

ASH-WEDNESDAY: ELIOT'S RELIGIOUS MEDITATION WITH THE CONCEPTION OF BIRTH AND DEATH

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Eliot's Ash Wednesday is a religious meditation .The title of the poem refers to Ash-Wednesday, the first forty days of 'Lent' which is a time for self reflection, sacrifice and repentance *Ash –Wednesday* is the first of long poem, drawing on Christian Liturgical. It is originated out of separate poems; three of the sessions were first published as single, independent poems. Section II appeared in the Saturday review of literature, December 1927 Section I in commerce, spring 1928; and Section III in Commerce, Autumn 1929, Section IV, V and VI previously published, were then added to complete the sequence. The six sections were published together under the title Ash-Wednesday in 1930.

In order to understand the poem it is necessary to know the religious significance of the term "Ash-Wednesday". It is a day of experiencing humility while performing this rituals the priest dips his thumbs in ashes and makes the sign of the cross on the fore-head, murmuring these words , "Remember, Oman, that thou are dust, and unto dust thou shall return," a version of God's words to Adam when he expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden OF Eden (Genesis iii,19) In this background Eliot uses a Chain of religious metaphors in order to define the nature and scope of 'humility' in the Christian sense.

Further, in order to understand the spiritual content of the poem it is necessary to refer to what saint, John of the cross says about the 'Dark night' of the soul :

In each of these saint John gives counsel for the
Religious experience of purgation and explains
That those who could attain union with God must
Enter the condition of the soul called the 'dark night'
This condition is of two stages: the dark
night of sense and the dark night of spirit, in
which sense and sprit respectively are purged.
The Ascent, counsel for the active way of
purgation is intended for proficient, the dark
night counsels for the passive way for beginners.
The Passive way is that where the soul does
nothing and God works in the soul and it remains
as it were patient.

‘Ash-Wednesday’ is based on the counsel for the passive way of purgation. Since Eliot was confirmed into the Church of England in 1927, he sincerely thought about purgation of his individual –self- Humility as defined by the Christian mystics is not only thinking of their own affairs but having very little satisfaction with themselves, they consider all others as for better than himself. His conversation gave him an extraordinary sense of surrender and gain, as if he had finally crossed a very wide, deep river, never to return again, Ash- Wednesday with this aim clearly states the individuals efforts of renounce the world.

The poem begins with the translated quotation from Cavalcanti and this immediately broken up into fragments suggesting the speaker’s struggle to find expression.

In the first section of the poem Eliot uses the word ‘because’ ten times. This frequent ‘because’ is away of reasoning: arguments are presented by the convert as he meditates on the past, present and future. The opening lines of the poem are :

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn
Desiring this man’s gift and that man’s scope.
No longer strive to strive towards such things

(Line 1-5)

The above lines quoted clearly indicate of the protagonist towards the spiritual world, now he no more needs the things of the sensual world. The protagonist of the poem is a Christian in the process of purgation. Ash- Wednesday renders the conflict of old feelings with the new, but it registers the efforts of renunciation rather than its triumph. The poem evokes feelings of loss and emptiness, and it renders the difficulty of subjugating desire and surrendering to disbelief.

The eagle as a symbol in the first part of the poem is directly taken from the bible, as it is closely associated with the renewal of life. In religious context the eagle is used to symbolize spiritual rebirth. It is a common place in the bible, as in Psalm ciii.5: so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle’s. In medieval Christian allegory the eagle in its old age representing the sinful soul, is able to renew its youth by flying into the circle of the sun’s flames, where it burns off all its feathers, and then falling blinded into a fountain of water. This signifies spiritual regeneration through baptism. By locating this symbol Eliot wants to emphasize the idea of purgation which will lead him to the highest point in spiritual life.

The last part of this first section of the poem teaches us to sit still refers to passive way the soul prepares to accept god:

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death
Pray for us now and at the hour of our death

The second section of the poem introduces us to the stronger issues of repentance: the bone must die. At the same time he maintained same balance between intense bitterness and hertless levity, caring and not caring:

Lady ,three white Leopards sat under a juniper –tree
In the cool of the day , having fed to satiety
On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been
Contained
In the hollow round of my skull and God said
Shall these bones live?

In these lines the parts of body special chosen in the lines represents a verity of human aspects and skill like: legs represents activity and motion, heart is a symbol of emotion , liver express sensuality and skull represents though of mind. In this section white bones, white lady and white leopard refers to purity.

