LYNDALL GORDON

ELIOT'S EARLY YEARS

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I should finally like to thank the Rhodes Trust for a fellowship which enabled me to complete the book, and the Principal and Fellows of St. Hilda's College, Oxford, for their hospitality from 1973 to 1975.

Abbreviations

ASG *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy.* The Page-Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia, 1933. London: Faber, 1934; New York: Harcourt Brace, 1934*.

AW 'Ash Wednesday', 1930 (see *The Collected Poems*).

CC *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings.* London: Faber, 1965; New York: Farrar Straus, 1965, rpr. Noonday–Farrar, 1968*.

CP *The Collected Poems of T. S. Eliot 1909–1962.* London: Faber, 1963; New York: Harcourt Brace, 1963*.

facs. WL *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound,* ed. Valerie Eliot. London: Faber, 1971; New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971*.

FQ *Four Quartets,* 1943 (see *The Collected Poems*).

ICS *The Idea of a Christian Society.* London: Faber, 1939; New York: Harcourt Brace, 1940, rpr. in *Christianity and Culture,* Harvest-Harcourt, 1960*.

KE *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley.* London: Faber, 1964*; New York: Farrar Straus, 1964.

NDC *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture.* London: Faber, 1948; New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949, rpr. in *Christianity and Culture**.

NEW *New English Weekly.*

NYRB *New York Review of Books.*

OPP *On Poetry and Poets.* London: Faber, 1957; New York: Farrar Straus, 1957, rpr. Noonday–Farrar, 1969*.

SE *Selected Essays.* London: Faber, 1932; New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932, rpr. 1960*.

SW *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism.* London: Methuen, 1920; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920. Rpr. London: University Paperbacks, Methuen, 1967*.

* Editions used in text. In the footnotes and source notes, when both English and American publishers of a book are cited, the first cited is the one used in this book.

TLS *Times Literary Supplement.*

UPUC *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England.* Charles Eliot Norton Lectures for 1932–3 at Harvard University. London: Faber, 1933; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1933, rpr. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970*.

WL *The Waste Land*, 1922 (see *The Collected Poems*).

1. *Early Models*

THOMAS STEARNS ELIOT was born in 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri, the son of a New England schoolteacher and a St. Louis merchant. Thirty-eight years later he was baptized as an Anglican in an English village. Such facts tell little of a man for whom there was usually a gap between his outward and his private life, the formulated, highly articulate surface and the inward ferment. Wyndham Lewis painted Eliot's face as if it were a mask, so that he might distinguish Eliot's formal surface from his hooded introspective eyes, and the severe dark lines of his suit from the flesh of his shoulders beneath. Virginia Woolf wrote that his hazel eyes seemed oddly lively and youthful in a pale, sculptured, even heavy face.[1]

Eliot was obsessed by his private experience and determined to guard it. He was barely famous in 1925 when he decided that there should be no biography.[2] He urged those close to him to keep silence. Many letters are shut away until the next century. Meanwhile, Eliot wrote his own biography, enlarging in poem after poem on the character of a man who conceives of his life as a religious quest despite the anti-religious mood of his age and the distracting claims of women, friends, and alternative careers. Eliot once spoke of the man who tries to explain to himself 'the sequence that culminates in faith'[3] and in a letter, written in 1930, mentioned his own long-cherished intention to explore a mode of writing neglected in the twentieth century, the spiritual autobiography.[4] Eliot's Notebook and other manuscript poems show that he began to measure his life by the divine goal as far back as his student days, in 1910 and 1911, and that the turning-point came not when he was baptized in 1927 but in 1914 when he first interested himself in the motives, the ordeals, and the achievements of saints. In his later years Eliot seemed to beg off personally in favour of a routine life of prayer and observance, but the early manuscripts suggest that for a time in his youth he dreamed of the saint's ambitious task, of living by his own vision beyond the imaginative frontiers of his civilization.

As more is gradually known of Eliot's life, the clearer it seems that the 'impersonal' façade of his poetry—the multiple faces and voices—masks an often quite literal reworking of personal experience. Eliot wrote that there is a 'transfusion of the personality or, in a deeper sense, the life of the author into the character.'[5] This book is an attempt to elicit the autobiographical element in Eliot's poetry by measuring the poetry against the life. It may be called a biography, but in Eliot's rather special sense of the genre. Whenever Eliot wrote about lives he was not so much concerned with formal history and circumstance as with what he called the 'unattended' moments. 'The awful daring of a moment's surrender', he wrote in *The Waste Land*. 'By this, and this only, we have existed.' The external facts of Eliot's life are here, but only to prop the record of the definitive inward experiences to the time of his conversion. By avoiding the traditional schema of an official biography and by limiting the amount of biographical trivia, it becomes possible to trace the continuity of Eliot's career and to see the poetry and the life as complementary parts of one design, a consuming search for salvation.

