostituting typist, a wanton queen."27

The same limited affirmation of a woman occurs in "The Waste Land" as in "Dans le Restaurant." Eliot's mythic expansion of the experience in the garden in "The Waste Land" did not significantly change the direction of the action in the earlier poem. While the significant position assigned to the hyacinth girl as the Grail bearer in the scheme of "The Waste Land" indicates the importance which Eliot attached to the experience, the disastrous consequences of Tiresias' failure in the Hyacinth garden preclude the kind of full affirmation of the spiritual power of a woman which only fulfillment in the episode would make possible. A full affirmation of the spiritual power of a woman was to come in "Ash Wednesday"; in "The Waste Land" and "Dans le Restaurant" there are only hints of such an affirmation.

25 Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 91.
26 Ibid., p. 76.
The epigraph to "The Waste Land" provides an image which illustrates well the limited nature of the affirmation of the young girl in the poem. The epigraph is taken from the Satyricon of Petronius:

"Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: Σιβύλλα ἔλεις; respondebat illa: Σιβύλλα ἠθύλω."

I saw the sibyl at Cumae, hanging in a bottle, with my own eyes. When the boys asked her, "Sibyl, what do you wish?" she would respond, "I wish to die." 28

The sibyl of Cumae, like the Grail bearer of the medieval legends, was supposed to aid the quester in his journey. But in the epigraph she is imprisoned; "the feminine power which should enable the protagonist to complete his quest for initiation cannot do so." 29

In the epigraph, as in the poem, there is the acknowledgement of a spiritually significant feminine power; however, in the poem as well as in the situation presented in the epigraph the power of the woman to assist the quester is crippled. The sibyl, the hyacinth girl, and Tiresias himself are all victims of Tiresias' failure in the Hyacinth garden. 30 The spiritual power of the experience in the Hyacinth garden remains only potential in "The Waste Land"; there is no full affirmation of a woman in the poem.

The obsessive nature of the speakers' memories in "Dans le Restaurant," "La Figlia che Piange," and "The Waste Land"

29 Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 69.
30 Ibid., p. 69.
affirms the importance of the young girl of the childhood episode. Mixed with their memories of her significance, however, are memories of frustration which preclude any full affirmation of the experience. The speakers who recall the incident are possessed of a romantic nostalgia which mourns their lack of fulfillment. No full affirmation of a woman was to take place in Eliot's poetry until he abandoned this philosophy of romantic expectation.
CHAPTER IV

A NEW PHILOSOPHY

Between the publication of "The Waste Land" in 1922 and the appearance of "Ash Wednesday" in 1930, Eliot was to undergo some fundamental philosophical changes which were to increase his admiration of and dependence upon Dante. These changes were also to make possible the appearance of the Dantean lady who dominates the landscape of "Ash Wednesday." Evidence of Eliot's philosophical changes is apparent in his essay "Dante," published in 1929, the year before "Ash Wednesday." This chapter will present and examine those sections of "Dante" which reveal Eliot turning from the romantic philosophy of his earlier verse to that philosophy which would permit his full affirmation of the lady in "Ash Wednesday."

Eliot's essay on Dante is characterized by a tone of personal intensity which verges on autobiographical confession. This personal intensity is especially apparent in those sections of "Dante" which deal with the Vita Nuova, Dante's early work. The Vita Nuova is Dante's account of his youthful encounter with Beatrice in the streets of Florence; Eliot seems to have recognized in the experience described in the
Vita Nuova an experience of his own youth. As Drew suggests, Eliot's own remarks on the Vita Nuova suggest strongly that he sees in the story of the relationship of Dante to Beatrice a mixture of the personal and the imaginative which parallels something in his own life, something which also had its roots in a childhood memory.¹

One passage from Eliot's essay particularly suggests this autobiographical tone:

... The type of sexual experience which Dante describes as occurring to him at the age of nine years is by no means impossible or unique. My only doubt (in which I found myself confirmed by a distinguished psychologist) is whether it could have taken place so late in life as the age of nine years. The psychologist agreed with me that it is more likely to occur at about five or six years of age. It is possible that Dante developed rather late, and it is also possible that he altered the dates to employ some other significance of the number nine. But to me it appears obvious that the Vita Nuova could only have been written around a personal experience. If so, the details do not matter: whether the lady was the Portinari or not, I do not care; it is quite as likely that she is a blind for some one else, even for a person whose name Dante may have forgotten or never known. But I cannot find it incredible that what has happened to others should have happened to Dante with much greater intensity.²

The fact that Eliot seems to have recognized in Dante's work "a personal experience" which "has happened to others" is not in itself significant. What is significant for Eliot's own verse is his recognition that Dante "drew other conclusions"³ from his experience in childhood than Eliot himself had drawn from a similar situation in "Dans le Restaurant"

²Eliot, "Dante," Selected Essays, pp. 233-234
³Ibid., p. 234.
and "The Waste Land":

Let us entertain the theory that Dante, meditating on the astonishment of an experience at such an age, which no subsequent experience abolished or exceeded, found meanings in it which we should not be likely to find ourselves. His account is then just as reasonable as our own; and he is simply prolonging the experience in a different direction from that which we, with different mental habits and prejudices, are likely to take.4