This second part of ‘Ash – Wednesday’ presents the renewing power of grace. Death is the second theme of the poem and like the first section it contain the image of the ‘Juniper tree’ and the image of the tree white leopard’s as this symbol are transformed from the bible. It is felt that in order to understand this section of the poem it is necessary to possess the highest degree of knowledge about the Biblical stories i.e. of their prophets the sainta.As Eliot’s frequently uses the symbols and images taken out from the Bible. In the Bible leopards are God’s agents for the destruction of evil: ‘a lion out of the forest shall stay them, and a wolf of the evenings shall spoil them, a leopard shall watch over their cities: every one that goeth out thence shall be torn in pieces : because their transgressions are many , and their backslidings are increased’ (Jeremiah v 6).The three white leopards here seems to be agents are of purgation who devour the appetites and lusts of the self. White is the colour of purity and faith, and it associates the leopards with the lady ‘in a white gown’ (line 58) and with the whiteness of the bones which atone (line 59).It has been suggested that the leopards signify the world, the flesh and the devil. They have also been interpreted as personify the goodness of the lady, her loveliness and the fact that she honours the virgin in meditation (smith 45) .Next the image of the juniper tree is closely associated with Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of bones, in which God predicts the spiritual regeneration of Israel.Fromthe Biblical story of the profet Elijah. When Queen Jezebel threatened him with death , he escaped into the wilderness and, under the shade of a juniper tree, prayed that God would take his life since he was no better than his father.God , however, sent him food and water , which fortified him for forty days (IKings XIX ,1-8).The juniper tree may be interpreted asa symbol of rebirth and of renewal of strength and life.

Part second ends with the bones under the juniper tree happy and singing.The idea implicit in this symbol(juniper tree) is of the renewal of life, as the protagonist is starving ifor the renewal of his life :

Under a juniper –tree the bones sang, scattered and shining.
 (Line 89)

The third section of the poem of Ash- Wednesday uses stair symbolism to pictures the individuals ascent to the higher state of the mind. As, in the opening lines of the third section Eliot uses the word ‘turning’ which in itself carries a wide range of meaning in the process of spiritual progress as :

At the first turning of second stair
 I turned and saw below
 (Line 96-97)

Here in these lines the turnings are probably from Lancelot Andrews describing repentance as a kind of circle consisting of two turnings – first a turn where in we look forward to God, and then a turn again where in we look backward to our sins. As Elsie Duncan Jones points out, the ‘turn’ in the first line establishing the pivot on which the whole poem is to hang: It is not to be defined as a turn from unrighteousness, from the world to God, or from past to present: it is sometimes one, and the sometimes the others, and the ambiguity is fundamental (.Rajun 39).The stairs resemble the spiritual staircase or the ladder of contemplation found in the writing of the mystics such as st. John of the cross. It has been suggested that the three stairs of this section correspond to Dante’s purgatorial ascent, and to the three steps at the gate of

purgatory which have been interpreted as the steps of sincerity, contrition and love. Eliot adopts them in order to render the struggle, the doubt, and the conflict of the spiritual quest. This is an image of the split self. It is in image of the temptations of the world which comes in between the individual's ascent to a higher state of mind:

Struggling with the devil of the stairs who wears
 The deceitful face of hope and of despair
 (Lines 101-102)

In the first part the 'I' did not hope to touch but in the third part the individual turns again and again. Like Dante in the Divine Comedy he is unaged mounting the stair. His struggle is the devil, appearing as spring times sweetness indicates his spiritual progress which are remarkable cost of imagery Eliot picturises the hesitating temptation of the world:

At the first turning of the third stair
 Was a slotted window bellied like the figs' fruit?
 And beyond the hawthorn blossom and a pasture scene
 The broad backed figure drest in blue and green.
 Enchanted the may time with an antique flute.
 (Line 108-112)

The broadbacked figure is associated with the vegetative beauty of May, in the month of warmth and sweetness. To explain on the flute these an invitation to enjoy the beauty of spring but it is impossible for the protagonist who have made up his mind not to turn back. The blue and green colour of the player's attire perhaps deceptively recalls the liturgical symbolism of the colour- the Blue for Heaven and the Green for the Hope(smith 149). In this section of the poem the speaker acknowledges his unworthiness to turn to God.

The fourth section of the Ash –Wednesday is a directly concerned with the spiritual progress of an individual as in the other three section of the poem, it also uses various images and symbols to present its theme of the spiritual progress. Among the various symbols used in this section the most important symbols are of the colours and the yew tree. The violet and green of this section are not the references to flower and leaves but they are symbols of celestial experience and of new hope. The white of Mary is a symbol of purity. The colour symbolism is remarkably used to suggest the progress made in divine experience. The figure in white and blue is perhaps a penitent and the entire colours taken together emphasize the idea of beautiful.

The silent sister veiled in white and blue
 Between the yews , behind the garden God,
 Whose flute is breathless, bent her head and signed but
 Spoke no word.

