

T. S. Eliot's 'Vita Nuova' and 'Mi-Chemin': 'The Sensus Historicus'

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TS. ELIOT's last play, *The Elder Statesman*, is dedicated to his second wife in a short poem which concludes:
The words mean what they say, but some have a further meaning
For you and me only.

This is ambiguous; but whether it refers to the words of the dedication, or of the play which follows, it is an explicit admission that some of Eliot's published work contains private as well as public meanings. It will be the purpose of this article to explore some of the 'private' but publicly available references in Eliot's poems and plays, and to show how these help to increase our understanding of his whole poetic corpus.

In pursuance of this aim it is necessary to draw conclusions as to some significant events in the poet's life. Biographical gossip about authors living or dead is always to be deplored; but sometimes a general outline of developments is necessary even for literary appreciation. In this respect, Eliot is an extreme case. Far from being a 'shred of platinum', he is one of the most personal of writers; moreover, his *Collected Poems* constitute a single edifice, comparable to George Herbert's *The Temple*; and his life is the ground-plan of the building. But the outline to be suggested is not intended as literal biography: the 'events' in it may be purely symbolic representations of spiritual crises. A number of congruent patterns appear in the works, which make up a richer and more harmonious design when referred to apparently historical origins. The enquiry will involve some difficult general problems of literary ethics and semantics, to which, however, only first sketches of solutions will be suggested.

Eliot's critical writing provides a window into his own 'private poetry-workshop'. Repeated successes have justified the

method. In particular, the essay on Dante (dated 1929, included in *Selected Essays*, 1963, pp. 237-77, and especially the section on the *Vita Nuova*, pp. 271-7) has been used to good effect in 1942 by Leonard Unger (in 'The Rose Garden', reprinted in *T. S. Eliot: Moments and Patterns*, 1966). The most interesting paragraph Unger quotes from Eliot's *Selected Essays* is that in which Eliot affirms his belief in the historicity of Dante's childhood love experience. It begins and ends thus:

In the first place, the type of sexual experience which Dante describes as occurring to him at the age of nine years is by no means impossible or unique. My only doubt (in which I found myself confirmed by a distinguished psychologist) is whether it could have taken place so *late* in life as the age of nine years. The psychologist agreed with me that it is more likely to occur at about five or six years of age . . . I cannot find it incredible that what has happened to others should have happened to Dante with much greater intensity. (p. 273)

The positive tone of this pronouncement strongly suggests that Eliot is speaking from personal experience. He, too, had a childhood 'vision of Beatrice', presumably by the age of six years. Now there is one poem only, in all his work, which presents such an encounter: the early poem in French, 'Dans le Restaurant' which is included in 'Poems 1920' in *Collected Poems*, 1909-62. (This poem is the immediate source of Part IV of *The Waste Land*.) And even this gives us the experience only in travesty. But the connections between the poem and Dante are close — closer, indeed, than Unger remarks.

The diner, the 'I' of the poem, does not actually interrupt the waiter's narrative: his 'replies', like those of the man in *The Waste Land* 111-38, are not in quotation marks, and the hypnotized reflection 'Les taches de son gilet montent au chiffre de trente-huit' is not even formally addressed to the waiter. Since these are interior utterances, we may conclude that they represent sincere reactions. One of these is that the waiter is a 'vieux lubrique'; he must therefore be at least conveying that impression — with a wink, perhaps, or a leer. The diner is not merely a snob: he feels that his most precious or most tragic experience is being soiled by a gross parody, especially as the babbling old lecher prophesies in spite of himself. First, the line 'J'avais sept ans, elle était plus petite' tallies with the *Vita Nuova* as to the relative ages of the boy and girl: Dante was nearly nine, while Beatrice was eight

years and four months old. Eliot may have reduced Dante's ages for the sake of realism, or to substitute the mystic seven for the mystic nine; but the boy remains a little older. (The probability of this occurring by chance, without reference to Dante, is only about one in four, since there are four ways of treating the ages: the writer may give no exact figures, or make both ages equal, or the girl older, or the boy older.)

