

Analysis of Epiphanies in T.S. Eliot's Literary Works

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ABSTRACT

The word "epiphany" was originally used in earliest Greek literature for the sudden appearance of a god or goddess, also for some miraculous event, a divine intrusion - whether good or evil-in human affairs. In the Christian era of course the word "Epiphany" was associated with St. Matthew's account of the astrologers who visited the Christ child. At that point something new was added to the Greek tradition, something that I think has gradually been lost in current literary use of the term. The new thing in the Gospels was that the epiphany to the Wise Men was thought of originally as an event that could occur only once in history: the manifestation of the one God in human flesh. Furthermore this appearance differed in that it came not to a single person or a few or a nation but to all the races of the earth, represented traditionally in Kaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, the three astrologer "kings." This article attempts to explore epiphanies in T.S. Eliot's literary works.

KEYWORDS: T.S. Eliot, Epiphany, Greek tradition, Christianity.

INTRODUCTION

Seldom do our literary uses of the word "epiphany" depend on exact intertextuality with that tradition. In fact, writers, following James Joyce, revert to the more primitive Greek meaning: an often occurring event bringing to one or a few persons a sudden "divine" experience of wholeness, harmony and radiance (even if the inspiring event is shattering at first). If this event and its efficacy are to be known to "all the world," in modern literary usage, the person(s) receiving the revelation, whether as writer or character, must convey it in a work of art. I should like to suggest that Eliot even before becoming Christian received the early biblical sense of "epiphany" as a cosmic event, affecting all races, which was the essential point of the Epiphany in St. Matthew's Gospel. Son of Man, You cannot say, or guess, for you know only A heap of broken images, where the sun beats And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, And the dry stone no sound of water But (Come in under the shadow of this red rock), And I will show you . . . I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (*The Burial of the Dead*, italics mine). The hideous revelation is made as if in the voice of an Old Testament prophet, from God to all races remembering the falls of Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, London.

Epiphanies in Eliot's Literary Works

Many would say that Eliot's revived sense of the mystical moment as a communal experience "came with the territory" of being at least incipiently Christian that Eliot was in the state of so becoming long before his conversion in 1927. To my reading, however, Eliot's poetry from the beginning and to the very end presents something less onto-theological, less logocentric than it would if there were a strict system of Christian thought at its wellsprings. His poetic development III presents the case of someone who, like Heidegger or even Derrida, began his mature work by rejecting metaphysical systems and received theologies while seeking within perceptual experience itself the primary "facts" of experience. As Eliot (1950:250) said in "The Metaphysical Poets" of 1921, a poet must go a good deal deeper than "the heart" to be a good poet. "One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts."

A number of recent critics, including Northrop Frye and Meyer Abrams, have focused on the reappearance in the last two centuries of the word "epiphany" in its Greek meaning - a Theophany or miraculous manifestation to certain individuals, now to writers or their characters. Most recently Ashton Nichols (1987) has thoroughly

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investigated the literary uses of the word and concept in *The Poetics of Epiphany: Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Movement*. Following Abrams, Nichols believes that the literary concept of epiphany occurs for the first time in the 18th century beginnings of Romanticism -in Gray and Blake, for instance, but above all in Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. The actual word "epiphany," Abrams believed, was used in its secular sense for the first time by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his journal of 1838. Emerson, in his facticity, sounded a note directly anticipating James Joyce and Eliot in Emerson's words, Day creeps after day, each full of facts, dull, strange despised things that we cannot enough despise, call heavy, prosaic, and desert. The time we seek to kill. The attention it is elegant to divert from things around us. And presently the aroused intellect finds god and gems in one of these scorned facts, then finds that the day of facts is a rock of diamonds, that a fact is an Epiphany of God, that on every fact of his life he should rear a temple of wonder and joy. (lecture of 19 December 1838, italics mine).

