T. S. ELIOT'S ASH WEDNESDAY: A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO EMPOWERING THE FEMININE

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the University of North Texas in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Stephen D. Adams
Denton, Texas
August, 1992

In his 1916 dissertation, Eliot asserted that individuals were locked into finite centers and that all knowledge was epistemologically relative, but he also believed that finite centers could be transcended through language. In the essay "Lancelot Andrewes," Eliot identified Andrewes's "relevant intensity," a method very close to nonsensical verse. Eliot used Andrewes's Word and the impersonality of nonsense verse in Ash Wednesday. The Word, God's *logos*, embodied the Virgin Mary as its source, and allowed Eliot to transcend the finite center through language. Ultimately, Eliot philosophically empowered the feminine as the source of the Word. Though failing to fully empower the earthly Lady in part II of Ash Wednesday, Eliot did present a philosophical plan for transcending the finite center through language.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ELIOT'S SYSTEM: F. H. BRADLEY AND THE FINITE CENTER TRANSCENDED</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. ELIOT'S NONSENSE: FROM LANCELOT ANDREWES TO THE POWER OF THE FEMININE</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. THE FEMININE IN ELIOT</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. THE POWER OF THE FEMININE: THE LADY AND THE VIRGIN OF ASH WEDNESDAY</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WORKS CITED 63
WORKS CONSULTED 66
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1930, one reviewer of T. S. Eliot's poem Ash Wednesday said that "the main difficulty I have in facing this remarkable poem is that I do not understand what it is all about" (Birrell 292). The reviewer is not alone in his confusion, and since 1930 surprisingly little critical work has been done on Ash Wednesday. Though the poem receives frequent mention, only a few scholarly articles have been devoted to it in the last ten years. Further, a brief survey shows that in the last ten years only five or so dissertation writers concentrating on Eliot felt that the poem was significant enough to mention in their abstracts.

One reason for the slight attention paid to Ash Wednesday stems from its ready-made composition, that is, the first three parts published as separate poems, and the remaining three later combined in 1930 to form the whole poem. The connections between the six parts of Ash Wednesday are even more difficult to ascertain than the connections between the parts of The Waste Land, which were at least envisioned by Eliot to form a whole from the outset of their composition.

Another factor which impedes further study of Ash Wednesday is its clearly religious theme and its association
with Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927. One reviewer from wrote that

*Ash Wednesday* is, as its title indicates, a poem of repentance and renunciation. Its various sections are a ritualistic chanting working through the personal desire for oblivion toward some universal statement of the meaning of death in life, and life in death. (Walton 9)

This reviewer's interpretation of the poem has held sway for critics ever since, particularly with the New Critics who did not, or would not, probe the poem for psychological and biographical significance.

Beginning with his dissertation *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* in 1916 and through a series of essays until at least 1926, Eliot repeatedly stated how artists must transcend their finite center and use language to render immediate experience. The finite center is the individual locked into a point of view that leads to varying interpretations of objects as they appear to different beholders. As a result, finite centers are hopelessly discordant. Though Eliot accepted this idea as philosophically correct, he sought desperately for a way to transcend the finite center and render the object as universally as possible.

As early as 1916, Eliot had stated that he felt that language was the medium through which the finite center
could be transcended. He postulated that immediate experiences (raw experiences or feelings) were shared. Only when immediate experience was directed upon the object did finite centers become discordant. Through language then, Eliot formed his position on the "half-object" which he defined as an idea articulated by language. Language, in effect, can cohere discordant finite centers by articulating ideas which come as close to immediate experience as possible. I attribute much of the musical quality of Eliot's distinct phrasing to his ideas about the use of language to restore immediate experience.

As Eliot begins to develop his linguistic ideas poetically, his verse approaches nonsense. Nonsense, as I mean for this purpose, results from a tightly woven context of words and phrases that have no real meaning independent of their own particular setting. In this way, nonsense verse becomes a finite center locked into its own point of view, and both the reader and the poet must surrender to this point of view in order to find meaning. In a sense, we express the same idea when we say that a poem resists explication. Many passages from Ash Wednesday and The Four Quartets resist explication, causing readers to stop fitting their own patterns and meanings over the text, and forcing them to understand the two poems on their own terms.

One flaw in Eliot's linguistic program is that he did not believe that immediate experience could transcend time.
Consequently, he is left with the question of how finite centers could ultimately cohere at any moment except the present, and the present hardly represents any sort of continuum of shared feelings. Bradley proposed another phenomenon which he called the Absolute Experience, and this accounted for the transcendence of time. Eliot rejected Bradley's Absolute Experience. "Immediate experience," Eliot said in his dissertation, "is [the] timeless unity" (31), not the Absolute Experience, though Eliot could not explain the "emergence of temporal phenomena out of [immediate experience]" (Whiteside 404). Instead he claimed that "immediate experience . . . is annihilation and utter night" (K&K 31).

Eliot, as late as 1930, was still arguing that language was the only way out of "annihilation and utter night," as the inexplicable "emergence of temporal phenomenon out of [immediate experience]" became a metaphor for the incarnation of the Word. The Word, God's logos, was a metaphor that represented all words, transcended time, and allowed finite centers to cohere through the shared immediate experience of the incarnation. As a result, the nonsense verse of at least two key passages in *Ash Wednesday* represent the reader's surrender to the Word, words, and immediate experience.

Significantly, one of those passages is the song of the bones to the Lady in part II of *Ash Wednesday*. She is
empowered by the bones' song to transcend her finite center and ultimately share with the bones her immediate experience of the incarnation. Further, her power to intercede for the bones results from her role as a hermaphroditic figure in part IV of the poem; she is a fusion of Jesus (or God) and the Virgin Mary. Thus, the Word for Eliot embodies, and, consequently, empowers the feminie as the source that coheres finite centers.
CHAPTER 2

ELIOT'S SYSTEM: F. H. BRADLEY AND
THE FINITE CENTER TRANSCENDED

The finite center is the individual locked into a point of view that leads to discordant interpretations of objects as they appear to different beholders. It represents a subjective, interpretative strategy that claims no final truth. For Eliot, the finite center was philosophically correct; however, individuals must transcend the finite center and formulate tenable grounds for their ideals, or they face chaos. Though Eliot maintained that final or ultimate knowledge was impossible, some system must be available to artists that would allow them to create something new but that also already had a place set aside for interpretation in the mind of the critic. The paradox of creating both the new and the predictable represents a difficult struggle that comes up repeatedly in Eliot's critical prose. Artists, according to Eliot, cannot be finite centers; they must transcend the impulse to be the center of their creations; yet the objects of an artist's experience were all that was available to work with. Hence, a fundamental contradiction arises in Eliot for absolute ideals in an epistemologically relative world.

Eliot's critical prose represents a consistent effort
to formulate a method that recognizes finite centers as correct but also allows for the centers to cohere into a meaningful point of view. For the most part, the sources of Eliot's critical prose are rooted in his background as a philosopher. The statements in Eliot's critical prose are "largely unintelligible apart from his philosophy," and "commentators who ignore or discount the philosophy cannot as a rule find a meaning for Eliot's language" in the prose (Freed xv).

Beginning with his dissertation in 1916, and through a series of essays ending in 1926, Eliot states and restates a set of ideas that attempt to mediate the conflict between absolute ideals and epistemological relativity. Eliot's efforts to mediate this conflict can be seen as a philosophical progression that begins as early as 1914 and continues until the first part of *Ash Wednesday* is published in 1928. Through those years Eliot published essays that contain many of the phrases that we identify with him and his poetry today. One key phrase is the "objective correlative."

Knowing what Eliot meant by the objective correlative and the impersonal nature of poetry is important to understanding his poetry. I believe that Eliot's stance on the impersonal nature of poetry is largely misunderstood. Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry is not so much about being more or less forthrightly autobiographical, but is
instead a transition to verse which approaches non-sense. I propose that Eliot's finite center turned inside-out leads to a type of nonsense verse. The verse itself becomes a finite center, operating according its own principles, and not the poet's. To accomplish this kind of nonsense verse, poets must transcend their personality, that is, their point of view or finite center and objectify their feelings in order to articulate a unified and coherent presentation of the objects before them.