In other words, in the conclusions which Dante had drawn from his youthful experience with Beatrice, Eliot recognized another possible conclusion for the experience described in "Dans le Restaurant." Referring to the childhood episode in Eliot's verse, Williamson points out that "the way of Phlebas and the way of Dante are the two opposite issues for the experience. . . ."5

But accepting "the way of Dante" involved accepting the Christian scheme of things; Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927 had the effect of preparing his sympathies for the acceptance of Dante's world. There are hints of Eliot's religious conversion in his advice to those who would read Dante:

. . . such study is vain unless we have first made the conscious attempt, as difficult and hard as rebirth, to pass through the looking-glass into a world which is just as reasonable as our own. When we have done that, we begin to wonder whether the world of Dante is not both larger and more solid than our own.6

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4Ibid., p. 235.
Following "the way of Dante" requires, as Eliot points out, a change in patterns of thought:

The attitude of Dante to the fundamental experience of the Vita Nuova can only be understood by accustoming ourselves to find meaning in final causes rather than in origins. It is not, I believe, meant as a description of what he consciously felt on his meeting with Beatrice, but rather as a description of what that meant on mature reflection upon it. The final cause is the attraction towards God.7

The meaning which Dante put upon his childhood encounter with Beatrice was this "attraction towards God." Eliot was to impose this meaning upon the references to his own childhood experience in "Ash Wednesday"; this imposition of meaning was to be different from the frustration and disaster seen issuing from the episode in the earlier poems. Responsible for the change in attitude toward the childhood experience was a change in Eliot's philosophy, a change apparent in "Dante."

Behind the satiric tones of the speaker in the Prufrock poems discussed in Chapter II is an attitude of romantic expectation; the speaker's dissatisfaction with the women whom life could provide to him points to his frustrated expectation that life would provide him with his ideal. The same romantic expectation produced the tones of remorse adopted by the speakers who recalled the childhood experience; their dissatisfaction with life because it had denied them fulfillment points to their frustrated expectation that life would

7Ibid., p. 234.
permit fulfillment. Eliot was to discover in Dante a philosophy directly opposed to this romantic expectation:

At any rate, the Vita Nuova, besides being a sequence of beautiful poems connected by a curious vision-literature prose, is, I believe, a very sound psychological treatise on something related to what is now called "sublimation." There is also a practical sense of realities behind it, which is antiromantic: not to expect more from life than it can give or more from human beings than they can give; to look to death for what life cannot give. The Vita Nuova belongs to "vision literature"; but its philosophy is the Catholic philosophy of disillusion.8

This "Catholic philosophy of disillusion" is responsible for the appearance of the lady in "Ash Wednesday," who derives neither from the real world of the present nor from the real world of memory but from the "world of vision."9 Neither satire nor remorse are possible in "Ash Wednesday" because the speaker cannot be disappointed by life; he looks not to life but to the world of vision which is beyond the boundaries of life.

What Eliot calls "the system of Dante's organization of sensibility—the contrast between higher and lower carnal love, the transition from Beatrice living to Beatrice dead, rising to the Cult of the Virgin"10 is possible only because Dante possessed this "Catholic philosophy of disillusion." Beatrice died when Dante was twenty-five; in life, Dante never experienced any fulfillment of the attraction which he had

8 Ibid., p. 235.
felt for her at an early age. This apparent frustration creates yet another parallel between the experience described in the *Vita Nuova* and the episode recalled in "Dans le Restaurant."

With these parallels in mind, it is revealing to examine the difference in spiritual significance between the hyacinth girl and Beatrice. Smith has linked the appearances of Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova* and the *Divine Comedy* with the appearances of the maiden in the Grail legends. The consequences of such a comparison for the interpretation of Eliot's verse should be apparent; if the significance of the Grail maiden is not much different from the significance of Beatrice, then the difference between the hyacinth girl of "The Waste Land" and the Beatrician figure of "Ash Wednesday" is diminished.

Any comparison of the Grail maiden with Dante's Beatrice must have a rather limited value because of the immense difference in the spiritual power wielded by each. The spiritual power of the Grail maiden—as represented in "The Waste Land"—is dependent upon the success or failure of the Grail knight. Such a limitation does not apply to the spiritual power of Beatrice. Dante the quester failed because he was not faithful to the image of Beatrice after her death; this is apparent from Beatrice's reproaches to Dante in the latter

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cantos of the Purgatory. The success of Dante's quest in the
Divine Comedy—that is to say the fulfilled attraction toward
God—is due not to the actions of Dante but to the interces-
sory power which Beatrice wields.

The implications for Eliot's poems are obvious. The
vastly different tones of "The Waste Land" and "Ash Wednesday"
are due—at least in part—to the spiritual significance of
the woman in each poem. "The Waste Land," which depends upon
the framework of the Grail legends, contains a woman whose
spiritual power is significant, but limited by the actions
of the quester. "Ash Wednesday," which depends more upon the
world of Dante, contains a woman whose spiritual power is in-
dependent of the speaker's actions. Full affirmation of a
woman is possible in "Ash Wednesday" where it was not possi-
ble in "The Waste Land."