Another allusion is very probably contained in the line 'Moi j'avais peur, je l'ai quitté à mi-chemin' (I was afraid, I left her in the middle of the way). The first half of the line seems to echo Prufrock, the second half (since *chemin* and *cammin* are cognates) Dante's famous first line 'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita', especially as Dante also had 'left' Beatrice (but spiritually) in the middle period of his life. Of course, this is not what the *waiter* means: presumably he intends a sexual innuendo — he was interrupted when half-way to his goal. The phrase 'à mi-chemin' may, indeed, have *four* distinct senses: (1) Literal: 'half way along the path'; (2) Metaphorical: the sexual innuendo; (3) Allegorical: the Dante reference; (4) Historical: analogy with the diner's (or poet's) experience. This scheme may remind us of the traditional Catholic fourfold interpretation of Scripture, which Dante expected his audience to apply also to the reading of his poems. It would not be surprising if Eliot had adopted the semantic principles of his master. It is, at least, very usual to find three or four levels of significance in his images, allusions, proper names, and even whole works.

We are now concerned especially with the fourth level, the *sensus historicus*. It is possible that 'Dans le Restaurant' may contain elements of an actual scene. In 'Burnt Norton', II, we read:

To be conscious is not to be in time
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
Be remembered

These are evidently three different moments of illumination, certainly symbolic but probably also actual moments experienced by the poet. 'The moment in the arbour where the rain beat' is the one travestied in 'Dans le Restaurant'. Here divine grace

appears in the aspect of pre-adolescent love; the drenching rain (cf. the withheld rain of *The Waste Land*) is a traditional symbol of fertilization, physical or spiritual. The rose-garden is part of the same image-complex, but stands rather for the love of maturity — as may be seen from the endpiece of *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, 'A Dedication to my Wife'. In most of Eliot's work the rose-garden has only a *virtual* existence; the girl with the primroses or hyacinths (flowers symbolizing early spring, or extreme youth) becomes the Rose only in a mystical, sublimated sense (*Rosa Mystica* — as in 'Ash Wednesday' — a title of the Virgin Mary, who is symbolically identified with Beatrice). This is because of the *gran rifiuto* (see *Inferno*, III, 55-60. The first three lines are cited in Eliot's notes for *The Waste Land* and the whole passage is relevant to Eliot's hollow men who have refused to commit themselves to any generous act of self surrender), which is the turning away of the male persona from the Hyacinth Girl (as she may be called from her 'Waste Land' name, for the sake of brevity).

Now if Eliot's experiences were at all parallel to Dante's, this event might be expected to take place in manhood, on an occasion distinct from the original vision. This second moment is dramatically, agonisingly caught in 'La Figlia Che Piange', where the couple concerned certainly seem to be adults (but perhaps very young adults; the epigraph associates the *figlia* with Venus disguised as a maiden in *Aeneid I*). There is no suggestion that the parting was caused by death, as in Dante's case; rather, by the faithlessness of the lover. And the result of the *rifiuto* is made clear in 'Burnt Norton', I. C. A. Bodelsen's interpretation of this scene (given in his *T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets*, 1958, pp. 43-7) is followed here in particular as to the reference of the pronouns 'we' and 'you'. The two people who (in the imaginary might-have-been) enter the garden are the poet and the Hyacinth Girl; the children in the leaves are the children of Kipling's 'They', the children whom they might have had — if they had married. (Children's voices among the leaves of apple trees have constantly this meaning in Eliot's poetry, the apple trees providing a link between the rose-garden and the Garden of Eden. See 'New Hampshire' in 'Landscapes' I, and 'Ode' in *Ara Vos Prec*, the latter never reprinted in *Collected Poems*.) We can now fit Prufrock

into this biographical pattern — the question he fails to ask is the overwhelming question, 'Will you marry me?'. (One reason why Eliot is so much influenced by Laforgue, especially in his Prufrock period, is that Laforgue deals with a similar failure in 'Solo de Lune' and is dominated by a revulsion from sex.) And the same, probably, is true of the Quester in 'The Waste Land'.