By 1916 Eliot had already established the criteria for most of his critical and literary thought. He was influenced by the philosopher F. H. Bradley who was the subject of his dissertation *Experience and the Objects of Knowledge in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*. Bradley was what James Longenbach in his article "Guarding the Horned Gates: History and Interpretation in the Early Poetry of T. S. Eliot" identifies as an "'existential' histor[ian]." Existential historicism is "a way of thinking about the past that emphasizes the interaction between the historian's mind in the present and a single moment in the past, rather than encouraging the construction of a linear or teleological model for history" (503).

In addition to history, Bradley was also concerned with the interpretation of experience to find absolute truths. For Bradley, the "object" of experience, whether a fact of history, or an emotion in the present, must be combined with
a view towards the whole of experience. Longenbach quotes form Bradley's *The Presuppositions of Critical History* to define the object of experience:

```
this new object, which now for the critical mind
is the sole and increasing reality, is the re-
organization of the old world; it is true only
because recreated, and can be recreated only
because connected into a rational system. Every
part must live, and live in the life of the whole.
```

Bradley's thought was that experiences occurred in wholes, but were only perceived as one single phenomenon. In effect, an individual must have a "system," a way of incorporating single bits of information into a pattern where all the new perceptions could fall into place. If an individual, critic, or historian had a system for interpreting new information, then this information could be considered factual and true.

One criticism of Bradley's idea of system was its relativistic nature. He rejected the idea that history was scientific, but was, instead, intuitive, therefore interpretative. Bradley said that the "object of our endeavor is to breathe the life of the present into the death of the past" (15). The fundamental contradiction of Bradley's position is ascertaining an absolute ideal through relative means, a problem that Eliot struggled with in his early poetry and critical prose. Longenbach summarizes
Eliot's position saying that Eliot "felt a conflict between his awareness of the relativity of all knowledge and his desire to formulate tenable criteria for absolute values" (504). The conflict between the "relativity of all knowledge" and his desire for "absolute values" is "the motivating impulse behind all his work," and leads to Eliot's "championing of formalism in his criticism and his preference for the dramatic monologue" (Longenbach 504). To help solve the dilemma between relative knowledge and absolute values, Eliot requires from the critic or historian a broad base of knowledge. In "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), Eliot says that "poets in our civilization . . . must be difficult" because "our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results" (SE 248). Eliot expects of readers a "refined sensibility," and is not beyond saying in the 1930 preface to Anabasis that he requires the reader to do some "fundamental brainwork" to understand a poem (Preface to Anabasis 78).

The broader the base of the critics' system, the truer their claims will be. If the base of knowledge is encompassing enough, the critic can ultimately claim absolute ideals. Without a system, the new information would be a disparate set of facts, a mere impression, gathered without any coherent frame of reference from which
to judge them. The meaning of system, according to Longenbach, is not systematic (not conscious, rational, automatic) in the sense that we use the word, but closer to the French *système*, "a unity that minglesthe emotional, intellectual, and sensual aspects of the individual" (506).

The systematic approach that Eliot studied in 1916 continued to influence the way he thought about history and criticism, and the necessary conjunction of the two. His 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" reworks the ideas of existential historicism and systems for the purpose of literature. "Tradition," in the way Eliot means, renames Bradley's existential historicism, and is interpreted in terms of the present. The "individual talent" is the artist or critic who must form a system and interpret works of art with as much breadth and experience as possible. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" he says that "tradition" involves a "historical sense." The historical sense that a writer must have is an idea he learned from Bradley. Eliot says that historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and
composes a simultaneous order. (Ulysses, Order, and Myth" 177)

Eliot's ideas about history and tradition continued to influence his criticism. In 1923 he reviewed James Joyce's Ulysses asking a rhetorical question about Joyce's "system." "The question, then, about Mr. Joyce, is: how much living material does he deal with, and how does he deal with it: deal with, not as a legislator or exhorter, but as an artist." Eliot answers his own question in the familiar closing passage of his review: "In using myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is perusing a method which others must pursue after him." Joyce's method is the mythic method, "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" ("Ulysses, Order, and Myth" 177).

The language and ideas in Eliot's review of Ulysses is similar to his other essays of the period and to the ideas in his dissertation. The "method" is Bradley's system, one that "control[s]," "order[s]," and "shape[s]" the experiences in Joyce's work. The "panorama of futility and anarchy," single impressions without a system to organize them, is what Joyce has overcome by "manipulating a conscious parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity." The parallel that Joyce accomplishes in Ulysses is similar
to Bradley's statement that the historian "should breathe the life of the present into the death of the past." Joyce, according to Eliot, gives the past an immediate place in the present, meshing past and present. Eliot had previously made a similar observation about Ezra Pound who "proceeds by acquiring the entire past; and when the past is acquired, the constituents fall into place and the present is revealed" ("The Method of Mr. Pound" 1065). And not only is the present acquired, but it is the most truthful because it is based on a system that is as broad as possible; and that system, in this case, is Eliot's historical sense. The sections of *Ulysses*, Joyce's "constituents," fall into place, form a pattern by which the ideal order that already exists can be, "if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new." Joyce, through the mythic method, had arrived at a kind of truth by ordering the "panorama of futility and anarchy" of a single day in Dublin through a system that demonstrated the continuity of past and present; a system that had a feeling for the "timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together."

Eliot's critical prose from 1916 to 1926 was a systematic attempt to present the criteria that would lead to absolute ideals. He agreed with Bradley's idea of the
finite center and the need to discover grounds for absolute truth. He disagreed, though, with the method of discovering the absolute ideals they both sought. In his dissertation, Eliot defended Bradley's idea of the finite center but said that "the ultimate nature of the Absolute does not come within the scope of the present paper" (31). Freed summarizes the discrepancy between Eliot's and Bradley's idea of the Absolute in the following way:

With Bradley, though the Absolute is immanent in finite centers and finite centers are immanent in the Absolute, the manner of this coherence is "inexplicable." The point at which Bradley stops thus leaves space for mystery, wonder, and doubt. For Eliot, the problem posed by Bradley is resolved by the incarnation. (57)

Freed's allusion to the incarnation points to a Christian unity that was, until 1928, missing from Eliot's critical prose. Eliot's Christian unity, specifically the act of the incarnation, provides the "inexplicable" element in Bradley's philosophy. Consequently, the influence of Irving Babbitt and his school of new humanism has been overemphasized at the expense of Bradley's influence and Eliot's own training in philosophy. Freed also suggests that Babbitt was an "external" influence, saying that "certainly, the problem that occupied Eliot was first posed for him by Bradley" (58).
Eliot did transcend the finite center and the "inexplicable" elements of the Absolute through Christian unity. His confirmation in the Church of England in 1927 is not simply a move to turn his troubles over to the church as a matter of faith, but must, as Freed argues, be seen in terms of his philosophy. The theme of established order which runs through the 1916-1926 essays is a major part of Eliot's philosophy. Establishing the ideal order while preserving the finite center was for Eliot a religious matter. Freed claims that

with Eliot religion has two contexts, philosophic and theological; and when he speaks of religion in his critical prose . . . he does so . . . from the point of view of his philosophy, and from this point of view religion is one aspect of . . . order. (21)

Religion, particularly that of Anglo-Catholicism, and order provide for Eliot a way to transcend the finite center by turning this center inside out. In effect, by extinguishing the personality in matters of art, Eliot believed that discordant centers can cohere.