Eliot's progress toward a full affirmation of a feminine
spiritual power depended upon two borrowings from Dante: "the
Catholic philosophy of disillusion" and the figure of a woman
spiritually independent of the actions of a quester. The
lady whose spiritual power is affirmed by the speaker in "Ash
Wednesday" is not taken from life; her image derives from the
world of vision, "death's twilight kingdom,"12 whose bounda-
ries are beyond life. Her appearance in "Ash Wednesday" is
perhaps foreshadowed in "The Hollow Men," whose sight can

be restored only if a redemptive figure like the Mystical Rose or the Morning Star reappears beyond the boundaries of life:

In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And avoid speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

Sightless, unless
The eyes reappear
As the perpetual star
Multifoliate rose
Of death's twilight kingdom
The hope only
Of empty men.¹³

¹³Ibid., p. 58.
CHAPTER V

THE LADY OF "ASH WEDNESDAY":
A FULL AFFIRMATION

"Ash Wednesday" contains a full affirmation of a woman. The poem confirms the direction in which the limited affirmations of earlier poems had gestured. The tones of satire and frustration which had marked experiences with women in the earlier poems and prevented any full affirmation of a woman disappear in "Ash Wednesday." They are replaced by a mood of "extraordinary relaxation" which accompanies the more positive attitude toward women in the poem.

"Ash Wednesday" is in the tradition of the "Way of Affirmation"; spiritual reality is approached in the poem through the image of the lady who dominates its landscape. The fact that Eliot's debt to Dante is enormous and pervasive in "Ash Wednesday" is not, then, surprising, since Dante is the master of the "Way of Affirmation" in the civilization of the West.  

Not all critics have agreed that "Ash Wednesday" follows the affirmative approach to spiritual reality. Some, misled


2See p. 4, above, for Williams' definition of the "Way of Affirmation."

3Williams, The Figure of Beatrice, p. 11.
by the vocabulary of renunciation which appears in Part I of the poem, have suggested that the pervasive influence in the poem is that of St. John of the Cross, a Spanish mystic of the sixteenth century whose negative system of spirituality is directly opposed to the affirmative way:

The first section of Ash Wednesday--indeed, the whole poem--not only reflects superficially The Dark Night of the Soul, but also contains allusions which, by their contextual significance, are in accord with St. John's purgational system. The first section of Ash Wednesday--indeed, the whole poem--not only reflects superficially The Dark Night of the Soul, but also contains allusions which, by their contextual significance, are in accord with St. John's purgational system.

Those explications of "Ash Wednesday" which admit the influence of St. John's spirituality are completely unacceptable. Williamson has warned the reader of Eliot never to "accept any explanation that conflicts with part of the context or with the whole poem"; to admit the influence of St. John in "Ash Wednesday" would be to deny the wholly affirmative pattern at the center of the poem and to place the influence of Dante in direct conflict with the negative spirituality of St. John. Another explanation for the apparent renunciations of the speaker in Part I can be found.

"Ash Wednesday" has been proclaimed "the most obscure of Mr. Eliot's poems." While critics have illuminated many individual lines of the poem, the guesses which have been hazarded as to the overall meaning of the poem have done little to clarify the obscurity of the whole. Part of this failure

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4Unger, Moments and Patterns, pp. 43-44.
has derived from a critical reluctance to admit "the interrelatedness of Eliot's work." If "Ash Wednesday" is read in conjunction with "Dante," Eliot's essay published the year previous to the poem, the meaning of the poem is somewhat clarified; the poem should also be read as a continuation of the theme developed in the poems containing the childhood experience, for references to that episode appear in the poem. If the poem is read with these other works of Eliot in mind, the obscurity of the poem dissolves and its meaning as a statement of affirmation becomes apparent.

Part I of "Ash Wednesday" contains those sections of the poem which have caused the most critical difficulty. There is an obvious renunciation in the opening lines of the poem:

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

The suggestion of renunciation in these opening lines is reinforced by the source for the first line, a poem by a contemporary of Dante's, Guido Cavalcanti; Eliot's line is a paraphrase of the opening line of Cavalcanti's poem, in which the speaker, "languishing in exile and despairing of return, bids the ballata take word of his sorrow and illness to his lady in Tuscany." Some critics have further

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7 Unger, Moments and Patterns, p. 93.
9 Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 140.
10 Ibid., p. 140.
emphasized the apparent renunciation of these lines by finding in them "a correspondence between the afflictions expressed by this contemporary of Dante and the condition of St. John's beginner." Any correspondence with the system of St. John of the Cross would emphasize the renunciation of the speaker, since the negative way of the Spanish mystic involves "the renunciation of all images except the final one of God himself."  

The speaker continues to employ the vocabulary of renunciation throughout Part I of the poem. His ultimate renunciation, "I renounce the blessed face . . . ," has led most critics to interpret the poem as being spoken by "a man plunged almost into despair" because he has been deprived of the presence of a lady: "At the beginning of Part I and throughout the actual present of the poem he is deprived of her presence and is unable to 'turn' toward her again."