Why was the question not asked? 'Prufrock' supplies a part of the answer — 'I was afraid'. The Quester was daunted by the 'awful daring of a moment's surrender'. The boy in 'Dans le Restaurant' was frightened away — by a dog. This is the same 'Dog' that appears in *The Waste Land* (line 74) to prevent the rebirth of spring flowers (hyacinths?), i.e. the regeneration of Stetson, 'mon frère' — a hollow Everyman who has made the *rifiuto*. The ironic misquotation from Webster suggests that the animal may be a wolf in disguise — indeed, it is none other than the 'lupa' (she-wolf, bitch goddess, or Latin 'prostitute') which frightened and hindered Dante in *Inferno I*. This canine, whether male or female, dog or wolf, symbolizes for Eliot (as for Dante) Avarice, especially the avarice which destroys love or beauty; as may be seen from its appearance in a number of poems: 'Aunt Helen', line 8; 'Gerontion', line 21 ('dogwood', followed by 'judas', and in line 23 'Silvero' suggest the betrayal of Christ for the thirty pieces); 'Le Directeur', line 13 ('loup' associated with 'actionnaires'); 'Lune de Miel', line 4 (cf. lines 13, 14); 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales', lines 9, 23-4 (where Rachel is a Jewish 'lupa'); and, most clearly of all, the fifth Chorus from 'The Rock', lines 14-18, 28. Nor are we dependent only on symbolism: *The Elder Statesman* gives a literal version of this event; there it is money and worldly considerations which come between the hero and his eighteen-year-old mistress after he has 'pawed' her soul.

If this was Eliot's story, it may appear a very prosaic and everyday one. Whether this was literally the case or not, some inner event which could be so symbolized is required to make sense of the entire sequence of Eliot's major poems, in which the male personae are haunted by guilt for an original sin of omission, and are conscious of a consequent hollowness. Moreover, they never forget the wronged Hyacinth Girl. Following Unger and Grover Smith (in his *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, 1966) I would

say that she appears as a *main* character in each of the following (dates are approximately those of composition): 'La Figlia Che Piange' (1911), 'Dans le Restaurant' (1916-17), 'A Cooking Egg' (1918-19), *Gerontion* (1919), *The Waste Land* (1921), *Ash Wednesday* (1927-30), *Marina* (1930), *Burnt Norton* (1935), *The Family Reunion* (1939), *The Elder Statesman* (1958). She is also conspicuous as an *absence* (symbolized by eyes, star and perhaps rose) in 'The Hollow Men' (1924-5).

For most of these works, the case need not be argued in detail: it is well documented in Unger and Smith. But 'A Cooking Egg' will repay a careful scrutiny. There is an immediate personal reference in the first line of the epigraph 'En l'an trentiesme de mon aage'. Eliot was 30 years old on 26 September 1918; the poem was first published on May-day 1919. We are directed, therefore, to assume that the 'I' of 'A Cooking Egg' is the poet himself (the same line of Villon is used by Ezra Pound in *Mauberley* (1920), where again it refers to the poet himself) and that Pipit is a real person in his life. She is, in fact, the Hyacinth Girl; or rather, the woman, now aged nearly thirty, whom the Hyacinth Girl has become since the *rifiuto*. This interpretation emerges clearly enough from the evidence as presented by Grover Smith in his book. He does not, however, state the obvious conclusion. The identification of Pipit with Rose La Touche, first pointed out by F. O. Matthiessen in *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*, is highly significant: Rose was Ruskin's Beatrice figure, the great love and sorrow of his later life. He spoke of her in the language of Dante; he made an artificial stream for her in his garden at Denmark Hill, where they wandered together under the peach-blossom. She called the place 'Eden-land', and Ruskin compared its waters to those of Abana or Euphrates, the rivers of Damascus and Paradise, if not 'Thamesis'. (See *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. Cook and Wedderburn, 1903, xxxv, 561.)