Eliot's method of transcending finite centers leads to his impersonal theory of poetry, partially worked out in his 1919 essay "Hamlet" and the objective correlative. This final method, arrived at by 1928, leads to a kind of verse that is the result of turning the finite center inside out.
Ash Wednesday is Eliot's first significant attempt at nonsense verse. The poem allows Eliot to turn his inner-self out in order to objectively articulate the mystery of the unity embodied in the incarnation.
CHAPTER 3

ELIOT'S NONSENSE: FROM LANCELOT ANDREWES
TO THE POWER OF THE FEMININE

From Eliot's 1923 essay "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" until at least 1926, he continued to criticize literature with the same set of terms that he had developed in 1916. In 1926 Eliot wrote an essay entitled "Lancelot Andrewes." The occasion for writing the "Andrewes" essay is unclear. Donald Gallup's bibliography of Eliot's contributions to the periodical press for 1926 shows no particular pattern of thought. Eliot reviewed 16 books, ranging from the History of Medieval Philosophy to Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative to what Gallup describes as a review of "six mystery novels."

Eliot's interest in Andrewes began in 1919, according to Lyndall Gordon in her biography Eliot's Early Years. He read the sermons of John Donne, Hugh Latimer, and Lancelot Andrewes, "and became interested in the sermon as a 'form of literary art'" (Gordon 103). In general, the "Andrewes" essay is a comparison of the styles of John Donne and Lancelot Andrewes. Eliot considered Donne's style too personal. He wrote that "Donne is a 'personality' in a sense in which Andrewes is not: his sermons, one feels, are a 'means of self-expression'" (SE 309). Donne has failed to
transcend his finite center. In comparison, Andrewes is "wholly absorbed in the object and therefore responds with the adequate emotion" (SE 309) Andrewes's concentration on the "object" through which he expresses the "adequate emotion" is similar to the objective correlative. Andrewes's sermons express the right emotion by thoroughly exploring the "object" of discussion.

Eliot wrote that "the most conspicuous qualities of [Andrewes's] style are three: ordonnance, or argument, precision in the use of words, and relevant intensity" (SE 302). Eliot states that Andrewes has the appropriate "relevant intensity" because his emotion "is purely contemplative; it is not personal, it is wholly evoked by the object of contemplation, to which it is adequate; his emotions wholly contained in and explained by its object." The relevant intensity that Eliot attributes to Andrewes's prose is similar to the objective correlative:

a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (SE 124, emphasis mine)

What is inadequate in Hamlet (the man) and in Donne's sermons is emotion in excess of the facts. Eliot speaks of Hamlet's "bafflement," in the same way that "there is always
the something else, the 'baffling'" in Donne's sermons (SE 309).

A significant difference between the objective correlative of 1919 and the relevant intensity of 1926 is Eliot's concern with the way language is used. He quotes Andrewes:

I add yet farther, what flesh? The flesh of an infant. What, Verbum infans, the Word of an infant? The Word, and not be able to speak a word? How evil agreeth this! (SE 307)

And again,

Let us make this so accepted a time in itself twice acceptable by our accepting, which he will acceptably take at our hands. (SE 307)

Eliot says that "in this extraordinary prose, which appears to repeat, to stand still, but is nevertheless proceeding in the most deliberate and orderly manner, there are often flashing phrases which never desert the memory" (SE 307). Further, he states that Andrewes "will not hesitate to hammer, to inflect, even to play upon a word for the sake of driving home its meaning" (SE 307). What appeals to Eliot here is the combination of sound and sense. Some words make sense on a conscious level. Other words sound in the memory, do not make conscious sense, but still reverberate with meaning. Though meaning may be lost to the conscious, the unconscious may deduce meaning from the word's history.
Eliot had a complex understanding of the nature of language. In one sense his understanding of language was equivalent to our Postmodern distrust of language to convey any precise meaning. In "Burnt Norton" he says that

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still." (121)

At the same time that Eliot distrusted the precise meaning of words, he also felt that language was adequate and necessary. Without language we could not express ideas, "and ideas are aspects of objects and also are aspects of selves" (Whiteside 407). In brief, Eliot's definition of an object "is a point of attention, and thus anything and everything which we may be said to direct attention is an object" (K&E 99). Eliot's objects arise out of Bradley's immediate experience which George Whiteside summarizes in the following way:

First of all . . . it [immediate experience] designated unthinking acts of experiencing: it designated raw feeling. Second and more important, the term designated raw reality, that is, reality undistorted by thought. And third and most important is Bradley's belief that that reality is an undivided whole. (402)
From Bradley's immediate experience we have raw feelings, feelings undistorted by thought. We then scrutinize these raw feelings with ideas and articulate our ideas with words. Hence, "ideas are aspects of objects and our selves."

Consequently, as Eliot sees it, a connection exists between objects and words through ideas. Eliot says that "it is language which gives us objects rather than 'passions.' Or at least we have no objects without language" (K&E 133). We cannot share objects, for those are personal phenomena of the finite center, but we do share immediate experiences (Whiteside 411). So ideas, through language, allow us to restore the raw feelings of immediate experience, and they also allow finite centers to cohere and eventually be transcended.

Ultimately, when Eliot speaks of understanding on a deeper level, and of allowing the sound of the words to penetrate beyond conscious meaning, he is suggesting that the history of a word restores immediate experience and allows discordant finite centers to cohere. "A word's history--the social inheritance it bears through long use--limits, defines, and categorizes inchoate feeling [objects in our case] into something connected with and similar to the feelings of every other prior speaker, or hearer. (In Eliot's analysis of Bradley, this is how disparate finite centers come to intend identical reference)" (Sigg 107).

The meaning that Eliot finds in Andrewes's sermons is
limited to a tightly woven context. "Accepted," "acceptable," "accepting," and "acceptably" all used in the same sentence do not make Andrewes's meaning more sensible, but make it resonate in the memory where meaning is understood on Eliot's deeper level. For Eliot, meaning begins to approach what Elizabeth Sewell identifies as nonsense, an important aspect of Eliot's poetry. She says that "nonsense goes deep in Mr. Eliot" and defines it in the following way:

The genre or game of Nonsense has strict rules. The aim is to construct with words a logical universe of discourse meticulously selected and controlled. . . . The process is directed always towards analysing and separating the material into a collection of discrete counters, with which the detached intellect can make, observe, and enjoy a series of abstract, detailed, artificial patterns of words and images . . . which have their own significance in themselves. All tendencies towards synthesis are taboo. . . . Whatever is unitive is the great enemy of Nonsense, to be excluded at all costs. (66)

The aversion to unity that Sewell describes is similar to Eliot's own rejection of Bradley's Absolute Experience. For Bradley, the Absolute Experience "inexplicably melts all things, all parts, into one whole. It is the whole"
Eliot "implicitly rejected" the Absolute Experience (Whiteside 404). The most that he could accept was the cohering of finite centers through the shared experience of language. Again, Eliot here departs from Bradley. "One reason is that he [Eliot] gloried in the power of language. Words--articulated ideas--simply could not be as superficial as Bradley said they were" (Whiteside 409). "Immediate experience," Eliot said in his dissertation, "is [the] timeless unity" (K&E 31), not the Absolute Experience. The "timeless unity" that emerges out of immediate experience is a problem, for only objects arise out of immediate experience, and "it is only in the world of objects that we have time and space" (K&E 31). Eliot could not explain the "emergence of temporal phenomena out of [immediate experience]" (Whiteside 404). Instead he claimed that "immediate experience . . . is annihilation and utter night" (K&E 31). Aware of his split from Bradley's philosophy, Eliot said that "Mr. Bradley's accept[ance of] this is not to be presumed" (K&E 31).

"Annihilation and utter night," is the dark position that Eliot arrived at after he departed from Bradley. Eliot's rejection of the "underpinning" of Bradley's philosophy led him "to despair" (Whiteside 404). Consequently, The Waste Land with its many sources of failure is also a failure of philosophy and of language to transcend the finite center. The lines from the "What the
Thunder Said" section of *The Waste Land* aptly describe the failure to transcend the finite center.

We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison[.]

(49)
The prison is the finite center from which Eliot at the time of *The Waste Land* could not escape.