Of course it was James Joyce (in his *Stephen Hero* and the collection of prose "moments" titled "Epiphanies") who first made current our 20th century uses of the word. In Richard Ellmann's (1966:87) account, the epiphany did not mean for Joyce the manifestation of godhead, the showing forth of Christ to the Magi/ although that is a useful metaphor for what he had in mind. The epiphany [for Joyce] was the sudden "revelation of the whatness of a thing," the moment in which lithe soul of the commonest object seem to use radiant." He might find "a sudden spiritual manifestation" either "in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself Sometimes the epiphanies are "eucharistic," another term arrogantly borrowed by Joyce from Christianity and invested with secular meaning. These are moments of fullness or of passion. Sometimes the epiphanies are rewarding for another reason, that they convey precisely the flavor of unpalatable experiences.

The spirit, as Joyce characteristically held, manifested itself on both levels. The epiphanies vary also in style: sometimes they read like messages in an unfamiliar tongue; their brilliance lies in their peculiar baldness, their uncompromising refusal of all devices which would render them immediately clear. At other times they are deliberately unenciphered, and lyrically biased.

We see in Ellmann's citations that Eliot learned a lot more than "the mythical method" from Joyce. Even before reading Joyce, however, he had already found the unpalatable epiphany in Baudelaire, who taught Eliot that revelations of the "sordid and disgusting" could be a proper subject for lyric poetry. Along with such modern instants or illuminations, Eliot could have learned also from Mallarmé and the French Symbolists, as well as from Joyce, how to present the moments either "baldly," as in the pub closer's "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME," or by encipherment as in the mystifying horror under the red rock.

No one to my satisfaction, however, has told us the way in which Eliot's epiphanies differ from Joyce's. Ashton Nichols's account seems to me wrong when he turns straight to *Four Quartets*, omitting all the moments of illumination in Eliot's early poems and *The Waste Land*. Nichols (1987:190) then concludes:

In the twentieth century, T.S.Eliot's later poems strive to continue Hopkins's return to the literary epiphany in a theological framework. Unlike Hopkins, however, Eliot in *Four Quartets* is able to find the "privileged moment" not only a source of theophanic revelation but a symbol of divinity itself.

It is true that more than any other modern poet Eliot expresses the relation between time and timelessness, but what he presents even in *Four Quartets*, is only the human experience of divinity; not any knowledge of God. Christ is nowhere mentioned by name except in the *Poems of 1920* and in *The Rock*, the occurrences in the *Poems* being blasphemous and *The Rock* allusions having an ecclesiastical purpose. The word "God" appears only twice in *Four Quartets*: first as a person's dread -"Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God" ("*East Coker*" II) and then in "*The Dry Salvages*" II, as "The bone's prayer to Death its God," anxiously prayed by all who face no end but extinction. Neither reference tells us anything about God.

Whatever we may say of Eliot's prose, we cannot (In my view) call his poetry "theocentric" at any point. It is hard to agree with Roy Harvey Pearce that Eliot believed in culture rather than personality; that he believed in history and God rather than in man and human experience as Pearce claims in *The Continuity of American Poetry* (421-39). Nowhere in the mature Eliot, any more than in the early Eliot, is individual human consciousness de-centered. Certain exaggerated notions of personality and its importance were always his targets; yet he never departed from his view (and F. H. Bradley's) that the Absolute is known only (if at all) in and through the "finite center" of the single human consciousness. In his 1940 essay on Yeats, Eliot corrected the misconceptions proliferating from his early so-called "Impersonal theory" of poetry. In the Yeats essay he said that the most powerful poetry comes "out-of personal experience, II and only from this is the poet "able to express a general truth" (Eliot 1979:299).