There are echoes of Ruskin throughout 'A Cooking Egg', as well as in 'Burbank with a Baedeker', and perhaps even in 'Le Directeur', all in the same 1920 volume. (The 'seven laws' upon which Burbank meditates are Ruskin's 'seven lamps' of architecture. In 'Le Directeur' I suspect that the petite fille is Pippa-Pipit, *alias* Rose La Touche, who called Ruskin's artificial stream 'The gutter', whence 'egout'. Also the situation of the girl

vis-à-vis the director matches that of Maisie Batterson and Mr Ferry senior in *The Elder Statesman*.) Though the book on the table is not his, Ruskin certainly sketched views of Oxford colleges; Alps (and eagles) were among his favourite images; and the 'buttered scones and crumpets' of the last stanza are possibly a reminiscence of Rose's nickname for her elderly admirer — she called him 'St Crumpet', while her governess was 'Bun'! (*Works*, xxxv, 528.) Whether Ruskin did supply these details or not, Pipit is certainly Rose, the Rose of the rose-garden, 'our first world', the place 'where trees flower, and springs flow'. Her bird-like name (with perhaps a side-glance at Browning's Pippa) suggests her function as a bearer of the divine message, like the thrush in 'The Waste Land' and 'Burnt Norton'. But in her spinsterish maturity she is no longer heavenly: she can only provoke the wry 'ubi sunt?' of the last nine lines.

She is, in fact, essentially the same person as Mary in *The Family Reunion*. Mary has been a student at Oxford (which may explain why Pipit has the *Views*); when the play begins Charles supposes 'she must be getting on for thirty'. (See T. S. Eliot, *Collected Plays*, 1962, p. 59. But Charles is imperceptive, and Mary is likely to be a few years older, perhaps 33 or 34. When they were both children, Harry 'seemed so much older' (p. 78), an unnatural expression if he actually had been more than five years older. Eliot, unlike Shakespeare, always takes great care over such details. The relative ages of Harry and Mary would then agree with those of Dante and Beatrice, and of the children in 'Dans Le Restaurant'.) She is certainly the Hyacinth Girl — the flowers she carries at her first entrance are hyacinths (Eliot's instruction for the original London production) and the rose-garden imagery is associated with Agatha, who (as appears later) is her poetic double. Eliot's proper names are very often significant: 'Mary', of course, recalls the Virgin, whence also Beatrice. Moreover, she was the hero's intended bride, and in childhood played with him in a wood by a river (cf. the willows — probably by a stream — in 'Dans le Restaurant'). And Harry is just as clearly a persona of the poet as the 'I' of 'A Cooking Egg'. This play is full of numerology, for which Eliot, like Dante, has an inordinate fondness: Harry's age, 35, which is so heavily emphasized in the text, represents Dante's *mezzo del cammin*, the mid-point of the Biblical

three-score-and-ten; the age also of Gotama's enlightenment. Harry was married seven years, and since his wedding has been away from Wishwood altogether for eight, like Menelaus and Orestes. But the numbers are not only of mythical significance, as a little simple arithmetic will show: Harry's age at his marriage was $35 - 8 = 27$ years = $1915 - 1888$, i.e. Eliot's age at his first marriage. With this age we reach the end of his *Vita Nuova*.