The philosophical and linguistic despair of *The Waste Land* was not endless. Language, words that have a history, are the medium through which we articulate the ideas we have about objects emerging from immediate experience. One object emerging from immediate experience is the incarnation, God's word made flesh, tangible. The incarnated Word becomes the timeless unity that Eliot could not explain until the "Andrewes" essay of 1926. The Word represented unified words and allowed discordant finite centers to cohere through language. From the same passage in "Burnt Norton" where Eliot describes the imprecise nature of language, he also describes the way in which finite centers linguistically cohere. Further, he imparts to language an aspect of timelessness that is similar to nonsense. As a result, Eliot rescues himself from the previous feeling that immediate experience would lead only to "annihilation and utter night." He writes:

Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness [...] (121)

The years from 1923 to 1926, immediately after The Waste Land and before Ash Wednesday, are described by Gordon as a period of crisis for Eliot. In 1925 he contemplated leaving his wife; and in 1926, Gordon describes a moment in Rome when "he fell on his knees before Michelangelo's Pieta" (120), both events revealing the mental stress that Eliot was under. During this time of "annihilation and utter night," the stillness of the finite center, had not yet been penetrated by words. By 1926, however, Eliot began regularly attending early-morning communion where "he learnt the morality of patience" and began to retreat from "his mother's revelatory moment of truth towards the more moderate goals of 'prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action'" (Gordon 130). The lines from part I of Ash Wednesday:

> Teach us to care and not to care
> Teach us to sit still

reflect Eliot's new found devotion to "observance, discipline, thought and action."

Gordon points out that Eliot had always had a fascination with the life of the saint and the mystical aspects of religion. She demonstrates that much of his
reading while at Harvard was focused on religion and mysticism. Eliot's turn towards Anglo-Catholicism and his interest in the incarnation allowed him to philosophically transcend the finite center. And at the same time, he could not maintain the incarnation's historically unifying validity of shared immediate experience and retreat from it theologically. Therefore, Anglo-Catholicism and the incarnation provided Eliot with a way out of the "annihilation and utter night" of immediate experience.

The incarnation was not a part of the Christian doctrine emphasized in Eliot's exposure to the Protestant, Unitarian theology of his family. Eliot's attraction to the incarnation represents a marked turn from his family and also a way to mediate the conflict of finite centers with shared immediate experience.

The opening lines of Ash Wednesday
Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn
represent Eliot's feelings, both sacred and secular, about the course his life had taken since he left America in 1914. By 1926 he had turned his finite center inside out, marking a point of no return as indicated by his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927.

The "Andrewes" essay of 1926 marks significant changes in Eliot's life. It provided him with a linguistic metaphor
for transcending the finite center, and also presented him with a timeless unity through Christianity. Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism was not abrupt. It can be traced back to his interest in the sermon as a literary art form, and specifically to the way that Andrewes used language. For Eliot, Andrewes's word choices were an attempt both to move to a deeper understanding of the object, and at the same time to reveal the constraints upon ever understanding the object at all. The incarnation of the Word was a divine mystery accepted by faith that paralleled Eliot's philosophy, and allowed him to have more faith in words that Bradley did and to finally part from him. Further, the incarnation allowed Eliot a way to explore the power of feminine in himself and in society.
1. This and all further references to Eliot's poetry, except where noted, come from *The Complete Plays and Poems: 1909-1950*. See works cited page for full bibliographic information.
CHAPTER 4

THE FEMININE IN ELIOT

One notable feature of Eliot's poetry is the splitting of the self into separate parts. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Prufrock says that

there will be time

To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet. There will be time to construct and re-construct, to "murder and create," the many selves needed to move through society; and, though the created selves often differ from occasion to occasion, society does limit, often prescribes, the selves he creates for himself. The multiple selves that appear in "Prufrock" are not limited to the early poetry. In fact, multiple selves appear throughout Eliot's poetry. In the compound ghost section of "Little Gidding," Eliot writes:

So I assumed a double part, and cried
And heard another's voice cry: 'What! are you here?'

Although we were not. I was still the same,
Knowing myself yet being someone other.

Eliot introduces into his poetry what Eric Sigg identifies as the homo-duplex. Sigg points out that William James talks about the homo-duplex in a chapter of Varieties of Religious Experience entitled "The Divided Self." Sigg
shows how the divided self was a reaction to Romantic sincerity. He defines sincerity as "the identity between feeling and its presentation," and says that sincerity "maintains such religious, cultural, and ethical prestige that it pretends not only to describe the soul, but also to prescribe behavior" (77). Sigg argues that in "Great Britain, many late-nineteenth-century writers and thinkers responded to Romantic values by questioning the premium placed upon sincerity and by dividing the self that society formerly presumed it had unified" (79). He points to Oscar Wilde as a good example of the modern questioning of sincerity saying that he dared "to prefer style to truth and manners to morality" (82). Sigg also points to the American late-nineteenth-century reaction to sincerity showing Emerson, Melville, Thoreau, and Henry Adams as writers who focused on how society divided, for good or bad, the once unified individual of the eighteenth century.

Eliot's use of the multiple or divided self is his version of the late-nineteenth-century reaction to sincerity. "The study of multiple, disintegrating or insubstantial personalities had attained some prominence in Boston and Harvard circles when Eliot arrived in the city and began writing" (Sigg 89). Eliot's questioning of sincerity is implicitly suggested by the objective correlative and his desire for impersonal poetry.

Sigg's argument concentrates mainly on selves divided
by a private/social pole, where the social self is often fragmented by the various economic, political, and rhetorical demands placed upon it. He does not suggest that the self may be divided by gender. Though writers began to question the value of sincerity for social roles, it still prescribed a fidelity to traditional gender roles.

But earlier in the nineteenth century, Edgar Allan Poe wrote stories and poems about a self divided by gender. In the "Fall of the House of Usher," Poe presented a distinctive split along gender lines and the disastrous effect of repressing the feminine half. Poe, more so than Eliot, was able to experiment and reconcile a self split along lines of gender. The various gothic conventions that Poe used in his works allowed him to disguise his recognition of the substantial role of the feminine in every self and still adhere to social prescriptions for the sincerity of, or fidelity to, traditional gender roles in the nineteenth century.

For Eliot the answer to reconciling femininity with himself and society was more complicated. His past does not lend itself nearly so well to accepting the feminine as Poe's did. Eliot is often targeted as a misogynist, but it is a label that is only partially true and can be applied with specificity only to his early work. There is no doubt that in his life he accepted the power of femininity as early as *Ash Wednesday* in 1926, or even earlier. The time
before 1926 and *Ash Wednesday* is not a period of outright misogyny so much as it is a time of struggle with femininity and its place in society. Eliot's role as a son of an upper-middle class American family with a long history in the church partially explains why he would deny the feminine in society and in himself. Despite a background that would typically lead a young man into misogynic tendencies, Eliot's attraction to the feminine is apparent in Vivien Haigh-Wood, his first wife whom he married in 1915, only a few weeks after meeting her. Cynthia Ozick, in her article "A Critic at Large: T.S. Eliot at 101," describes Vivien Haigh-Wood as "a high-spirited, high-strung, articulate young woman" (131), and as "slender, lively, very pretty, with a wave in her hair and a pleasant mouth and chin" (138). Ozick reports that Bertrand Russell sensed in Vivien Haigh-Wood "something brasher--perhaps rasher--than mere vivaciousness; he judged her light, faintly vulgar, and adventurous" (132). Further, Ozick also states that Eliot was "attracted to her [Vivien Haigh-Wood's] theatrical personality" (132). Whether vivacious or vulgar, high-strung, rash, or articulate, Vivien Haigh-Wood would not be the choice of a man who feared and resented femininity, especially, as Ozick speculates, of a man who was not yet "relieved of his virginity" (131).

Vivien Haigh-Wood was permanently institutionalized in 1938, and from that point until 1957 Eliot maintained close
friendships with two other women. During World War II he rented a place to live in the London suburbs with what Ozick calls "a family of gentlewomen" (141). Eliot's need for female companionship never waned. His marriage to Valerie Fletcher in 1957, a woman thirty-eight years his junior, is similar to Poe's marriage to Virginia Clemm, his thirteen year old cousin who was fourteen years his junior.