This interpretation is unsatisfactory, since it fails to explain some apparent contradictions in Part I of the poem. Although the speaker claims to "renounce the blessed face," he affirms, in the closing lines of Part I, an obviously feminine spiritual power:

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11 Unger, Moments and Patterns, p. 44.
12 Williams, The Figure of Beatrice, p. 8.
14 Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 135.
15 Ibid., p. 136.
Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death
Pray for us now and at the hour of our death.¹⁶

This petition, taken from the "Ave Maria," invokes the intercession of the Virgin. It indicates both that the speaker has not renounced all images and—together with the petition that precedes it—that the speaker is neither alone nor addressing the reader.¹⁷

The speaker cannot both renounce and affirm the spiritual power of a woman. Unless the integrity of "Ash Wednesday" is to be questioned, another explanation must be found than that which would have the speaker embracing the negative way of St. John.

In Eliot's reflections upon the latter cantos of Dante's Purgatory he describes a type of renunciation which is not inherently opposed to the affirmation of images. This description occurs in his remarks about Canto XXX of the Purgatory, the canto in which Dante sees Beatrice for the first time since the youthful adventure of the Vita Nuova. Eliot both comments upon and translates the passage in question:

> We cannot understand fully Canto XXX of the Purgatorio until we know the Vita Nuova, which in my opinion should be read after the Divine Comedy. But at least we can begin to understand how skilfully Dante expresses the recrudescence of an ancient passion in a new emotion, in a new situation, which comprehends, enlarges, and gives a meaning to it.

Olive-crowned over a white veil, a lady appeared to me, clad under a green mantle in colour of living flame. And my spirit, after so many years since trembling in her presence it had been broken with awe, without further knowledge by my eyes, felt, through hidden power which went out from her, the great strength of the old love. As soon as that lofty power struck my sense, which already had transfixed me before my adolescence, I turned leftwards with the trust of the little child who runs to his mama when he is frightened or distressed, to say to Virgil: 'Hardly a drop of blood in my body does not shudder: I know the tokens of the ancient flame.'

And in the dialogue that follows we see the passionate conflict of the old feelings with the new; the effort and triumph of a new renunciation, greater than renunciation at the grave, because a renunciation of feelings that persist beyond the grave.  

Eliot is concerned, in this most dramatic of Dante's passages, with Dante's feelings as the "ancient flame" of his devotion to Beatrice is renewed and confirmed. Eliot points out that both affirmation and renunciation are present in Dante's feelings: affirmation because the "new situation . . . comprehends, enlarges, and gives a meaning to . . . an ancient passion"; renunciation because Dante's adolescent feelings for Beatrice are inappropriate and must be formulated in "a new emotion."

The renunciation which takes place in Part I of "Ash Wednesday" is fundamentally the same type of renunciation that Eliot describes in his remarks on Dante's feelings at the reappearance of Beatrice. Like Canto XXX of the Purgatory, "Ash Wednesday" contains a discovery and a confirmation.

What obscures this fact in "Ash Wednesday" is the absence in the poem of a dramatic situation which would represent the discovery implicit in the emotions of the speaker. The broken, halting speech patterns of Part I suggest these emotions.

The speaker of "Ash Wednesday," apparently in the presence of a visionary lady who confirms the significance of the childhood experience, is struggling to rid himself of adolescent feelings—very probably those nostalgic feelings of regret associated in earlier poems with the memory of the childhood episode. Just as Dante could not enter the state of blessedness which Beatrice signified until he had renounced his adolescent feelings for her, the speaker in "Ash Wednesday" cannot enter the "state of mind which is aspired to" in the poem until he has renounced the nostalgic desire for fulfillment which characterized the speakers in "Dans le Restaurant" and "The Waste Land."

It is unfortunate that "Ash Wednesday" is not prefixed with an epigraph which might provide a hint to the dramatic situation confronting the speaker in Part I. The poem is almost certainly about a situation like that which Eliot analyzes in "Dante," one which demands a renunciation of the speaker only so that a greater affirmation might take place.

Read in this way, the opening passage of the poem continues Eliot's commentary upon the childhood experience in

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a different direction from that taken in earlier poems:

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
(Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)
Why should I mourn

The vanished power of the usual reign? 20

The "power of the usual reign" would have been accomplished through success in the Hyacinth garden; the renunciation in this passage of turning, striving, and mourning reveals that the speaker no longer regrets the frustration of the episode.

The next section of the poem continues to develop the speaker's new attitude toward the childhood episode:

Because I do not hope to know again
The infirm glory of the positive hour
Because I do not think
Because I know I shall not know
The one veritable transitory power
Because I cannot drink
There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is nothing again. . . . 21

"The infirm glory of the positive hour" is a direct reference to the childhood experience; "the one veritable transitory power" is that power which fulfillment would have bestowed upon the speaker. This reading is supported by the speaker's description of "there" as "where trees flower and springs flow"; the vegetation imagery brings to mind the renewal which would have been accomplished had Tiresias succeeded in the Hyacinth garden. The speaker's change of attitude toward

21 Ibid., p. 60.
the failure in the garden is evident in the comment he adds to his description: "for there is nothing again. . . ."

