

T S Eliot's Seminal Concepts and "Ash Wednesday"

Muhammad Khan Sangi
Sameena Abbas Khokhar
Abdul Hameed Panhwar

Abstract

The poem presents the journey of the poet's soul from a hopeless and meaningless world to the all embracing divine world. Eliot may present his thoughts and facts in fragments but his target remains to be the total or the absolute. Eliot may present his thoughts and facts in fragments but his target remains to be the total or the absolute. Absolute is something, which when felt or perceived by individuals, becomes same for all; hence it becomes an impersonal observation for all. one can say that at places the personal element can also be traced out but the dominant feature is indeed impersonal. The poet by employing various pertinent literary tools succeeds to achieve the desired characteristic of impersonal presentation in 'Ash Wednesday'. For any idea or feeling that Eliot wants to be conveyed strongly to the readers, he does not put only his own thoughts before the readers but he takes help of the earlier works to substantiate his views. Eliot has linked his ideas both with literary and religious traditions alongside. We find concrete allusions, in Eliot's poems from Dante's Divine Comedy and many other literary and religious works. This paper discusses the poets skilful use of various devices to build up the impression of impersonality and tradition in the poem.

Key Words: impersonality, literary tradition, objective correlative, images

Introduction

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, which lasts 40 days ending with Easter. The period is spent by dedicated Christians in fasting and repentance in commemoration of Christ's 40 days in the wilderness. Ash Wednesday is so called because of the ashes sprinkled by the priest on the penitent's head as a sign of modesty. "Ashes signify

Penitence and Death. Ash Wednesday takes its name from the ancient custom of signing the Cross with ashes on the forehead, this the first day of Lent" (Knowles) The priest then says: 'Dust thou art, to dust returnst', thus reminding man of the transience of the world and of his need to turn to God, the only reality.

Impersonality and Ash Wednesday

In its simplest terms the argument of the poem "Ash Wednesday" is that man wants to turn to God but he lacks the necessary strength of will. Frustrations of life fill him with despair and he wants to die. He discovers the cause of this; it is self-absorption. It is his ego, his little self with its egocentric desire that is the source of all his miseries. Since the poem is full of religious spirit and references, a number of images and allusions have been used to portray such feelings and experiences. "This new religious influence in Eliot's poetry is first seen in "Ash Wednesday", a poem which is 'the culmination of years of religious hope and despair' and one in which embodies Eliot's 'realisation of the Christian vision" (Naugle). Being thus illumined, he frees himself from his ego. The ego conquered, he is released from all frustrations and acquires the necessary strength of will to turn to God as well as to the world. He finds his peace in His will. "While the fallen world and desert of "The Waste Land" has become in "Ash Wednesday", a part of the journey to the Absolute, ..." (Terry: 134). This capacity for total surrender to God comes to man only after the destruction or death of his self. The death of the self means the end of the narrow egocentric desires and thus of all sorrows. It is only after this purgation that man is reborn, as it were, on the higher plane of his real self, his divine nature. "Ash Wednesday" is inspired by the closing cantos of Dante's "Purgatorio". "Eliot emphasizes other Dantean images, techniques, and devices when writing his own works" (Wood). Craven (2001) finds the traits of modernism in the poem which in other words bring the poem close to accomplishment of the poet's theoretical claims. He says: "Ash Wednesday' represents the spectacle of modernism at war with the modernist enterprise, of Symbolism using its repertoire of techniques to mock its own indeterminacy."

The poem presents the journey of the poet's soul from a hopeless and meaningless world to the all embracing divine world. Such an abstract and mystical flight naturally has to be a complex one. This complexity is not only in the mind of the poet but he has tried his best to portray the same intricate feelings in the development of the poem. As Cunningham puts it:

Bold to enter upon such a great mystery, Eliot preserves it by refusing chronology, by invoking the elusive "Lady" (or ladies), by using deliberately indeterminate imagery, by risking syntactical impertinences, and by a mixing of tenses (and therefore of times) in sections, and even in parts of sections. Seeing these as pointers to mystery rather than as cruxes to be solved leads one closer to the heart of the poem. A soul's pilgrimage is never straightforward (192).