Both Poe and Eliot found ways to reconcile femininity with society's vigorous repression of women and sexuality. Poe made his case through nature and his gothic fiction while Eliot turned to religion, specifically to Anglo-Catholicism. Eliot embraces femininity, the "great mother" in *Ash Wednesday* in the form of the Virgin Mary. Part VI of *Ash Wednesday* attests to Eliot's desire for a closer union with the feminine in society and in himself. Eliot writes:

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

And let my cry come unto Thee.

Before *Ash Wednesday*, Ozick speculates, Eliot fled the great mother, or his own mother as he left for Europe. Eliot's reconciliation with femininity was prolonged until Part I of *Ash Wednesday* was published, in 1928. One reason for Eliot's hesitation to accept the role of the feminine in himself and in society was his rejection of the inescapable
Camille Paglia in her book *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* describes the great mother, and how the decadence of late Romanticism made it possible to question the relevance of sincerity for gender roles. Summarizing the first chapter of her book, she identifies Romanticism as a period of revolt against the Age of Enlightenment, because of Romanticism's return to nature, mysticism, the occult, and paganism which are elements always present in society if not otherwise repressed. She sympathizes with the ideas of the Marquis de Sade and Coleridge rather than those of Rousseau and Wordsworth. Her picture of nature is daemonic. The feminine too, through nature, is daemonic. Hence, the rise of the power of femininity in late Romantic and Gothic fiction through its association with nature as dark, liquid, hidden, bloody, and ultimately fatal. Man is outside of nature, forever seeking to escape it. Man's propensity to flee nature results in many of the structural oppositions that shape our society today. The repression of women and sexuality, according to Paglia, is the myth that has kept civilization stable, linear, enlightened, and progressive. From the myth of progress, among others, comes misogyny, violence, rape, and finally art as the male outlet to control the feminine. And art, most importantly, represents the realm where man is free to develop a controlled female
personae of his own (1-39).

Art, then, and especially the decadent art of the late Romantics provides Poe with a way to confront the questions of femininity in himself and in society. Frequently Poe's character's are separated into two parts. The dark Ligeia is contrasted with the less satisfactory "fair-haired, blue-eyed Lady Rowena Trevanian of Tremaine." William Wilson is paired with his doppelgänger who when destroyed causes the death of William Wilson. These doubles represent a split of personality along psychological lines of good and evil and are gender neutral in the sense that both parts are of the same sex. Other times Poe represents a split along across gender such as Roderick Usher and his sister Madeline. This separation across gender allows Poe to depict a man fearing the feminine that is himself in his twin sister. Roderick can approach his own femininity, his sister, only in death as Poe hints at incest and necrophilia. The inability to repress the feminine even in death is the source of Roderick's catastrophe, for what is repressed, the feminine, will return with a vengeance. As with Ligeia, Madeline cannot be repressed; she is the feminine, nature, and consequently eternal, returning to Roderick in the close of the story as the house of Usher, the mind or brain of Roderick, sinks into the liquidity of "the black and lurid tarn," or nature.

Poe depicts man trying to repress the power of the
feminine, the unapproachable approached only in death. This theme is repeated throughout Poe's works. He covers his intentions with the conventions of Gothic fiction. Dark spaces, tarns, misty regions, cats, gloomy houses and fields all play into the eclectic deception that is decadence. The subject or surface of the story appeals to and repulses the audience. The enjoyment is in the subject, the message is coded into the treatment. One has little to do with the other. Like the arch of Mannerist architecture, the illusion of the perilous keystone catches the audience's attention while the stability of the arch remains a paradoxical fact before their eyes. Poe comes to terms with the dual nature of his sexual personae recognizing it in stories like *The Fall of the House of Usher*. His answer to society's repression of woman and sexuality is a collection of works that demonstrate the power of the feminine and man's futile, sometimes disastrous attempts to repress it.

Eliot's answer to the question of society and femininity, and Poe's influence upon that answer can be explained in the terms of a poem that Eliot wrote entitled "The Love Song of St. Sebastian." The poem, enclosed in a letter to Conrad Aiken is dated July 25, 1914. The first stanza is a masochistic in nature with the male as the beloved. Eliot writes:

I would come in a shirt of hair
I would come with a lamp in the night
And sit at the foot of your stair
I would flog myself until I bled
And after hour on hour of prayer
And torture and delight
Until my blood should ring the lamp
And glisten in the light
I should arise your neophyte
And then put out the light
To follow where you lead
To follow where your feet are white
In the darkness toward your bed
And where your gown is white
And against your gown your braided hair
Then you would take me in
Because I was hideous in your sight
You would take me in without shame
Because I should be dead
And when morning came
Between your breasts should lie my head.

The second stanza is sadistic in nature. The speaker is now the lover, and cruelly inflicts pain on the lover. Eliot continues:

I would come with a towel in my hand
And bend your head below my knees.
Your ears curl back in a certain way
Like no one elses in the world
When all the world shall melt in the sun
Melt or freeze
I shall remember how your ears were curled.
I should for a moment linger
And follow the curve with my finger
And your head between my knees
I think at last you would understand
There would be nothing more to say
You would love me because I should have strangled you
And because of my infamy.
And I should love you more because I had mangled you
And because you were no longer beautiful
To anyone but me. (Letters 46)

"The Love Song of St. Sebastian" was to be part of a larger collection called Descent from the Cross that was never completed. Eliot's "Sebastian" follows "Prufrock" in its composition. Eliot had already been experimenting with the voices that Jules Laforge, a symbolist poet, had taught him to use to mask his emotions. Further, "Prufrock" demonstrates a splitting of the person into the psychological parts of "you" and "I," a split not uncommon in Poe. At the end of "Prufrock" the two parts reunite into "we" singing together a song of resignation. Poe's "Ulalume--A Ballad" features a similar Prufrockian split of
the mind into two parts of "I" and "Psyche." It is significant that "Psyche" is identified as female, a sexual personae that Poe recognizes as part of the masculine. At the end of "Ulalume," "Psyche" and "I" reunite to form a "we," in the same way that the "you" and "I" of "Prufrock" reunite to form a lingering "we" of their own. Further, both the "we" of "Ulalume" and the "we" of "Prufrock" end their journeys at a tomb. "Psyche" and "I" end their journey at the vault of lost Ulalume, and Eliot's "you" and "I" in "the chambers of the sea," liquid, fatal nature.

The obvious split that occurs in "The Love Song of St. Sebastian" is one between masochism in the first stanza and sadism in the second. What is more important, as evidenced by "Prufrock," is that the split of personality or dual role was by 1914 a notable feature of Eliot's poetry. The dual role in "The Love Song of St. Sebastian" goes beyond masochism and sadism and into Eliot's attempt to be both the beloved and the lover experiencing both the pleasure and the pain, exhibiting his need to give a voice to his latent feminism. The claim that both the passive and the active, the feminine and the masculine are the two parts of Eliot which he wishes to pull apart and identify is backed by Harvey Gross' article "The Figure of St. Sebastian." In that article, Gross quotes Freud as saying that the "active and the passive forms are habitually found to occur together in the same individual," and further that we "are inclined
to connect the simultaneous presence of these opposites, sadism and masochism, with the opposing masculine and feminine which are combined in bisexuality" (Gross 98).

Eliot, like Poe, recognized that the latent femininity of man needs expression before repression leads to catastrophe. Thus Eliot's need to isolate and stagnate the flux within himself; his need to hide behind St. Sebastian as he confesses his acknowledgement of the feminine to society. The figure of St. Sebastian provides Eliot with "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events" with which he can begin to formulate the objective correlative and make use of the familiar theme of pain and ecstasy, desire and renunciation of desire that contributes to the curious sensations evoked by the semi-nude, bound, agonizing Sebastian.