It is in the next section of Part I that the speaker renounces "the blessed face." It should now be clear that this renunciation is of a face in a past experience, a face which is blessed because its image has prepared the speaker for the affirmation of the lady who is present in Part I. Because the childhood episode has prepared the speaker for the experience of "Ash Wednesday," he can "rejoice that things are as they are." 22

In the last lines of Part I it becomes apparent that the speaker is not alone. His petition, "Teach us to care and not to care/Teach us to sit still. . . ." 23 reveals that the person to whom he directs his petition is a part of that spiritual, visionary world in which acts as paradoxical as caring while not caring are possible. The last petition of the poem, taken from the "Ave Maria," suggests that it is a lady who is present, perhaps the Virgin. The closing lines of Part I affirm the spiritual power of a woman.

Before proceeding to an examination of the affirmation of the lady in Part II, it should be noted that there is no developmental relation between the parts of "Ash Wednesday."

As Gardner explains,

It is not a single continuous poem, but a group of poems on aspects of a single theme. . . . The first

22 Ibid., p. 60.  
23 Ibid., p. 61.
three poems originally appeared separately in periodicals and not in the order in which they appear in the volume. This suggests that it is probably a mistake to attempt to trace a development of the theme from poem to poem.  

Each of the six parts of "Ash Wednesday" develops the theme of the approach to spiritual reality through the power of the lady.  

In Part I the speaker's successful struggle to renounce familiar feelings and to affirm in a new way the spiritual power of the lady who is present to him is cast in terms which are intellectually direct; there is little imagery in the almost prosaic speech of Part I. Part II of "Ash Wednesday" presents the theme of affirmation in the intellectually indirect terms of allegory. Matthiessen notes that Part II possesses what Eliot, in his essay on Dante, has called "a poetic as distinguished from an intellectual lucidity."  

Eliot is heavily indebted to Dante for his use of allegory in "Ash Wednesday"; as one critic has commented upon Eliot's use of allegory,  

... it becomes increasingly apparent that it was not accidental that 'Ash Wednesday' was published in the year after Eliot's essay on Dante, but that his renewed study of 'The Divine Comedy' and the 'Vita Nuova' had flowered into stimulus for his own verse.  

But Eliot's employment of allegory differs from that of Dante in an important way; this difference has been defined  

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as "the inevitable absence in Eliot of the strict medieval interpretation of what the figures stand for." The figure of the lady in Part II of "Ash Wednesday," symbolizing the redemptive power of intercession, possesses no clear identity. Though she is like both Beatrice and the Virgin, she is neither. The way in which Eliot has turned this ambiguity to advantage has been pointed out by Matthiessen:

Exactly what Eliot's method is in handling allegory can perhaps be pointed more plainly in considering the figure of his Lady, for, as a result of the way in which she is described in distinct definite images and yet left at the same time indefinite and suggestive, she can stand at once as Beatrice or a saint or the Virgin herself, as well as being an idealized beautiful woman... For readers of to-day who no longer believe in the elaborate hierarchies and gradations of Dante's system, the figures of Beatrice and the Virgin, though distinct, possess similar connotations. They convey like attributes of merciful intercession. And the way Eliot manages to suggest this quality of both without naming either is another instance of how he indicates the general in the particular, of how he can impart in a single passage a range of different and yet related experiences.

The distinctions which Matthiessen makes in this somewhat lengthy passage are important for an understanding of "Ash Wednesday." Too many critics, confused by the fact that while the lady of Part II is obviously like the Virgin, she cannot be the Virgin since "... she honours the Virgin in meditation," have projected the presence of several ladies in the poem. What Eliot is interested in achieving in the

\[27\text{Ibid., p. 115.}\] \[28\text{Ibid., p. 116.}\] \[29\text{Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 61.}\]
various appearances of the lady in "Ash Wednesday" is an approximation of a state of being which all of the lady's appearances suggest. The activity which characterizes this state of being is dramatically presented in the first section of Part II:

Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree
In the cool of the day, having fed to satiety
On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained
In the hollow round of my skull. And God said
Shall these bones live? shall these Bones live? And that which had been contained
In the bones (which were already dry) said chirping:
Because of the goodness of this Lady
And because of her loveliness, and because
She honours the Virgin in meditation,
We shine with brightness.30

The bones of the speaker are redeemed by the intercession of the lady; the bones know this and affirm the spiritual power of the lady with their "chirping."

The lady is more than a spiritual mediatrix for the speaker; as a symbol of the state to which the speaker aspires she is a model for his behavior. When the lady retires to contemplation the speaker emulates her action:

The Lady is withdrawn
In a white gown, to contemplation, in a white gown.
Let the whiteness of bones atone to forgetfulness.
There is no life in them. As I am forgotten
And would be forgotten, so I would forget
Thus devoted, concentrated in purpose.32

30 Ibid., p. 61.
One of the activities of the souls in the blessed state is the recitation of hymns and litanies of praise. In the next section of Part II the scattered bones of the speaker recite a litany in praise of the lady whose intercession has redeemed them:

Lady of silences
Calm and distressed
Torn and most whole
Rose of memory
Rose of forgetfulness
Exhausted and life-giving
Worried reposeful. . . .

The effect of the lady upon the speaker's obsessed memories of the garden episode becomes apparent as the litany continues:

The single Rose
Is now the Garden
Where all loves end
Terminate torment
Of love unsatisfied
The greater torment
Of love satisfied
End of the endless
Journey to no end
Conclusion of all that
Is inconclusible
Speech without word and
Word of no speech
Grace to the Mother
For the Garden
Where all love ends.  