(141-143)

Priapus, a Greek God of fertility and of gardens, was usually honored with statues in gardens and orchards. It is the silence of the sister that prevails, and her silent gesture – perhaps the sign of the cross which makes the fountain spring and the bird ring, renewing the sources of spiritual life. Here again in this symbol one can note the idea of the renewal of life through spiritual inclinations. Side by side with colour symbolism, Eliot uses the symbolism of the Yew tree commenting on the yew tree symbolism Helen Gardner rightly points out that changes of many in the same images by their reoccurrence is witnessed in Ash- Wednesday and in the four Quartets “The Yew tree for instance , used many times in the last three poems of Ash-

Wednesday occurs only three times in the four Quartets; but each time with different significance. In the second verse of the lyric in the *Burnt Norton*, the chilled fingers of youth – the touch of death hardly brushing the cheeks give vague sense of foreboding.” 4

The Yew is an ever green tree. It is associated with graveyards and remembrance and is emblematic of grief. It has suggestions of both morality and immortality. As the tree planted in church yards it suggests death, and its long life symbolizes immortality. It is also an emblem of the resurrection of Christ because it is evergreen. Its occurrence for the first time in the fourth section signifies the idea of immortality. In the fifth section the Yew tree is associated with virgin Mary and in this reference it signifies the presence of divinity; and in the last section the yew tree is shaken to give an answer related to the spiritual progress of the protagonist :

But when the voices shaken from the yew tree drift away
Let the other yew be shaken and reply;

(Line 207-208)

In these lines there are two kinds of yews tree; the first does not give an answer to the question related to the high dreams of the individual but second yew tree is expected to solve the problems because it grows with the blessed sister.

The fifth section of the poem concentrates on the circling motion of the individual self. Here the silence of the ‘word’ is a reference to the baby Christ who maintains complete silence. Silence is regarded as a necessary an individual .Like the other section of the poem this section also uses few images i.e. the images of desert in the garden is probably the inner space of spiritual aridity, that part of self which is unable to believe. The paradox of the garden in the garden is to be found in Israel xxx, 1-2 , where it is prophesied that the glory of God’s coming will make the desert fertile: and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rare’. The image would therefore signify spiritual renewal. The line enacts the conflict between doubt and belief.

The sixth section focuses our attention on individual natural vigour and spontaneous movement .Eliot now refers to *Paradise Roman III 85-87*, and, ‘his will is our peace; it is that sea to which all moves that it createth and that nature maketh.’The essence of the *Divine Comedy* as of *Ash-Wednesday* is experienced in the individuals surrender to the will of God prayer. The final experience in the spiritual experience of the individual is an experience of divinity embodied in ‘Anima Christ’ which is an ancient prayer a Roman Catholic Hymn.

The textual analysis shows, as Helen Gardiner (Pg -62) points Mr. Eliot in England fashion employed phrases from the prayers and liturgies of the Church. But it is very doubtful whether these phrases fulfill their proper poetic function or not. It is however true, Helen Gardiner says further, the discovery of faith is assumed .*Ash- Wednesday* as its title warns us is a poem of purgation it deals with the mortification of the natural man efforts to confirm the will but the theme of penitence and expression towards the holiness. The acceptance of the church discipline of self- contrition , confession and satisfaction , is lost by another theme, it is clear that the poem springs from intermediately personal experience so painful that it can be hardly hinted at and so immediate that it cannot be wholly translated in to symbols’’(Pg 104).

Allen Tate in his essay an *Ash-Wednesday* points out that , “the six poems are a brief moment of religious experience in an age that believes religion to be a kind of defeatism, and puts all its hope for man in finding the right secular” 5. For Leonard Unger “*Ash-Wednesday* comes to stand for a state of mind, a state of the soul.”(Pg.42)

The poem as *Wednesday* presents a beautiful picture of Eliot’s views about the religion with the conception of birth and death .Eliot influenced by Dante’s philosophy of life and religion which we can see clearly in his writing As the poem *Ash –Wednesday* uses various

images and symbols to explore its complete theme. Although few images and symbols, though difficult to understand, as they are directly transformed from the bible but after a careful study of these symbols and images, it becomes quite easier to understand its meaning. As it is clear that the spiritual progress of an individual interruption by the world of senses. The poem Ash-Wednesday renders the conflict of the old feelings with the new, but it registers the efforts of renunciation rather than its triumph. After his conversion Eliot may have experienced a sense of surrender and gain, as he wrote to Stead in his letter of 15 March 1928. But the poem evokes feelings of loss and emptiness, and it renders the difficulty of subjecting desire and surrendering belief.

WORK –CITED

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