The latent homoerotic implications of Sebastian were clear to Eliot. "I have studied S. Sebastians," said Eliot in that same letter to Aiken, but "there is nothing homosexual about this [his poem]." Perhaps so, but Sebastian is clearly an ambivalent figure, one that desires to experience both the pain and the pleasure, femininity and masculinity, being the beloved and the lover.

As beloved, Sebastian dies in the first stanza. Significantly he dies in the arms of his female lover. The association with the Christian Pietà, of Christ melting into the arms of Mary, is unmistakable, especially since
Sebastian was supposed to be part of the larger collection *Descent from the Cross*. The return of the mother, the descent from the cross into nature, signals the ultimate power of the feminine in death. As lover, Sebastian must kill the feminine to approach her, must "strangle" and "mangle" her to love her. He must immobilize her before he can control her, before he may "for a moment linger" over her beauty. Still, despite the lover's superior role in stanza two, he is unable to confront the feminine outside of death.

Eliot's recognition of the hermaphroditic nature of the Sebastian figure allows him to explore for himself a whole range of emotions not previously available. Gross suggests that "if we grant that the powers of sado-masochism function as a displacement of the artist's normal androgyny, then the figure of Sebastian emerges with specific signifying force: he becomes the artist's desire to hold himself open to all experience. He stands, naked and vulnerable, while the arrows inflict their terrible wounds" (984). This idea seems a correct one as later the two personae present in the figure of Sebastian are reunited as Tiresias who "foresuffered all" in *The Waste Land* that Sebastian, hence Eliot, has suffered. Like Hemingway, Eliot spent his early years in curls and dresses. His mother, though not forceful, was extremely protective of him. Bertrand Russell's first impression of Eliot at Harvard was of "a
young dandy, impeccably turned out." The dual nature of the Sebastian figure does have a significant equivalence in Eliot's biography as he struggles to comprehend a feminine side that can be more fully explored in his work.

From the two distinct sexual personae of "The Love Song of St. Sebastian" to the hermaphroditic figure of Tiresias, and finally a surrender to the great mother as the Virgin Mary in Ash Wednesday, Eliot has confronted the feminine as did Poe. The violence of "The Love Song of St. Sebastian" and the sado-masochistic split of the poem serve as objective correlatives masking the feminine sexual personae that Eliot wanted to develop. Like Poe hiding behind Gothic fiction, Eliot too hides behind the objective correlative to make a confession for which society will not grant absolution. Ozick concurs with the deceptive, sometimes decadent, nature of the objective correlative saying that "what was once accepted as an austere principle of poetics is suddenly decipherable as no more than a device to shield the poet from the raw shame of confession" (126). What Poe hid with Gothic fiction, Eliot hid with the objective correlative.
CHAPTER 5

THE POWER OF THE FEMININE: THE LADY
AND THE VIRGIN OF ASH WEDNESDAY

Carl Wooton, in his article "The Mass: Ash Wednesday's Objective Correlative," concludes that the "structure of the sacrifice of the mass [is] loosely imposed on the whole poem" (31). But Wooton goes further than explicating the "loose" imposition of the Catholic Mass on Ash Wednesday and interprets the poem as an allegory, taking as his basis Eliot's own words that "the consummation of the drama, the perfect and ideal drama, is to be found in the ceremony of the Mass." Wooton claims that "the six parts of Ash Wednesday are arranged parallel to the structure of the Catholic Sacrifice of the Mass" (32). He continues by explaining in detail how each of the six parts corresponds to the actions of the celebrant and penitent in the Mass.

Wooton is correct in pointing out how the Mass is the objective correlative of Ash Wednesday, but fails to point to the poem's larger, secular significance of empowering the feminine through a consistent philosophical belief in transcending the finite center through language.

Through the Catholic Mass, Eliot expresses deeply personal feelings in terms of an accepted ritual; he transcends the finite center and renders the shared
immediate experience of the Mass through language that approaches nonsense. In effect, by using the Christian experience of the Mass as secular philosophy, Eliot broadens the possible interpretations of the poem and ultimately empowers the feminine in a way that he had not before. Consequently, the closing lines of *Ash Wednesday*, "Suffer me not to be separated / And let my cry come unto Thee" take on a meaning overlooked by most critics, including Wooton.

Linda Leavell in her article "Eliot's Ritual Method: *Ash Wednesday*" suggests that the closing lines of the poem plead for something "deeper even than Christianity," something as "deep as man's primal cry to his maker" (1007). She indicates that much more than prayer and ritual are involved in *Ash Wednesday*. Therefore, interpreting *Ash Wednesday* as a strictly religious poem excludes the philosophy and intimate biography that can give the poem a much richer interpretation. Louis A. Cuddy in his article "Sounding the Secular Depths of *Ash Wednesday*: A Study of Eliot's Allusional Design and Purpose" argues that "there are . . . struggles of a secular nature that are essential to the whole meaning of this poem" (167).

Cuddy's argument about the necessity of recognizing the secular nature of *Ash Wednesday* gains merit as critics are frequently too quick to interpret the several female figures in the poem. Carl Wooton incorrectly identifies the "Lady" of Part II of *Ash Wednesday* as the "symbol of both Beatrice
and the Virgin Mary" (36). She is at best a symbol of earthly love, but she is not divine as she "honors the Virgin" herself. What she does symbolize is the power of the feminine in secular form as opposed to the power of the feminine manifest in the divine form of the Virgin Mary. The Lady is indeed powerful, but not divine.

The Lady which opens part II of Ash Wednesday intercedes for the bones of the speaker. The bones "shine with brightness," because of the Lady's "goodness," "loveliness," and because "she honors the Virgin in meditation." Recognizing the power of this Lady, the bones sing her a song. The bones' song is nonsensical, rejecting any sort of unity through paired contradictions. The bones admiration for the Lady is an incommunicable immediate experience rendered through a nonsensical language. The song of the bones reconciles "the contradictory desires of life by their annulment" (Morrison 273), suggesting a void more than a unified condition.

The reconciling of contradictory desires is similar to transcending the finite center. Nonsense language allows the object (the Lady) to rise above the disparate interpretations of many finite centers. In effect, Eliot has empowered the Lady to transcend the bounds of objectification and to become part of a shared immediate experience articulated as well as possible in nonsense.

Eliot, still maintaining his rejection of Bradley's
Absolute Experience, allows finite centers to cohere in the presence of the Lady. She is the "conclusion of all that is inconclusible," a tangible manifestation and substitution for Bradley's Absolute Experience. The Lady, now a powerful intercessor, is also a maternal image. The bones sing "Grace to the mother / For the garden / Where all loves end." Eliot's garden is usually a place outside of time. Here the garden is the desert that the bones inhabit; it is "the quiet of the desert" where, as Sewell's definition of nonsense indicates, "neither division or unity matters." The bones are happy simply existing.

The sparse existence of the bones is not enough though. Their repose comes about through the unifying medium of language, the "Speech without word and / Word of no speech." Their "Word" though is ambiguous. Is it the "Word" of the incarnation or not? By placing "Word" at the beginning of a line, Eliot indicates that the bones themselves are unsure. Since, as Eliot believed, immediate experience is shared by finite centers, and language is the medium through which centers cohere, the one historically unifying experience is the incarnation of the "Word." The bones as a finite center recognize this coherence as they empower the Lady by nullifying contradictory objects, but are not aware that the source of their coherence is the "Word." In part I of *Ash Wednesday*, when the bones had a corporeal existence, the speaker acknowledges an identical problem: how to transcend
a philosophical repose which does not fully recognize the "Word" as the unifying force that allows finite centers to cohere.

The tone of the first stanza of part I is dejection. "The poem begins immediately building a pattern of hesitancy . . . with great breathing caesuras" (Muske 1153). The first three lines of the stanza are like "an organ's wheezebreathe on the down pedal." (Muske 1153). The dejection and somber mood of the first stanza lead the speaker to ask two questions:

(Why should the agéd eagle stretch its wings?)

Why should I mourn the vanished power of the usual reign?