Such a coordinating technique brings forward the theme of the poem quite objectively. The reader is made to feel and go through the same kind of difficulties and labyrinths the poet felt during his spiritual ride.

Externalisation of emotions

Terry (1994), comparing Eliot in "Ash Wednesday" with Dante in "Paradiso", says that the two have successfully attempted to use reasoning to bring forth the particular states of feelings in their respective works. Terry refers to the 'Dante' essay pointing to the adequate use of images in "Ash Wednesday". He says that Eliot does not use images just for their own sake but they are very meaningfully used to make the abstract and spiritual visible. He says: "The poetry itself, in the case of Ash Wednesday, serves to point us beyond the poetry – the poetry itself is part of the process of 'reasoning' that takes place before the reaching of eternity" (p.136). Terry also speaks of Eliot's obsession with the impersonal tone in his poems. He says, "As always with Eliot, whether in prose or poetry, one sees the distrust of the personal and the desire for the total: "oblivion" is what the poet

seeks, and this oblivion can only be found in the region of the eternal" (137). Eliot may present his thoughts and facts in fragments but his target remains to be the total or the absolute. Absolute is something, which when felt or perceived by individuals, becomes same for all; hence it becomes an impersonal observation for all.

Brown (2003) speaking about the impersonal effect of the poet's technique in "Ash Wednesday" says that this poem "enacts this kind of human inter-relationship on the plane of reader-writer dynamics"(p.03). Brown is actually trying to depict the psychological effects of the poem on the readers. He says that the effect that the poet himself has experienced has been fully transferred to the readers for their own feelings and experience. He calls it "a form of bereavement-therapy for writer and reader alike"(p.03). "Eliot's lines not only express his own primal experience but also activate the reader's too. In this lies the possibility of redemption somewhere between psychotherapeutic re-connection and religious adoration" (p.06). Here the function and presence of 'objective correlative' is pointed out in the form of psychological effect, which according to the writer is desired by the poet. Brown calls it the psychoanalyst's displacement of emotion onto the patient/reader or more generally the psychoanalyst's emotional involvement in the therapeutic interaction and says that Eliot is successful to evoke reader's emotions by means of his own confession and 'talking cure'

Personal touch

However, Christ (162) finds personal touch especially in Eliot's religious poetry. He says, "Interestingly, Eliot, like the Victorians, feels free to speak in his own voice only when he achieves a religious vision." Christ is of the view that in earlier poetry, Eliot has used the technique of dramatic monologue to establish the notion of impersonality of poetry, but to express his religious beliefs, he does not feel the necessity of such technique. But again the kind of images and symbols he uses do not deviate him far from impersonal effect. Hence, one can say that at places the personal element can also be traced out but the dominant feature is indeed impersonal. The poet by employing various pertinent literary tools succeeds to achieve the

desired characteristic of impersonal presentation in 'Ash Wednesday'.

Tradition and "Ash Wednesday"

"Ash Wednesday" is a religious poem. It communicates what the poet feels in his own person. The presentation style is again impersonal loaded with a number of understandable allusions, quotations and references. It represents the struggle of any devotee or spiritual seeker on his way to divinity. It is not a particular individual that describes or shows his emotions but it is the poetic description of the spiritual seekers in general. Meyer (425) puts *Ash Wednesday* in the formal tradition of confession poetry. He says that Eliot's post-conversion poetry, like *Ash Wednesday*, is firmly connected with the religious aspects of English literature. A number of allusions are found in the poem referring to the sonnets of Shakespeare. Part one, line four and line twenty one are taken from Shakespearean sonnets. For any idea or feeling that Eliot wants to be conveyed strongly to the readers, he does not put only his own thoughts before the readers but he takes help of the earlier works to substantiate his views. In these two lines, the poet mentions the determination and power of love. These are the two feelings the poet had in the course of life especially at the time of conversion and his will to abandon the worldly desires in pursuit of the spiritual rebirth. The poet resorts to express these very personal experiences with the help of earlier literary works of reputation. Hence, he satisfies his own desire of expression as well as his scholarly job of upholding the literary past in his own work.