After the death of Beatrice, Dante soon consoled himself; with apparently no very terrible results, though he later regarded this part of his life with remorse. But Eliot's 'middle way' — the period of his first marriage — was disastrous. The tone of his work darkens with the 1920 volume, and in 'The Waste Land' a new obsessive female figure appears — we may call her the Drowned Woman. She is not always literally drowned, but certainly destroyed; as may be seen from the following table of her appearances:

<i>Work</i>	<i>Persona</i>	<i>Fate</i>
<i>The Waste Land</i>	Ophelia (line 172)	frustrated, mad, self-drowned.
<i>Sweeney Agonistes</i>	unnamed girl	murdered, preserved in lysol.
<i>The Family Reunion</i>	(i) Harry's wife (ii) Amy	drowned at sea (murdered?) nearly murdered by Harry's father; killed by Harry's departure.

With the Drowned Woman we should perhaps associate the River Girl (the phrase was applied to the poet's first wife, according to Stephen Spender, 'Remembering Eliot', *T. S. Eliot* (ed. Allen Tate, 1967)), or Girls — in 'The Waste Land' represented by most of the female characters of Part III, the 'nymphs', the Thames Daughters, Mrs Porter and her daughter. Of course, 'all the women are one woman' — even the Hyacinth Girl adds a touch of irony and pathos to the complex. The situations and reactions of the 'Waste Land' women might be represented by the sequence: seduction — sterility — frustration — hysteria — madness — 'death by water' (a phrase which includes the sexual 'little death' beside the river, spiritual death, and actual drowning). Line 193, 'White bodies naked on the low damp ground' is nicely ambiguous, and sums up the process. Drowning, of course,

overtakes the men, too, and the half-men — Phlebas, Ferdinand's father, the 'king my brother' (line 191) who is probably the mad homosexual King Ludwig of Bavaria, Wagner's friend, mysteriously drowned in the Starnbergersee (as George L. K. Morris argued in 1954 in 'Marie, Marie, Hold on Tight', reprinted in *T. S. Eliot*, ed. Hugh Kenner, 1962. The expression 'the king my brother' can be justified if Tiresias speaks it in the persona of Elizabeth, Empress of Austria); and Tiresias, who is everybody. I must protest against that interpretation which sees the drowning of Phlebas and his brothers and sisters merely as a prelude to their rebirth. In the fertility rituals, the god or hero is already dead before he is committed to the reviving waters — he is never drowned. Drowning is a disaster, a shipwreck of the soul and mind, perhaps even damnation, as in the case of Ulysses in the *Inferno*: the sea, river or lake which effects it is, very often in Eliot, a symbol of sex or of meaningless duration — as in 'The Dry Salvages'. Water is life, but too much kills; and it is never without some sexual connotation, even when it also represents the grace of God. The fertilizing rain never actually falls on the Waste Land. The 'damp gust bringing rain', of lines 393–4, gets nowhere, not even to the end of its own sentence; Ganga is sunken and the leaves still waiting in the very next line, while the plain remains 'arid'. The poem ends on a note of desperation — 'Hieronymo's mad againe' — and the peace which passeth understanding can only be glimpsed as a remote possibility.

It is also a mistake to see *The Waste Land* as a lament for the past glories of Europe, or of civilization. The past glories are as rudely handled as the present sordidness. Both are tainted — Cleopatra and Elizabeth I are as hollow and lustful as the modern London women; St Augustine and Gotama are quoted to remind us that man has always been plagued by his own sensuality. They also indicate the way out — not more fruitful sexual relations, as might be expected on the basis of the Weston-Frazer myth, but total asceticism. This, perhaps, is the fundamental reason why the fertilizing rain cannot fall: the poem is permeated with a disgust for sex as such, the kind of life-rejecting horror which drove Gotama to abandon his wife and concubines and to go out into the wilderness.

We may suspect that so strong a revulsion must spring from a personal predicament. 'I wrote *The Waste Land*,' Eliot remarked in *On Poetry* (1947), 'simply to relieve my own feelings.' Indeed, he wrote it while recovering from a breakdown induced largely by his wife's breakdown. It is no secret that Eliot's first marriage was sterile and destructive to both parties. It came to an end, effectively, in 1933.