The two questions are redundant. The second question asks why the speaker should mourn the loss of the Word, the "usual reign" and potentially unifying experience of the incarnation. The first question symbolically asks the same thing. Why should the tired eagle, the speaker, attempt to unify all the disparate finite centers with his own advantageous viewpoint? In the following stanzas of part I the speaker answers his own questions with a series of causal conjunctions.

In the second stanza the speaker does not want to know "the infirm glory of the positive hour." He resists the "positive hour," the coherence of finite centers through language. And if the centers were to cohere it would be a
hollow and "infirm glory" because the speaker, like the bones in part II, had not recognized that the power behind the coherence is the Word. He does not think that he will ever know "the one veritable transitory power," the Word. He has resigned himself to the philosophical repose of the bones. Consequently he will rejoice, "having to construct something upon which to rejoice," that is, his own finite center.

The speaker in part I cannot transcend his finite center; he will not allow the immediate experience of the incarnation to move him beyond his own point of view. He "renounce[s] the blessed face" and "voice," denying the power of the Virgin to bring the Word to him. He says that:

time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place..

Because the speaker will not allow the "one veritable transitory power," the Word, to move him beyond his finite center, he will never "drink / There where trees flower and springs flow / for there is nothing again."

The speaker though is unsure about his renunciation of the Word in the same way that the bones were unsure of the source of the power of the Word. He prays that he may forget "these matters that with myself I too much discuss / Too much explain." In the closing lines of the stanza he
vainly implores God to "Pray for us sinners now and at the
hour of our death/ Pray for us now and at the hour of our
death."

Part III of Ash Wednesday is the most thematically
Christian of the six parts. Eliot used a Dantean ascent
towards greater spirituality to show how the speaker takes
the first steps towards salvation. The first stanzas
represent the speaker looking back at himself, struggling
with "the devil of the stairs / who wears the deceitful face
of hope and of despair." The second stanza shows the
speaker overcoming the devil of the stairs, and having
renounced his previous ways, he now finds that "the stair
was dark." In the third stanza the speaker is tempted to
re-enter his previous life. "The broadbacked figure drest
in blue and green," and the sensuous image of the "hawthorn
blossom and a pasture scene" tempt the speaker back into his
previous ways. He realizes the "distraction" and then finds
strength beyond hope and despair.

In addition to the Christian themes of part III, Eliot
reveals the speaker's struggle to overcome his finite
center. If the speaker is moving through time in his
ascension, then "the same shape twisted below" could be an
intertextual reference to Prufrock. Nearly twenty years
later, Prufrock is still wondering "Do I dare," thinking
that their is still "time to turn back and descend the
stair." In Ash Wednesday, the speaker does not hope to turn
again, and has bolstered his will, thus far, to continue his journey where "there were no more faces and the stair was dark."

In the third stanza of part III, the speaker, like the bones, again finds strength in a philosophical repose. As the distractions of the flute begin to fade, he finds strength beyond hope and despair. He has nullified a contradictory state of being by pairing its opposite conditions in much the same way as the bones empowered the Lady of part II. As the Lady becomes empowered by transcending her finite center, the speaker is trying to do the same. The closing lines of part III:

Lord I am not worthy
Lord I am not worthy
but speak only the word
show how he wants to hear a word, but has not fully reconciled the contradictory desires of life in the way that the Lady has. His plea is to hear the word, but not the Word. He, like the bones, is still not fully aware of the power that will let him transcend his finite center. The speaker is feeling unworthy and distracted by the false garden god and cannot ask to hear the Word. His reference to the word is ambiguous, like the bones' reference to the Word. The context in which the speaker asks to hear the word is that of the Word, but ultimately he is still unsure, asking only for the word.
The last three parts of *Ash Wednesday* were written together in early 1930 and combined with the first three written in 1928 and 1929 to form the whole composition. Significantly, the earthly Lady of part II is transformed into the divine Beatrice figure of the last three parts. She is no longer "withdrawn / In a white gown, to contemplation, in a white gown." She has lost her earthly attire, and now "moves in the time between sleeping and waking, wearing / White light folded, sheathed about her." And, as in part II where she intercedes for the bones, she does the same for the speaker in part IV.

The Lady has been transformed into the silent sister who

veiled in white and blue
Between the years, behind the garden god
Whose flute is breathless, bent her head and
sighed but spoke no word.

She is the token of the "word unheard, unspoken."

At this point, Eliot fails to fully empower the earthly Lady. She is empowered in part II, but Eliot does not sustain her role. Not until his last work *The Elder Statesman* does Eliot create a fully empowered female in the character Monica. In her article "T. S. Eliot's Symbolical Woman: From Temptress to Priestess," Susan L. Roberson claims that

it was not until his last play . . . that
[Eliot's] image of woman is also an image of fusion and of redemption. In effect, it took Eliot his entire literary career to reach a more or less normal attitude toward woman. Even though Eliot fails to fully empower the earthly Lady, his speaker realizes that her token of the word is powerful, but without fully transcending his own finite center he cannot hear the Word.

In part V of *Ash Wednesday*, the speaker knows that the silent sister can make finite centers cohere. From part IV he knows that she is "restoring / With a new verse the ancient rhyme," and that she can "Redeem / The time. Redeem / The unread vision in the higher dream." The higher dream is the coherence of finite centers, but the silent sister's power is only potential so long as the speaker is still unwilling to fully surrender himself to the Word.

The language of the first stanza of part V approaches nonsense. Eliot writes:

If lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent
if the unheard, unspoken
Word is unspoken, unheard;
Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard
The Word without a word, the Word within
The world and for the world;
And the light shone in the darkness and
Against the Word of the unstilled world still
whirled

About the centre of the silent Word.

The conflation of word, Word, and World, along with the
assonance and alliteration of O's and S's respectively makes
the passage difficult to read. The mental breath expended
on the O's, W's and S's gives the passage a weary, dejected
tone, much like the tone of the first stanza of part I. The
speaker realizes that the "token of the word unheard,
unspoken" is not enough, and says as much in the first
stanza of part V. Whether the words are lost, spent,
unheard, unspoken, or broken the Word is still the Word; its
existence is timeless and will always be "the Word within / The
world and for the world." The Word is its own center to
which all others must surrender and cohere. It represents
the timeless unity of immediate experience that leads the
speaker out of Eliot's "Annihilation and utter night." So
the Word, the timeless unity to which all centers must
cohere manifests its power through the difficult nonsense
verse of the first stanza of part V. The stanza itself is a
finite center to which the reader must surrender in order to
gain any meaning from it.

The remaining stanzas of part V describe the fruitless
search for the Word without first transcending the finite
center. Regardless of where the speaker searches for the
Word there will be "No place of grace for those who avoid
the face / No time to rejoice for those who walk among the
noise and deny the voice." The face the speaker refers to is the silent sister's. Denying her face and her voice (which brings the Word) leaves the speaker and the others to move about in the discordant noise of many finite centers.

The sixth and final stanza of Ash Wednesday is highly ironic. Though the speaker is now aware of the source of the Word and the power of the silent sister to move him beyond the finite center, he is still bound to it. His heart, which was once devoured by the leopards, now recovers. The speaker is still unwilling to completely surrender himself, and the sensuous temptations of part III come again to the speaker's mind:

And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices
In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices
And the weak spirit quickens to rebel
For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell
Quickens to recover
The cry of the quail and the whirling plover
And the blind eyes creates
Empty forms between the ivory gates
And the smell renews the salt savour of the sandy earth[.]

The weak spirit has rebelled against the silent sister. It continues to be caught in its own center in the same way that "the blind eye creates / The empty forms between the ivory gates." The spirit sees only objects from his own
point of view, empty forms which are images that arise from
the ivory gates of false dreams.