The speaker's frustration and nostalgia have ended with the appearance of this lady who has herself become "the Garden/Where all love ends." Smith comments upon this passage:

"That garden is paradise regained; the Hyacinth garden of

\[33\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 62.\]  
\[34\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 62.\]
The Waste Land is paradise lost." The disillusion of the speaker with what life can provide is indicated by the "torment" which he sees as the result of both "love satisfied" and "love unsatisfied."

The bones are apparently successful in their quest for the forgetfulness of the blessed state; in the closing section of Part II they seem to have attained to that state which the lady symbolizes:

Under a juniper-tree the bones sang, scattered and shining
We are glad to be scattered, we did little good to each other,
Under a tree in the cool of the day, with the blessing of sand,
Forgetting themselves and each other, united
In the quiet of the desert. This is the land which ye shall divide by lot. And neither division nor unity matters. This is the land. We have our inheritance.

One critic has noted that "the bones are as little careful of their own rights or envious of those of others as the blessed in Dante's Paradiso." Through the intercession of the lady the bones have been redeemed and elevated to the state of the blessed which she signifies. The lady's intercession is the "inheritance" spoken of in the last line of Part II.

Part II illustrates, in a sense, the reason why the speaker no longer hopes—or needs—"to turn." Although it

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35 Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 146.


does not further the theme presented in Part I, it does re-
state the theme in a more visual way; the lady whose presence
is only suggested at the end of Part I is more clearly seen
in Part II. Because the speaker has experienced the passive
redemption of the lady's intercession, he has arrived at the
state of the blessed which she signifies; he no longer needs
to turn to the alternatives glimpsed in Part I.

The most difficult sections of "Ash Wednesday" are those
which comprise Part III. Part III illustrates, in its some-
what obscure passages, the intensely personal nature of the
experience which is described in the poem. The lady of the
poem does not appear in Part III, though the speaker seems
to approach her presence in its last lines. The way in which
Part III reiterates the theme of the affirmation of the lady
becomes apparent if the title under which the poem was first
published is examined in its context together with what auto-
biographical information can be gleaned from earlier poems
and Eliot's essay on Dante.

Part III was originally published bearing the title of
"Som de l'Escalina," a phrase which derives from Canto XXVI
of the Purgatory:

'Ara vos prec, per aquella valor
que vos guida al som de l'escalina,
sovenha vos a temps de ma dolor'
('Now I beg of you, by that goodness which guides you
to the summit of the stairway, to take thought in due
time for my pain.')38

38 Dante, "Purgatory," The Divine Comedy, pp. 342-343.
These lines are addressed to Dante by Arnaut Daniel, a soul suffering in the refining fires of purgatory. The phrase which Eliot employed as the title for his poem translates as "the summit of the stairway." Eliot's poem, Part III of "Ash Wednesday," is structured by the speaker's climbing three stairs; the original title suggests that the point of view of the speaker derives from his stance at the top of the stairway, from which he looks back upon the stages of his journey toward his affirmation of the lady. The source for the title, Arnaut's speech to Dante, indicates that the journey has been made under the guidance of the lady; this guidance is the "goodness" which has directed the speaker "to the summit of the stairway."

The three stages represented as various levels of the stairway in Eliot's poem are autobiographical. The imagery of the first two stages is difficult. In the first section there are hints of Prufrock's condition, suggesting one stage in the speaker's journey toward affirmation of the lady:

At the first turning of the second stair
I turned and saw below
The same shape twisted on the banister
Under the vapour in the fetid air
Struggling with the devil of the stairs who wears
The deceitful face of hope and of despair.39

As Gardner notes,

The twisting and turning of shape and devil "Under the vapour in the fetid air" is a wonderful realization

of the misery and oppression that accompany interminable internal debate, the stale taste and headache that this kind of debauch brings. This "interminable internal debate" suggested by the activity "at the first turning of the second stair" calls to mind Prufrock's "decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse."

The floral imagery exposed "at the first turning of the third stair" recalls the garden episode and the stage of limited affirmation which memories of that experience constituted. At this turning

Was a slotted window bellied like the fig's fruit
And beyond the hawthorn blossom and a pasture scene
The broadbacked figure drest in blue and green
Enchanted the maytime with an antique flute.
Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown,
Lilac and brown hair;
Distraction, music of the flute, stops and steps of the mind over the third stair,
Fading, fading; strength beyond hope and despair
Climbing the third stair.