A better way to define the epiphanal moments on which so many of Eliot's poems turn is to associate them not with theophanies but with Ezra Pound's (1968:4) central concept of the Image, which Pound defined as "a complete emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time." Eliot was always concerned with the union of emotion and intellect, as also with their completeness. If we follow the development of his poetry, we find that his epiphanal

moments are indeed images of great psychological complexity, such as that Pound describes in a note on his word "complex." It is this psychological complexity and completeness that distinguishes Eliot's revelatory instants from Wordsworth's "spots of time" or Joyce's "epiphanies" or Virginia Woolfs "moments of being." The closest example of a similar epiphanal image might be found in E. M. Forster's image of the Marabar Caves, which provides not only the pivotal moments in *A Passage to India* but also serves as the prism through which very complex emotional and intellectual experiences in all the main characters are refracted.

Like Pound and Forster, Eliot began as a writer rejecting the Christian revelation. We see this clearly in the *Poems of 1920*: in "Gerontion" for instance, where Christ is imaged as a devouring tiger (not at all like Blake's thrilling tiger either). Two other poems, "The Hippopotamus" and "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service," ridicule the Christian community mercilessly. But also like Pound and Forster, who equally delighted in such send ups, Eliot believed that some sort of transforming revelation was missing from modern life, and the lack had to be supplied from the artist's moments of illumination. Pound's attempts to recover Greek theophanies, like Forster's recovery of the Krishna birth ceremonials, were proofs that Pound and Forster desired some communal revelation on which to graft both their art and their personal lives. To all three men, but especially to Eliot, primitive myths were survivals of real revelations, lacking which modern life was a travesty of true living. Curiously, however, of the three only Eliot believed (at least for many years) that no such integrating revelations as appeared to the Greeks and Hindus could ever be recovered. What survived in the Christian world, Eliot thought, was a neurotic confusion of spiritual and sexual energies such as he dramatized in his pathological "saint" poems: "The love Song" of St. Sebastian, who dies in an erotic embrace with the woman he strangles, and "The Death of Saint Narcissus," who (like Hesse's Siddhartha) undergoes three Buddhist incarnations into a tree, a fish, and then a young girl, but then achieves liberation under a grey rock in a ghastly, auto-erotic self-immolation. I read these poems, like "Gerontion" and *The Waste Land*, as real but despairing epiphanies revealing the death of a religious consciousness, even while Eliot's essays were pleading for the continuity of a literary tradition that included "religious feeling" in poetry.

We recall that in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Eliot said his poems dealt with what was actual in his life while his prose dealt with his ideals. I think this was particularly true in what he said about the continuity of traditions and the unified sensibility. Eliot felt the loss of consensus and social integrity in both America and in Europe, even in his student years. Indeed his very influential teacher, Irving Babbitt, blamed this breakdown partly on Christianity and counseled Eliot to look to India and the Orient for better religions and philosophies, which Eliot immediately did. The *Prufrock* volume and the *Poems of 1920* showed that psychic isolation from a supposedly Christian culture was the actuality for Eliot, whatever ideals he expressed as to the unity of culture in his essays. Before 1925, for himself at least, no Western tradition was continuous, since none was any longer based on community of "religious feeling," as he worded it in his 1920 essay on Dante. Nor was he himself capable of experiencing the unified sensibility he found initially in the poetry of Donne.

Eliot's poems that dealt with epiphanal moments, before 1925, all represented a voyeur, peering into darkness and seeing some horror that could only be specified by sexual inadequacies or vacuities. Such an epiphany isolates the fantasizing man in "La Figlia Che Piange," much the way Gerontion's "thousand small deliberations. Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled." The only "Tenants of the house" in "Gerontion" are "Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season." A "complete emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time," Eliot revealed, could be conveyed in images of absolute isolation, emptiness and inanity.

These epicene, empty epiphanies appear central, as I.A. Richards observed, in *The Waste Land*, where sexual horror is one key to a larger void, affecting whole cities and beyond them whole civilizations. The only thing that could save the questing knight or sailor would be a new religion on which to found a new Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, London. But the poet in *The Waste Land* finally refuses to ask for just another cycle of civilization after the one he has, like Derrida, deconstructed. He asks only for peace, admitting that he, like every one else, has failed. Most critics still, I think, misread the quester's response to the Thunder's message: Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata. The poet in the waste land has not been able to give fruitfully; he has not been able to sympathize, nor to control his human relationships. All things have failed him, and he has failed them. All his epiphanies have brought him near to absolute defeat and a longing for liberation from the cycle of rebirths.