The works of the 1920's and 1930's reflect this long agony. The desert of 'The Hollow Men' (1924-5) is evidently a mere annex of *The Waste Land*. There is still no rain. Sterility is again emphasized in 'Sweeney Agonistes' (1924-6) by the preservation, dead and unchanging, of the woman's body in the 'gallon of lysol'. In *The Family Reunion* (1939) the barren relationship of Harry and his wife is 'an empty hospital pervaded by a smell of disinfectant' — or, worse, 'a contagion of putrescent embraces on dissolving bone'.

To comprehend the moral structure of *The Family Reunion* it must be realized that the members of the family form poetically equivalent pairs. This is true even of the minor relatives: Ivy and Violet, Gerald and Charles, and the non-appearing John and Arthur, the hollow men. More importantly, the six central personae reduce to a triangle. Mary and Agatha are younger and older versions of the Beatrice figure, Mary being the rejected Hyacinth Girl, while Agatha (whose name means 'good') is the inspiring force of spiritual regeneration, lover of Harry's father and cause of Harry's own existence. Harry and his father are also doubles; both have been trapped in marriage, and have wished to kill their wives; Harry finally avenges his father by destroying his mother. It is a paradox that Harry's wife and his mother Amy, literally opposed in the family story, also form a pair: both stand for unchanging sterility.

It must be clear to all sensitive readers that the main tone of Eliot's middle period is horror mingled with sexual disgust, and the main attitude numbness, rising at times to remorse. The remorse is twofold: for the betrayal of the Hyacinth Girl, and the subsequent destruction of the Drowned Woman (who, presumably, if only in the *sensus historicus*, symbolizes the poet's wife). The dry asceticism of the Christian poems needs to be understood and evaluated against this background: 'Ash Wed-

nesday' and the 'Ariel Poems' represent attempts to salvage something from a shipwreck. This interpretation is confirmed by the epigraph to 'Marina'. The situation of Seneca's Hercules has a personal application which I have never seen mentioned in print — he has, in a fit of madness, killed his wife and children, but is now being restored to rationality, if not happiness. For Eliot, the reference could include both the Hyacinth Girl and the Drowned Woman; the dead (i.e. unborn) children appear in dream in the poem itself (lines 20-1), and so does the Hyacinth Girl, who is sublimated into Marina.

After *The Cocktail Party* (1949), which also deals with salvage operations and the ascetic solution, Eliot passes out of the 'middle way' into his final period, which culminates in his happy second marriage in 1957. Already in *The Confidential Clerk* (1953) the atmosphere is lighter; sterility is no longer emphasized, and sexual horror is absent. One has only to compare the image of smell in the early poem 'Lune de Miel' (1916-17), 'La sueur aestivale, et une forte odeur de chienne', with that in the dedication of *Collected Poems* 'to my Wife' (1962?), 'Of lovers whose bodies smell of each other', to appreciate the difference. He had finally achieved the Rose Garden, and that not only in a spiritual sense.

But he still looks back to review the past in a work which clarifies earlier events for us. *The Elder Statesman* (1958) is dedicated to his wife with an earlier version of the poem referred to above. The ending already quoted is significant:

The words mean what they say, but some have a further meaning
For you and me only.

These lines can certainly be read as referring to the text of the play; and we may be sure that Eliot would not have published them unless he intended them to be so read. There are indeed private meanings in the play. Now, if the author really wanted these to remain private, we should respect his wishes. But the clues (this word is the only appropriate one) as usual are not in the least difficult to solve, and the Dedication is a public provocation to attempt their unravelling. All this is merely a piece of coyness on the part of Old Possum.