In the final stanza, the speaker realizes his failure
to transcend his finite center, but also realizes that the
silent sister, now the blessèd sister, will be his salvation
if only he had the will to surrender to her. The speaker
asks that the blessèd sister "suffer us not to mock
ourselves with [the] falsehood" of our own blind eye.
Further, he asks her to "teach us to care and not to care,"
to help us reconcile the contradictory desires of life. And
in the final lines, the most ironic of all, he implores of
the blessèd sister "suffer me not to be separated / And let
my cry come unto Thee." The speaker strongly desires to be
united with the blessèd sister, but he will continue to be
apart from her so long as he will not transcend his finite
center.
I have largely ignored the religious implications of *Ash Wednesday* in favor of a secular, philosophical discussion, but these implications cannot be wholly overlooked. The holy day of Ash Wednesday represents a period of fasting and penitence, and marks a period of humility before God. Ash Wednesday is a somber period with little joy, except perhaps at the end of Lent.

Though I find the speaker's position in part VI of poem to be ironic, Eliot was not ironic in naming the poem after a somber occasion. Despite Eliot's straightforward intention with the name of the poem, some critics have argued that there is joy and triumph to be found in *Ash Wednesday*. Carol Muske argues that the Dantean ascent to the Mount of Purgatory is echoed throughout the poem, and this makes *Ash Wednesday* "not a poem of penitence, but one of joy" (1155). Similarly, Theodore Morrison argues that the lost heart of part VI that stiffens and rejoices is positive, representing the triumph of the senses in union with the soul. He says that the blind eye which creates the empty forms between the ivory gates is also positive. "The eye . . . begins . . . feeding itself with dreams again, blind to reality, nourished on illusion. But if it is
illusion, it is necessary illusion--necessary to life, which is better than living death" (281).

I have argued in this thesis that Ash Wednesday is a worthy attempt at trying to free the self from its finite center through language, and also to empower the Lady of part II through the same method. Ultimately, the poem fails on both accounts. The speaker cannot surrender himself to the power of the Word because he is never able to reach it. The first stanza of part V "demonstrates the impossibility of connection between man's word . . . and God's word" (Leavell 1005). The speaker cannot reach the Word because he fails to recognize its source as the earthly Lady. The best the speaker can do is transform the earthly Lady into a divine figure. Even then, the speaker renounces the face and voice which could bring the Word, and ironically pleads at the end of the poem not to be separated from the Word when he knows he is separated from its source. The failure to affirm the role of the feminine in Ash Wednesday leads to the failure of language in the first stanza of part V. Ultimately, the failure prevents the speaker from coming into contact with what Eliot thought of as God.

Eliot's desire to commune with God depends on his ability to transcend his finite center through language. He uses the Word as a metaphor for language, one that communicates the miracle of the incarnation and allows discordant centers to cohere. Eliot developed the Word as a
metaphor for language in a series of essays from 1916 to 1926, with the origin of his ideas located in his dissertation in 1916.

In his dissertation, Eliot defended the philosophy of F. H. Bradley. He accepted Bradley's idea of the finite center and how all knowledge was epistemologically relative. Bradley contended that immediate experiences were unthinking acts of feeling. Through immediate experience we perceive objects around us, but each perception is only a single phenomenon broken apart from the whole of experience. Consequently, we must have a system that allows for our individual perceptions to cohere, or be faced with hopelessly discordant centers in an entirely relativistic world.

Thus far, Eliot had agreed with Bradley, but the question remained of how finite centers ultimately cohere through time. To answer this question Bradley proposed a phenomenon called Absolute Experience. For Bradley, Absolute Experience would allow the fragmentary perception of immediate experiences to melt into a timeless unity. At this point, Eliot rejects Bradley's philosophy. Instead he proposed his idea of the half-object. Eliot's half-object is the idea of the object that arises after immediate experience and before the object is fully perceived. Further, ideas were articulated through language.

In Eliot's departure from Bradley, language plays a
significant role. Eliot believed that through language immediate experiences could be shared, and centers could cohere, but for Eliot one problem remained: centers must cohere through time, there must be a timeless unity that extends beyond the moment. At the moment that Eliot put forth his ideas of the half-object and revealed his faith in language, he could not explain exactly how finite centers could cohere through time because objects that arise out of immediate experience were themselves bound by time. He concluded that immediate experience leads to annihilation and utter night, yet still maintained that a systematic approach to transcending the finite center must be possible.

After the dissertation, and until at least 1926, Eliot's critical prose reflects many of the same concerns that he addressed in his dissertation. He called for unity through historical sense, for order, for objectivity, and for impersonal art that transcended personal points of view. I have argued that Eliot's critical prose from 1916 to 1926 was a consistent effort to put forth criteria that would allow finite centers to cohere, for immediate experience to be shared, and ultimately for a timeless unity that would allow a continuum of immediate experience from the past into the future. His 1926 essay "Lancelot Andrewes" puts forth the first workable criteria for formulating absolute values that would allow finite centers to cohere.

In the "Andrewes" essay, Eliot identifies in Andrewes's
prose what he calls relevant intensity, and quotes from one of Andrewes's sermons on the incarnation to demonstrate the technique. In the passage

I add yet farther; what flesh? The flesh of an infant? What *Verbum Infans*, the Word of an infant? The Word and not able to speak a word? How evil this agreeeth! (307)

Eliot says that "in this extraordinary prose . . . there are often flashing phrases which never desert the memory" (SE 307). Eliot's idea of relevant intensity is manifested in Andrewes's prose. Andrewes creates with his language a tightly woven context of words that have no meaning outside their own field of reference. Consequently, Andrewes's prose approaches nonsense as defined by Sewell. Nonsense is a logical universe of discourse meticulously selected and controlled . . . with which the detached intellect can make . . . a series of abstract, detailed artificial patterns of words and images . . . [that] have their own significance in themselves. (66)

In effect, Andrewes's prose with its relevant intensity and self-reflexive context dovetails well with Eliot's impersonal poetry and Sewell's nonsense. Andrewes's prose, particularly with its pun on word and Word, provides Eliot with an example of a way to write intense poetry without being personal. Further, the pun on word and Word provides
Eliot with a metaphor for a kind of language that can articulate the idea, exhibit timeless unity, transcend the finite center, and ultimately allow him to escape from the annihilation and utter night of immediate experience.

One corollary of Eliot's new method is that he empowers the females of his poetry, particularly in *Ash Wednesday*. Eliot had long been experimenting with a way to explore the power of the feminine in himself. An uncollected poem of 1914 entitled "The Love Song of St. Sebastian" reveals his desire to experience love, pain, and sexuality from both the masculine and feminine point of view. His splitting of the self along gender lines was part of the late nineteenth-century movement to question the sincerity of the Romantics who claimed that their feelings and the presentation of their feelings were identical. Eliot, through voices like Sebastian, Tiresias, and the hermaphroditic figure in part IV of *Ash Wednesday*, demonstrated that the feminine must be present before the contradictory desires of life can be nullified. Once the opposing desires of life are defeated, Eliot is able to surrender himself to the Word. And, significantly, the Word is intimately connected with the Virgin Mary's role in the incarnation.

The feminine is the source of the Word, and the Word, through nonsense language, allows finite centers to cohere. The feminine, ultimately, is empowered by Eliot to bring order and unity to his waste land. Eliot's empowerment of
the feminine marks a significant turn from his past role as the son of an upper-middle-class family with a long history in a Protestant church. Eliot's turn from the ways of his family and from Boston society weighed on him heavily. The weary and dejected tone of the opening lies of Ash Wednesday find their source in Eliot's past.

Though I have argued that Ash Wednesday fails to fully empower the feminine, and that the speaker fails to transcend his finite center because he cannot surrender to the Word, the poem succeeded in other ways. Ash Wednesday provided Eliot with his first attempt at empowering the feminine, and using nonsense language in an attempt to transcend the finite center. Ash Wednesday does succeed as a poem which presents a workable alternative to the philosophical conundrum of attaining absolute values in an epistemologically relative world, regardless of whether or not the speaker of the poem realizes its implications.
WORKS CITED


Hall, 1965. 65-72.


WORKS CONSULTED