The imagery of this passage, "featuring the symbolic blossom of May Day, the hawthorn, has a Pre-Raphaelite quality: the 'broadbacked figure,' itself almost floral, reminds one less of Dante's imagery than of Burne-Jones's." It is possible that Eliot intended to convey a Pre-Raphaelite quality in the imagery of this section, the last stage in the speaker's

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42 Ibid., p. 63.  43 Ibid., p. 63.
44 Smith, A Study in Sources and Meaning, p. 148.
climb toward the lady. An autobiographical note in "Dante" suggests that a preoccupation with the Pre-Raphaelite representation of blessedness constituted a stage in Eliot's own gradual appreciation of Dante's Beatrice:

It took me many years to recognize that the states of improvement and beatitude which Dante describes are still further from what the modern world can conceive as cheerfulness, than are his states of damnation. And little things put one off: Rossetti's Blessed Damozel, first by my rapture and next by my revolt, held up my appreciation of Beatrice by many years. 45

At the top of the stair the speaker apparently catches a glimpse of the lady who had guided him through the various stages of his journey toward her and the state which she represents. His drawing near to her presence is indicated only by the speaker's faltering, repetitious statement of humility:

Lord, I am not worthy
Lord, I am not worthy. . . . 46

In Part IV the speaker is again remembering; here he remembers the appearance of the lady. One critic has commented that "... the whole scene is related to that in which Dante meets a Beatrice 'risen from flesh to spirit', in the Earthly Paradise." 47 The repetitive syntax of the opening lines suggests the same excited confusion which is evident in Part I of the poem:

47Duncan Jones, "Ash Wednesday," A Study of His Writings by Several Hands, p. 50.
Who walked between the violet and the violet
Who walked between
The various ranks of varied green
Going in white and blue, in Mary's colour,

In blue of larkspur, blue of Mary's colour,
Sovegna vos. . . .

The figure of the lady seems to become clearer in the speaker's mind as he repeats these phrases. The petition from Arnaut's speech secures the identity of the lady; the petition, "Sovegna vos," appeals to her powers of intercession.

The procession of the years in the next section of the poem recalls the pageant in which Dante saw Beatrice in Canto XXX of the Purgatory. The passage is a link between the childhood experience and the lady of "Ash Wednesday":

Here are the years that walk between, bearing
Away the fiddles and the flutes, restoring
One who moves in the time between sleep and waking, wearing

White light folded, sheathed about her, folded.
The new years walk, restoring
Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring
With a new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem
The time. Redeem
The unread vision in the higher dream. . . .

The appearance of the lady as "one who moves in the time between sleep and waking" redeems the years between the childhood experience and the present. Until this moment of revelation the "vision in the higher dream" had been "unread."

48 Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 64.
49 See p. 67, above, for the context of this petition.
50 Duncan Jones, "Ash Wednesday," A Study of His Writings by Several Hands, p. 51.
51 Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 64.
Eliot mentions the "higher dream" in his remarks on the pageant in which Beatrice appeared to Dante: "It belongs to the world of what I call the high dream, and the modern world seems capable only of the low dream. I arrived at accepting it, myself, only with some difficulty."^2

The remaining sections of Part IV portray the restorative power of the lady's intercession. As the lady, appearing here as "the silent sister veiled in white and blue," bends her head in contemplation, the life of the garden is restored:\^3

... the fountain sprang up and the bird sang down
Redeem the time, redeem the dream. ...\^4

Part IV ends with a phrase taken from the "Salve Regina," a Catholic prayer petitioning the Virgin as Queen of Heaven to reveal Christ to suffering humanity after the exile of life. The phrase which Eliot includes, "And after this our exile,"^5 continues in the prayer, "show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus." With this petition the speaker affirms once again the spiritual power of a woman and suggests that the power of the Virgin is more apprehensible than any other in this life, the time of exile.

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^3Duncan Jones, "Ash Wednesday," A Study of His Writings by Several Hands, p. 52.
^4Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 64.
^5Ibid., p. 64.
The speaker abandons the allegorical world of vision in Part V and returns to the intellectual reasoning of Part I. In this section, for the first time in "Ash Wednesday," he considers the implications of the lady's intercessory power for others; he "looks away from himself to all men."^56

The speaker knows that Christ, the Word, the ultimate spiritual reality, cannot be directly approached in this world. He asks where Christ may be found and replies to his own question:

Where shall the word be found, where will the word Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence Not on the sea or on the islands, not On the mainland, in the desert or the rain land, For those who walk in darkness Both in the day time and in the night time The right time and the right place are not here No place of grace for those who avoid the face No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice. . . .57

The Word cannot be known directly in this world; the speaker "asks where the word shall be found, and answers himself exhaustively and emphatically, recognizing that the condition of the modern world is prohibitive of the experience which he desires."^58

The speaker knows that the intercession of the lady has effected his own restoration; therefore, he requests the lady

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^56 Genesius Jones, Approach to the Purpose (London, 1964), p. 120.


^58 Unger, Moments and Patterns, p. 63.
to intercede for the rest of humanity:

Will the veiled sister pray for
Those who walk in darkness, who chose thee and oppose thee,
Those who are torn on the horn between season and season, time and time, between
Hour and hour, word and word, power and power,
those who wait
In darkness? Will the veiled sister pray
For children at the gate
Who will not go away and cannot pray:
Pray for those who chose and oppose. . . 59

The speaker's request to the lady is for those who are incapable of the "high dream." The "darkness" in which they walk is equivalent to their ignorance of the spiritual significance of their own actions. Like Tiresias in the Hyacinth garden, they both "chose" and "oppose" the lady because they are capable only of a limited affirmation.

The "children at the gate" are those involved in the experience of ecstasy; while they "cannot pray" because they do not realize the religious significance of the episode, they "will not go away" because, like Tiresias, they are obsessed by the haunting nature of the episode. The speaker asks the lady to intercede for them.