Desiring this man's art and that man's scope
line. 04

The above mentioned line is "a version of a line from Shakespeare's Sonnet xxix" (Southam, 1981: 130). Borrowing this line Eliot has made it convenient for himself to express the worries of his mind which is experiencing different feelings while recalling his beloved.

The use of images

Similarly, a very powerful image of eagle is described in line 06, which, in its given meaning, is taken from Psalm ciii, 5 – *so that thy*

youth is renewed like the eagle's. According to old Christian myth, eagle is believed to have ability to renew himself at the old age in the light of sun and free flowing water. The same idea has been allegorically used to return to God with renewed spirit and character. Southam finds strong relation and impression of Donne's style and thought in Eliot's poetry. Southam (1981:130) says, "Moreover, section I of 'Ash Wednesday', with its slow and studied word to word movement, is a further reminder of the special verbal emphasis of Donne's Hymne." Besides, Southam finds many allusions in the poem from different parts of Biblical text. There are quotations in the poem that remind us of a variety of ideas, characters and stories of Bible. Leopards, Mary, the vision of Ezekiel, the prophet Jeremiah so on so forth are the allusions found at several places in the poem. Although, these references look scattered, they unanimously contribute to give the poem an organic look of expressing religious beliefs especially of penance.

Leitch (38) finds strong connection of "Ash Wednesday" with its European models. He says, "Eliot's quester in "Ash Wednesday" concludes with a prayer to the divine Sister, mother, who is a composite of the Virgin and Dante's Beatrice." In post-conversion poetry, Eliot has linked his ideas both with literary and religious traditions alongside. We find concrete allusions, in Eliot's poems from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Leitch, further says, "In addition, he paraphrases Dante's famous line, 'His will is our peace', about which Eliot once personally proclaimed, 'And the statement of Dante seems to me *literally true*' (Leitch's italics). Cleophas (329) also speaks of the same indebtedness to Dante, on Eliot's part while discussing the composition of "Ash Wednesday". He says, "Dante's is the most comprehensive and the most *ordered* presentation of emotions that has ever been made." Eliot has followed, in Ash Wednesday, the track of Dante to present his own emotions in the best traditional way.

Conclusion

Morrison (p.275) in his article *Ash Wednesday: A Religious History* writes about the use of Eliot's borrowings from other writers especially from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. He speaks of the efficacy of this practice in the case of readers being already acquainted with the

borrowed material. He says: "No doubt the stair mentioned by Araut Daniel was present in Eliot's mind as he composed this part of his poem, and the recollection of the passage by the reader will of course enrich the poem with a train of literary and religious association." Eliot does not say everything on his own. He almost always brings in a number of far-off allusions, with which, if his readers are already familiar, which he always demands and expects, the understanding or appreciation of the poem will be by far easier for the reader; and this is what he calls the impersonal style of writing poetry.

References:

- Brown, Dennis. Literature & Theology, Vol. 17. No. 1, March 2003
- Christ, Carol T.. *T. S. Eliot and the Victorians*. Modern Philology Vol.79, No.2 (Nov.,1981)
- Craven, Peter. The Urbane Mysticism of Old Possum. *Financial Review* Oct. 01. 2001 <http://afr.com/articles/2004/09/30/1096527854077.html> 17-06-2005
- Knowles, Rev. Archibald Campbell. *The Practice of Religion* (1911) p. 48-54.
- Leitch, Vincent B. T. S. Eliot's Poetry of Religious Desolation. *South Atlantic Bulletin*, Vol. 44, No. 2. (May, 1979).
- Meyer, Kinereth. The Otherness within Ownness: Reading T. S. Eliot's Ash Wednesday. *Christianity and Literature*. Vol. 51, No. 3, Mar. 2002.
- Morrison. Theodore Ash Wednesday A Religious History. *The New England Quarterly* vol.11 no.2 (Jan.,1938).
- Southam B.C. *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot*. Faber and Faber. London.1981
- Terry, John Kwan. Ash-Wednesday: a poetry of verification. *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*. (Ed.) A. David Moody. Cambridge: CUP, 1994
- Woods, Gregory. GLBTQ. Eliot, Thomas Stearns. <http://www.glbtq.com/literature/eliot_ts.html> 20-09-2005