It is well known that *The Elder Statesman* is based on the *Oedipus at Colonus* of Sophocles; also a last play by an old man, in

which the hero looks back on a life of suffering and prepares for death. Both plays have, therefore, obvious personal reference to their authors. But unlike Sophocles, Eliot faces his situation as a Christian; his preparation is by a general confession, followed by absolution. Lord Claverton (the most transparent of all the author's masks) confesses himself to his daughter Monica (a Beatrice figure, like Marina) and to her fiancé Charles. The love scenes of Charles and Monica have struck some critics as unreal, and so they are; rightly, since they belong to the dimension of the might-have-been, the ghostly rose-garden of Burnt Norton; as Beatrice says, in the Earthly Paradise, 'questi fu tal nella sua vita nuova / virtualmente . . .' Indeed, the whole play corresponds more essentially to Cantos 30 and 31 of the *Purgatorio* than to *Oedipus at Colonus*; it is Dante's confession to Beatrice, and his plunging into Lethe. (Numerology seems to confirm the connection with Dante. Maisie was 18 when she met Richard Ferry — approximately Beatrice's age at her first encounter with Dante as an adult; Richard was 25 or a little older — Dante's age at Beatrice's death. Thirty-five years have elapsed since, i.e. half a lifetime since the beginning of Richard's 'middle way'.) We notice that the scene in the *Purgatorio* is not a private, but a public one: the confession is made in the presence of the whole Church of God. Eliot's final work is certainly intended in the same spirit; it is a ritual Confiteor, completing the series of muffled cries for understanding and sympathy which began with the 1920 volume *Ara Vos Prec* (. . . 'sovegna vos a temps de *ma dolor*').

Claverton confesses to sins against two people, Fred Culverwell and Maisie Batterson. We are not concerned with Culverwell, since whatever *sensus historicus* may be concealed here does not seem to have entered Eliot's poetic works. But Maisie Batterson is another matter. She represents the women against whom the poet feels that he has sinned (as perhaps Culverwell represents the men). When she comes back into his life, she has to remind the hero of her identity:

There were the three of us — Effie, Maudie and me.
 That day we spent on the river — I've never forgotten it —
 The turning point of all my life!
 Now whatever were the names of those friends of yours
 And which one was it invited us to lunch?

I declare, I've utterly forgotten their names.
 And you gave us lunch — I've forgotten what hotel —
 But such a good lunch — and we all went in a punt
 On the river — and we had a tea basket
 With some lovely little cakes — I've forgotten what you
 called them,
 And you made me try to punt, and I got soaking wet
 And nearly dropped the punt pole, and you all laughed at me.
 Don't you remember?¹

Now this sounds very much like the river scene in Part III of *The Waste Land*. We are never told in *The Elder Statesman* exactly what happened on this day, 'The turning point of all my life', but *The Waste Land* supplies the answer (see especially lines 100, 193, 198, 205, 214, 292-9). Effie, Maudie and Maisie are the three Thames Daughters, or River Girls, and their men friends are 'the loitering heirs of city directors'. Maisie's unanswered questions in this passage are provocative — fairly satisfactory answers to most of them could be supplied from 'The Fire Sermon'; certainly the name of the host at lunch, and that of the hotel.

This does not imply that there is any literal historical sense behind this river scene. For one thing, Maisie is obviously a composite. She is the rejected mistress, who should have borne the hero's children (cf. Agatha in *The Family Reunion*); her age suggests La Figlia Che Piange, and Beatrice. The symbolic value of 'soaking wet' is interesting — it connects the Hyacinth Girl with the River Girl and the Drowned Woman.

All these trivialities are bound to suggest some interesting general questions. Are private meanings admissible at all in published works? Is a private meaning even a *meaning*, in the usual sense of the term? Should a professed 'classicist' use the incidents of his private life as material for public poems?