As E. M. Forster said after reading *The Waste Land*, "Eliot is difficult because he has seen something terrible, and (underestimating the general decency of his audience) has declined to say so plainly" (Furbank 1985:172-73). Eliot responded to Forster in a letter of 1929, saying that Forster was right about *The Waste Land*, and of course Eliot said so publicly later on.

Anne Boigan (1973) has noted that the "something terrible" Eliot had seen while writing *The Waste Land* was already structuring his "emotional and intellectual complexes" before he reached England and married. The philosophy of F.H. Bradley, summed up in the passage from *Appearance and Reality* that Eliot cited in *The Waste Land's* Notes, provided such structure. "My external sensations are no less private to myself than are my thoughts or

my feelings, "Bradley had observed -a perfectly Derridian insight." [M]y experience [is] ... a circle closed' on the outside ... [In brief] the whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul." After such knowledge, what forgiveness indeed?

Not until *The Waste Land* was published could Eliot know how, or if, the command "Come here ... and I will show you a handful of dust" would ricochet into the hidden memories of his readers, who hadn't like him been struck by Victor Hugo's epiphanies in *Les Contemplations*, or Conrad's just opposite, convivial image at the end of "Youth" when Marlow sees "the spark of life in the handful of dust." Eliot's own emotion in the changed image apparently derived obscurely from moments of psychic isolation in his boyhood when he explored the granite caves and "teeth" off the bleak coasts of Maine and Massachusetts. *The Waste Land's* reception was his only proof that its message of uncanny disconnection of self-isolation was familiar to a vast crowd of readers as well as himself. Such responding recognition surely fed his confidence that modern society had some common experience from which to build an integrated culture.

I won't recapitulate my argument in the *Negative Way* book that Eliot was at first taken aback by the extraordinary success of *The Waste Land*. He was particularly appalled by I. A. Richards (1948:292; 1926:81-82) jarring praise of the poem as "free from the entanglement with belief which takes from poetry half its power." Eliot responded in three prose retorts to Richards, arguing that his skepticism was a form of belief. But then in his next poems -*The Hollow Men* especially -he presented the actual state of his thought and feeling, given in the image of a "sightless" man, fearing to be seen yet longing for eyes to "reappear/As the perpetual star/Multifoliate rose," The epiphany is a feared event here in "*The Hollow Men*," suggesting Eliot's fear of belonging to ... others or to God! (as he would say in "*East Coker*"). But his concept of the epiphany has changed from what it was in *The Waste Land*: "We" are the subjects to whom a saving sight could appear, not the first person singular, "I" "who both receives and shows the ghostly epiphanies in "*The Burial of the Dead*," "*A Game of Chess*," "*The Fire Sermon*," and "*What the Thunder Said*" in *The Waste Land*.

From 1925 on, Eliot's poems image the speaker as one in a community of like-minded people, at first "stuffed," "hollow," and "empty" but nonetheless bound together. In *Ash-Wednesday* the speaker __ is admitted to a garden "Where all love ends," where good women tend him, sister and mother, bringing "the unread vision in the higher dream." In the *Ariel* poems too the clear fact is that Eliot is coming to share a common experience, suggesting Dante's visions and epiphanies, no longer simply as great poetry but now as "literally true" -Eliot's (1950:231) words in his 1928 essay on Dante. The immediacy of his own personal experience should come through to any disciple of Derrida, seeing the peculiarly experiential, psychological "reading," of epiphanal moments in the new poems. The best instance might be in "*The Journey of the Magi*." This poem like many others of Eliot's poems, both early and late, grows from a sequence of non-logically but affiliated images. I don't see how Derrida could read "*The Journey of the Magi*" the way Roy Harvey Pearce does, as a poem that is onto-theological rather than man-centered, or logocentric rather than based on immediate perceptions of natural objects. Surely Derrida would approve the way Eliot's symbols, as presented here, are free from any imposed framework. The symbols grow from the psychology of the magus speaking, and they have that modernist authenticity which Pound (1968:9) insisted on when he said, "[T]he proper and perfect symbol is [always] the natural object:"

