T.S. Eliot Essay, Research Paper

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) began his spiritual enquiry as a young man. At university he studied comparative religions and the medieval mystics. His thinking was greatly influenced by the philosopher Bertrand Russell and the poet Ezra Pound. Eliot?s experimentation with forms of poetry were a kind of literary journey which may have reflected something of his spiritual journey. Termed ?one of the major Christian poets of the 20th Century?(1), Eliot?s work on spiritual matters greatly appeals to me. I take pleasure from his ability with words and I am interested in the subject matter. The poem, The Hollow Men (1925) and two poems from The Ariel Poems collection (written and published 1927-30) are examined for evidence of Eliot?s pilgrimage towards a Christian faith and his membership of the Anglican Church. The earlier poem, The Hollow Men, was published when Eliot was experiencing extreme personal difficulty in his work and with his first wife?s poor health. Writing himself about an even earlier work, The Waste Land (1922), Eliot concluded that ?some forms of illness are extremely favourable to religious illumination?. I have not had personal experience of this but I am aware that serious illness and death can often make people focus sharply on the meaning of life. This could be said of the circumstances surrounding the writing of The Hollow Men, even if the ?illumination? simply highlighted a very dark time in Eliot?s life. The overriding image of humankind as ?hollow men? is powerful and depressing. In the context of a spiritual journey I would liken it to a ?wilderness experience?. Like the children of Israel who came out of Egypt, Eliot seems to be without direction or hope. While the ?hollow men? are not totally empty, even their stuffing is dead grass: ?Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!? and they are lifeless: ?Shape without form, shade without colour, paralysed force, gesture without motion.? Life is meaningless and Death seems to be the master of both life and death: ?death?s other kingdom? I like the strength of the poetry here. Eliot juxtaposes strong ideas together, e.g. ?paralysed force? in such a way that they appear to cancel each other out, leaving an emptiness. Throughout the five sections of the poem, Eliot uses many words and expressions that reinforce an atmosphere of emptiness and decay: ?cactus?..stone images?..fading star?.broken stone?.dying star?.hollow valley?.broken jaw?..lost kingdom?, etc. In Eliot?s world nothing seems whole, nothing seems to move or function, all is lost or being lost. I can sense his absolute despair when he writes: ?There are no eyes here in this valley of dying stars?? where ?we grope together ?? on this beach of the tumid river.? Here, he is sightless, unable to move forward with any understanding or insight. I think that Eliot feels trapped by his circumstances, which appear like a sinister swollen river, threatening to overwhelm him. There are similarities here with the experiences of the Psalmist in the Old Testament, who often felt trapped, surround by threatening enemies: e.g. ? O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; Many are saying of me, there is no help for him in God. Psalm 3 Eliot?s The Hollow Men finishes with some of his most quoted lines: ?This is the way the world ends This is the way the world ends This is the way the world ends Not with a bang but a whimper.? Here Eliot seems to be at an all time low. He is sad and cynical about life and his spiritual journeying could well have ended here. In Journey of The Magi and A Song for Simeon we find Eliot continuing on his spiritual quest. He seems to be slowly stepping forward, climbing and carefully building on previous experience. Both poems cover aspects of the journeying of biblical characters who are concerned with the arrival of the Christ-child, the Messiah. Both poems deal with the past, with a significant event, with the future (as seen from the time of that event) and with a time beyond time – death. I believe that these are some features common to a personal spiritual journey as experienced by T.S.Eliot. The Journey of the Magi is spoken by an old man. In the poem Eliot devotes much of the first two stanzas to describing an actual physical journey. This was a long, hard journey which took the Magi through foreign environments and climates, with ?cities hostile and towns unfriendly?. I imagine that this reflects a particularly difficult period of time in the life of TS Eliot. I think that his use of part of the famous seventeenth-century sermon (by Bishop Lancelot Andrewes (1555-1626) in the presence of James I of England (1)) portrays a personal emptiness and lifelessness: BISHOP ANDREWES Sermon 15 of the Nativity (1622) It was no summer progress. A cold coming they had of it, at this time of the year; just the worst time of the year, to take a journey, and specially a long journey, in. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off in solistitio brumali, the very dead of winter. T.S.ELIOT ?A cold coming we had of it, Just the worst time of the year For a journey, and such a long journey: The ways deep and the weather sharp, The very dead of winter.?. A Song for Simeon is also spoken by an old man. It too starts with a reference to a winter: ?Lord, the Roman?s hyacinths are blooming in the bowls and The winter sun creeps by the snow hills; The stubborn season has made a stand.?. In this poem, Eliot confines his comments on things of the past to four lines in the second stanza. In contrast to Journey of the Magi, which concentrates more on a physical journey, the time that has been spent making an inner journey of faith is emphasised: ?I have walked many years in this city?. We are aware too, that Simeon is very old. He is simply hanging on, waiting for God?s promise so that he can die: ?My life is light, waiting for the death wind, Like a feather on the back of my hand.? . Just as Eliot had his inner searching and wanderings, so he moved about from one place to another. He went from the USA to England, where he did further study, taught, and was naturalised as British subject. The difficulties with the mental and physical illness of his wife Vivien contributed to a separation and the complete breakdown of their marriage. I think that this would have added greatly to Eliot?s confusion and disillusionment with life. In both Ariel poems, Eliot focuses on an event that brings about the end of an old order and the beginning of a new one. In Journey of The Magi, I feel as though I am being led towards this event as I am brought out of an unfriendly environment into one which is warm, earthy, and appealing to the senses as in; ?temperate valley?, ?wet?, ?smelling of vegetation?, ?beating the darkness?. These are very powerful images and I can imagine being in that place. For the Magi, the life-changing event was ?a Birth?, and the place of ?it was (you may say) satisfactory?. The Magi were witnesses who ?had evidence and no doubt.?. I do not know if they fully understood the significance of the ?Birth?, but in the poem they are portrayed as among those who were forever changed by it. Eliot structures A Song For Simeon around lines from the prayer spoken by the temple priest Simeon as recorded in the Bible in Luke Ch.2 v 29-32: ?Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for my eyes have seen thy salvation?..? Simeon too was a witness. He was not present at the birthplace but he witnessed the presentation of the eight-day-old Christ-child as he was brought by his parents to the temple in Jerusalem for the rite of circumcision. Simeon did more than just see the child, for it is written in Luke Ch.2 v28 that ?Simeon took him in his arms? as he prayed. In the way that the Magi and Simeon were witnesses I think that T.S.Eliot would have seen himself as someone who could bear witness to the truth of Christian teaching. His search reached fulfilment when he embraced this teaching and was formally received into the Anglican church in 1927. In both the Ariel poems Eliot uses images that are significant for someone exploring the Christian faith. These images are also prophetic because the y tell of things that will happen to the baby Jesus in the future. An example of this in Journey of the Magi is: ?And three trees on the low sky?, which I am sure refers to the three crosses that will be on the hill of Calvary. Eliot also writes about ?hands dicing? and ?pieces of silver.? These mixed images speak of Roman soldiers at the crucifixion dicing for Jesus? clothes and pieces of silver paid to Judas for his betrayal of Jesus. There are several examples of prophetic image in A Song for Simeon. Two examples of these are: ?Before the time of cords and scourges and lamentation? and ?before the certain hour of maternal sorrow?. These refer to the scourging of Jesus before his crucifixion and to his mother?s weeping as he was crucified. I have wondered why Eliot uses these images and I think it us because the death of Jesus is a critically important part of the Christian faith. Once they had returned to their kingdoms the Magi were no longer happy with their lives; ?But no longer at the ease here in the old dispensation, With an alien people clutching their gods. I should be glad of another death.? Simeon expresses the same thoughts; ? I am tired with my own life and the lives of those after me?. Three times in the poem Simeon asks for peace, which I think refers to the peace of death. I do not think Eliot had a strong urge to die, but there is a Christian belief that death is not the end of the journey, but the beginning of a better life. I think that this is what Eliot is referring to. The Journey of the Magi and A Song for Simeon tell the story of a special birth from two different perspectives. It seems to me that together with The Hollow Men and a number of his other poems they are evidence of some of the personal experiences and the religious beliefs that were part of T.S.Eliot?s spiritual journey. Much of his journeying was wearying and burdensome, but he did come to a place of faith, and this encourages me as I continue in my personal spiritual journey. In his essay on Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), Eliot writes of Pascal?s ability to ?face unflinchingly the demon of doubt which is inseparable from the spirit of belief? : Eliot too knew this demon. This is evident in his work. I agree wholeheartedly with B. Rajan in The Man and His Work (Pelican Books) when he writes: ?Not all of us can share Eliot?s faith. But all of us can accept his poetry because really every line of it was written while looking into the eyes of the demon?. Matthew Macindoe T.S. Eliot?s Personal Spiritual Journey as traced in The Hollow Men Journey of the Magi and A Song for Simeon

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T.S. Eliot Collected Poems 1909 – 1962 Faber Brodie?s Notes on Selected Poems by T.S Eliot (1) Macmillan The Art of T.S. Eliot by Helen Gardner Faber T. S Eliot The Man & His Work Pelican Books The Holy Bible – Revised Standard Version Oxford Dictionary of Quotations (New Edition) Guild Publishing