He repeats this request in the last section of Part V, in which it becomes more obvious that he is praying for those who have "had the experience but missed the meaning."60

60 Ibid., p. 133.
asks if the lady will pray for those who

... are terrified and cannot surrender
And affirm before the world and deny between the rocks
In the last desert between the last blue rocks
The desert in the garden the garden in the desert... 61

Like Tiresias, "looking into the heart of light, the silence,"62 those for whom the speaker requests intercession "are terrified" at the implications of the experience. They "cannot surrender" to the "high dream." They are capable only of a limited affirmation. They do not realize, as the speaker now realizes, that the "garden" identified in Part II with the lady is present even in the desert of "love unsatisfied."

The appearance of the lady to the speaker has both enabled him to fulfill his limited affirmation in the Hyacinth garden and elevated him to the state of blessedness which the lady symbolizes. In the opening lines of Part VI the speaker asserts the finality of his state of being:

Although I do not hope to turn again
Although I do not hope
Although I do not hope to turn

Wavering between the profit and the loss... 63

Even though the speaker has arrived at the state of the blessed and does not hope to turn from it, the lady continues to intercede for him; this intercession is symbolized by the "white sails":

61Ibid., p. 66. 62Ibid., p. 38. 63Ibid., p. 66.
From the wide window towards the granite shore
The white sails still fly seaward, seaward flying
Unbroken wings. . . . 64

The "white sails" are probably the lady's prayers to the Virgin, as they are in Charles Péguy's poem, "Vision of Prayer," in which prayers that invoke the intercession of the Virgin are "the white sailed fleet, the innumerable fleet of Hail Marys." 65 Péguy was a French poet influential at the time of Eliot's philosophical studies in Paris.

The apparently diverse identities of the lady in "Ash Wednesday" merge in the final section of Part VI, in which the speaker petitions her to bring humanity nearer to the condition of the blessed:

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,
Our peace in His will. . . . 66

His final prayer is a personal one, requesting her continued presence and intercession:

Sister, mother
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated

And let my cry come unto Thee. 67

64 Ibid., p. 66.


67 Ibid., p. 67.
Only the reader aware of the increasing tendency in Eliot's poetry toward the affirmation of a woman can hope to comprehend the extraordinarily private world of "Ash Wednesday." The poem is a culmination of tendencies evident in Eliot's earliest poetry, but the images which suggest this culmination "have hardly emerged into the self-explanatory world of art." 68

"Ash Wednesday" is not a self-explanatory poem. To comprehend the world in which it exists and from which it derives its meaning, the reader must take some advice which Eliot offered to readers of Dante and "read some of the books that he read, rather than . . . books about his work and life and times, however good." 69 For readers who would understand Eliot's poetry, this advice means reading Dante's works.

Dante's figure of Beatrice, powerful in her intercession with the Divine, interceding for her poet beyond the limitations of life and death, stands behind the lady of "Ash Wednesday." The presence of the lady in the poem places Eliot "in the great tradition to which, in the present century, few writers but him and Joyce belong." 70 That tradition is the approach to spiritual reality through the affirmation of images.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The various attitudes adopted toward women in T. S. Eliot's early poetry would appear to be incongruous to a casual reader of his verse. Women in these poems are variously the objects of satire, romantic nostalgia, and veneration. This thesis has suggested that a consistent tendency toward the affirmation of an ideal woman underlies these apparently incongruous attitudes.

Eliot's journey toward the affirmation of the lady in "Ash Wednesday" is one involving disappointment, frustration, and discovery. From his earliest poetry Eliot tended to view women as symbols of the quality of their civilization. His well known disenchantment with the quality of modern civilization is apparent in the consistent rejection of real women in his early verse.

But an obscure personal experience, hinted at in several poems, compelled Eliot's imagination and confirmed his tendency to affirm women as symbols of spiritual reality despite the disappointing reality of modern women. The records of this experience, in "Dans le Restaurant," "La Figlia che Piange," and "The Waste Land," mark a progression in Eliot's journey toward a full affirmation of a woman.

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Had Eliot never read Dante, the attitudes toward women recorded in his verse would probably not have progressed beyond the frustrated affirmation of "The Waste Land." Eliot, like Tiresias in that poem, seemed doomed to exist in a society populated by women who could only parody the woman's traditional role of leading men to spiritual fulfillment.

But Eliot did read Dante, and he found in the experiences described in the *Vita Nuova* and *The Divine Comedy* a solution to the plight of Tiresias in "The Waste Land." In Dante, Eliot discovered both a philosophy which looked to the visionary world beyond the boundaries of life and death for fulfillment and a woman who symbolized the blessed state. "Ash Wednesday" is a statement of that discovery.

Eliot's poetry suffers from the obscurity of the experiences which it describes. The unity of the poet's vision and the interrelatedness of his work are not readily apparent; to discover these achievements it is necessary to examine the recurring influences in his verse and to probe beneath the superficial disparities of his vision. This thesis is the result of such examination and probing; it aspires to testify to a subtle but consistent development in Eliot's attitudes toward women between the years 1917 and 1930.
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