The poem celebrates the feast of the Epiphany by undercutting the modern, literary sense of "epiphany." The magi have had the experience but missed the meaning. As in all epiphanies, theophanic or literary, the appearance to the magi occurred unpredictably (not the way the astrologers expected). It occurred from the realm of the absolutely unknown and unthought. Eliot emphasizes the way the Epiphany disappointed, disrupted, and scandalized the pedagogues. In the Gospels it was the shepherds, men who had no book-learning and whose categories were unformed, who received the message of joy. The wise men, as Eliot astutely notes, were given no such consoling "news" in St. Matthew's text, nor does that text tell of any joyous response on the wise men's part. Instead they confront a Herod who has ordered the child's murder, and they must steal away from Bethlehem as fast as they can. Eliot's epiphanal poem makes lucid the aporia that appears in what St. Matthew left unsaid: the more than possible contradiction between what was foretold to the magi about a new born king and the poor, ignoble conditions of the birthing. The child whose supposed courtiers should have rejoiced at his coming, only wished to exterminate him. For all that, Eliot's poem does relate a tale of communal experience -the wise man speaking for his companions, dictating his report to a scribe who will transcribe it for generations to come, for us who also received the word but also find it "hard and bitter" (as Eliot clearly did when he wrote the poem), though Eliot like us knows about the Resurrection, which the wise man giving his report cannot foresee.

After 1927, the year of his conversion, all Eliot's poems have this authorial voice expressing consensus with others in and outside the poems, even when he adopts a dramatic persona like that of Simeon, Pericles, or of course the magus; and even when the authorial voice speaks in a condition of near hopelessness at certain points -as in *Ash Wednesday* and "*East Coker*" Part II ("wait without hope" etc.), or at several other points in *Four Quartets*. As Julia

Reibetanz (1983:4) says, in *Four Quartets* "Eliot wished to commune with the reader, /to speak in the tones and attitude of intimate conversation ... [In] no other single poem of Eliot's," she says, "do we get so great a sense of the poet speaking directly to us as he might face-to-face."

In each of the Quartets, Eliot meets the reader this way but also then withdraws and comes forth again—as in a dance. And the dance is one of the main structuring images in each of the four quartets. Thus the poet is engaged not only with the reader but also with many figures of the dance within the poem. Eliot said he got the conception of the dance around "the still point of the turning world" from a novel of Charles Williams called *The Great Trumps*, where Christ is figured as the fool in the tarot deck at the center of a dance. But "Burnt Norton" and "East Coker" define many other associations with the dance: from Thomas Elyot's *Boke Named the Governour*, from Sir John Davies's *Orchestra*, from the German folk tale *Germelshausen*, and the closing lines of Yeats's "Among School Children," to name a few. Behind them all, perhaps, is the image of the universal company in the *Paradiso*, Dante's extended epiphany culminating when he sees the scattered leaves of the universe all bound together in one volume, containing above all the lives of the saints.

"There" is only the dance," Eliot says in "Burnt Norton" II, referring to "the still point," and "there we have been." His assertion is factual, experiential rather than doctrinal. Intimations of this consensual society appear in the garden scene in "Burnt Norton" when the poet and his woman companion are led into a hidden garden, to an empty pool tilted with light within which they see reflected a timentary couple standing behind them, like Adam and Eve "in our first world" the world that might have been, with laughing children in the apple tree. This convivial scene has its counterpart in the matching first section of "East Coker" with its ancient world of mid-summer dancers; then in the third Quartet with the choral company of American fisherman and their wives. (There of course the scene is menaced by nature psychologized, animate and inanimate, even more than in the first two Quartets.) In the last Quartet the "company" is that of the prayer community at Little Gidding, which opens out to include all of wartorn England, past and present as the fourth Quartet closes.