As to the last question, there can be no doubt that Eliot's *general* method is justifiable. He has justified it himself in the Dante essay included in *Selected Essays*:

Now Dante, I believe, had experiences which seemed to him of some importance; not of importance because they had happened to him and

¹ *Collected Plays*, p. 321. We may notice that Effie says of Richard Ferry, 'That man is hollow', or 'yellow', which points to his identity with Eliot's other 'hollow men', and echoes the *viltate* of the *gran rifiuto*, *Inferno*, III. 60.

because he, Dante Alighieri, was an important person who kept press-cutting bureaux busy, but important in themselves; and therefore they seemed to him to have some philosophical and impersonal value. (p. 272-3)

Dante's whole method, in peopling the infernal and celestial regions with his friends, enemies and masters, was to provide symbolic figures, who would have both typical and personal meaning. Eliot has done the same throughout his work; most notably and clearly in the *Quartets*, where each poem has personal reference either in the title or in some vivid personal (but non-historical) scene, such as that of the first movement of 'Burnt Norton' or the second movement of 'Little Gidding'. Indeed, the reconciliation of the One and the Many (whether under the aspect of individual lives, or points in space or time) is the master-theme of the *Quartets*. With one exception — the 'Burnt Norton' rose-garden passage — it is handled in the true Dantesque manner: the personal references are used frankly, not hinted at, while the reader's attention is carried from the particular to the general. 'Home is where one starts from.'

It Eliot had always written like this, there could be no objection to his personalism. But at other times the too-personal allusion tends only to embarrass the reader. It might have been better to follow the master's example of an explicit *Vita Nuova* in prose. Some kinds of reticence defeat their own ends; the reticence that is combined with the dropping of hints is bound to be followed by guesses, and indeed incurs the suspicion that it means to invite them.

The semantic problems raised by Eliot's multiple meanings are much more difficult to deal with. Where should the reader draw the line between a 'meaning' and a private association? 'Meaning' ceases at the point beyond which no reader, not even the most sensitive and literate, could grasp a clear significance from the published text, in the context of the entire corpus. When Eliot's friend John Hayward tells us in his notes to the *Quartets* (quoted in Bodelsen's *T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets*) that 'in a desert or a city' means 'in the Thebaid or in Padua', we have every right to be derisive, and to point out the difference between the meaning of a text and the particulars that were in the author's mind at the time of writing. When Eliot places some important 'meaning' on the

private side of this limit (and he does so occasionally) he is breaking the social contract involved in publication, and the result is simply a bad poem. This is what Yvor Winters called in his book *In Defense of Reason* (1943), 'reference to a non-existent plot'. One effect of Eliot's deliberate obscurity is to abolish for us the distinction, normal and proper in the study of other poets, between an allusion and a reminiscence.

In conclusion, the *literary* importance of understanding at least the outlines of Eliot's symbolic biography needs to be made clear. The *Collected Poems 1909-1962* have been carefully arranged to begin with 'Prufrock' — a monologue on the sterility induced by the *rifiuto* — and to end with the joyful dedication 'to my Wife'. What we find between these limits is essentially a single poem (we might call it the 'Eliad') whose argument is the poet's life. Without reference to this argument (comprehensible enough from a careful reading of the whole corpus), some of the apparently isolated fragments become quite unintelligible (for example, 'Eyes that last I saw in tears', and 'The wind sprang up at four o'clock'), while a great many others lose a whole dimension of religious and emotional significance (e.g. 'La Figlia Che Piange', 'Dans le Restaurant', 'A Cooking Egg', and 'Marina'). Moreover, in Eliot the 'individual work of art' is an entity often impossible to delimit. Before 1962 the boundaries of the individual items were always somewhat provisional — the bits were continually being reshuffled in new combinations. At last the fragments were well shored, and the pattern completed. (This, incidentally, gives rise to another complexity of significance — the earlier poems may have had distinctly different meanings when first written and when later fitted into the pattern.) And within the finished epic there are divisions of different rank, corresponding to stanzas, cantos and books; for example, the rose-garden passage in 'Burnt Norton' forms part of a Movement, which is part of a Poem, which is part of a Set (*Four Quartets*). Which of these is the 'individual work of art'? The 'Eliad', like the *Divine Comedy*, must be read whole, and at times elucidated with the help of the plays. The more we understand of the general plan, the better will be our appreciation of those shorter pieces which still remain obscure.