Perkins (1962:41-54) and Reibetanz (1983:139-45) have dealt intensively with the way the first epiphanal moment in mid-winter spring -repeats with variations the vision of fullness in the empty pool at Burnt Norton. I would only emphasize that both epiphanies reveal the union of opposites ... the *Coincidentia Oppositorum* that has been historically insisted upon in the "light from light," the God made flesh "who dwelt amongst us" in the opening of S1, John's Gospel and through out the Christian tradition. In "Burnt Norton" I the union of opposites is stunning: Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged, And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight, And the lotus rose, quietly, quietly, the surface glittered out of heart of light ... (italics mine).

By contrast with, the light glimpsed and described in almost identical words after the Hyacinth garden in *The Waste Land*, here the promise of the perfect life emerges from the dry concrete in the extraordinary image of a "lotus rose," one possible reading of the lines. The lotus has the shape of a rose; and the image brings together the lotus's associations of spiritual, ascetic perfection with the rose's various evocations: sensuous desire, England's political history, and Dante's divine "comedy." Epitomizing "Burnt Norton's" theme, the "lotus rose", also brings to completion "what might have been," the unfulfilled desire that points to "one end," love "reconciled among the stars."

Then in "Little Gidding" I, the "Zero summer" repeats this "impossible union" of opposites. In "Burnt Norton" and "Little Gidding" (part I) there is still an emptiness and blindness as in the corresponding part of *The Waste Land*, but now they create a capacitating sense of interior light and shared reality. I do not think Eliot could have invented this counterpoint between his early and late masterpieces unless he had lived it and made it true.

"Little Gidding" extends the community of the living to the community of the dead, whose voices are heard and answered "where prayer has been valid." Where has prayer not been valid, I have wondered, but Eliot's answer was this: Prayer is valid at Little Gidding because a community was forged there on the acceptance of a martyr's self-sacrifice (Charles I's), as Eliot said. A common center and purpose were affirmed and sanctified, as it were, "For a further union, a deeper communion" ("East Coker" V).

Study of Eliot's epiphanies and their experiential "moments" is one of the most rewarding approaches to his poetry, I think. The onto-theological logocentrism charged against him by certain applications of Derrida's theory appear to me quite unhelpful. Of course Eliot spent his life as a wordsmith. But in the thirties and forties he indicated that words serve no better than music in representations of time, imaged from its beginning to its end. This is why the musical analogy of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, or Nicholas of Cusa's "learned Ignorance," or S1. John of the Cross's *Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, and even Aquinas's *Summa Theologies* remind us of the many ways in which sense data relate to the unknown before and after words and music. Eliot's epiphanies emerge from silence, and each is constituted as an image, "a complete emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time," as Pound said. Even in *Four Quartets* Eliot is closer to Heidegger and Derrida than to Hopkins. For ordinary people, the unity of thought and emotion can be glimpsed on/yin "hints followed by guesses" ("The Dry Salvages" V). This is where

Eliot remains the soul mate of Joyce, Pound, and Virginia Woolf. Unlike their epiphanies, it is true, Eliot's mark human experience as bombarded by extra-sensory intuitions that have universal validity beyond the work of art, ones that are registered in sense experience and are transmitted through history as well as literature. Unlike Joyce, Pound, and Woolf, he has arrived at Christian faith through these epiphanies. Yet still, even for him "Ridiculous [is] the waste, sad time / Stretching before and after" each momentary illumination ("Burnt Norton" V).

Nothing could better describe the fragility of 20th century epiphanies, so different from those of either Greek or biblical antiquity. Yet no 20th century epiphanies confirm the participatory and consensual nature of the biblical epiphany so well as those in Four Quartets. After The Waste Land's "enciphered" epiphanies, they have the lucidity and accessibility that Eliot strove to achieve in his masterwork.

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