A poet, Yeats said, 'is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete.'[6] It is hard to say exactly how or when the commanding idea is born but, in Eliot's case, an obvious source suggests itself in the dramatic figures that surrounded his American youth. The shadowy exemplary figure that haunts Eliot's poetry may be traced back to the model grandfather, whom Emerson called 'the Saint of the West',[7] to the New England mother's heroes of truth and virtue, to the hardy fishermen of Cape Ann, Massachusetts, and the rockpool and the silences between the waves that shaped Eliot's religious imagination. Towards the end of his life Eliot came to see his poetry as more American than English: '. . . in its sources, in its emotional springs, it comes from America.'[8]

From the start, Eliot's family recognized him as exceptional, particularly his mother who would speak to him as an equal. He, in turn, was devoted to her. His strongest recorded expression of emotion is on the flyleaf of a copy of *Union Portraits* which he sent to her 'with infinite love'. High-minded and plain-living, Charlotte Champe Eliot taught her children to perfect themselves

each day, 'to make the best of every faculty and control every tendency to evil'.[9] The father, Henry Ware Eliot, Sr., was a man of refined bearing, with a taste for art and music, and an acute sense of smell. He had a curious way of smelling his food before he ate it. Although he eventually made his success as a manufacturer of bricks, he lived under the shadow of his own father, William Greenleaf Eliot, a financial genius of whom it was said that, if he had not been called to the ministry, he might have owned nearly everything west of the Mississippi. There is little sign of imagination in Henry's autobiography; he presents himself as rather a plodder, proud of his industry and filial piety.[10] He could be, in a studied way, playful and liked to draw faces on his children's boiled eggs.[11]

T. S. Eliot spent his first sixteen years in a city distinguished at the turn of the century for the corruption of its businessmen, its inadequate sewers, and its sulphurous fumes. Yet Eliot could still say: 'I am very well satisfied with having been born in St. Louis.'[12] Whenever he recalled his St. Louis childhood in later life he did not think first of the city's blemishes but of the more personal memories that overrode them: the moods and rhythms of the great Mississippi ('the river is within us . . .'[13]); the steamboats blowing in the New Year;[14] the river in flood 'with its cargo of dead Negroes, cows and chicken coops';[15] his Irish nurse, Annie Dunne, and her prayers in the little Catholic Church on the corner of Locust Street and Jefferson Avenue; her discussing with him, at the age of six, the existence of God.[16] There is a photograph of Eliot, aged seven, with his dimpled nurse. His beret is perched jauntily on his head and his face is mischievous; Annie's lips are pursed, one hand on her hip.[17] Years later, Eliot wrote a rhyme about some naughty Jim Jum Bears who got up to tricks to exasperate their Nurse ('Was ever a Nurse so put about?').[18] It recalls the secure intimacy of his very early days with Annie to whom he said he was 'greatly attached'.

The Eliots lived in an unfashionable area of St. Louis at a time when most of their friends were moving to suburbs further west. Tom was the last of seven children, and his sisters and brother were relatively mature by the time he was born. He had few playmates and spent most of his time reading. He had a congenital double hernia and Charlotte, afraid it would rupture, forbade football and strenuous sports. During summers at Cape

Ann, when 'the Skipper' used to give him sailing lessons, Charlotte would go along, fortified by a guard of grown-up sisters, to ensure that he did not get too wet or too hot or too tired.[19] He accepted his mother's domination in good humour.[20]

There was in Eliot's mother a rare moral passion and a gift of eloquence. She had the ardent, unsophisticated intellectual energy of a Dorothea Brooke, a natural scholar whose sex and circumstances debarred her from higher education. She set out to be a poet, but when her youngest child showed talent, hoped that he might redeem her sense of failure. She wrote in a letter to Eliot at Harvard:

> I hope in your literary work you will receive early the recognition I strove for and failed. I should so have loved a college course, but was obliged to teach before I was nineteen. I graduated with high rank, 'a young lady of unusual brilliancy as a scholar' my old yellow testimonial says, but when I was set to teaching young children, my Trigonometry and Astronomy counted for nought, and I made a dead failure.[21]

After several years as a teacher she married a handsome clerk who dealt with groceries shipped on the Mississippi. She then devoted much of her energies to her growing family and local social reforms, particularly a house of detention for juveniles. Her room displayed no sign of conventional femininity except for a pincushion on the dresser. There was a comfortable armchair next to a sunny window even though it blocked a chest of drawers. The bed faced a mantlepiece draped with a velvet cloth on which rested a painting of the madonna and child. On her wall there hung an engraving of Theodosius and St. Ambrose, illustrating the triumph of holy over temporal power.

After her death, when Henry Ware Eliot, Jr. placed Charlotte's poems in Harvard's Eliot Collection, he wrote to the librarian: 'Perhaps a hundred years from now the connection with T. S. Eliot will not seem so remote. Of all the family, my brother most resembled my mother in features and . . . if there is anything in heredity, it must have been from that side that T. S. Eliot got his tastes.' Apart from Charlotte herself, there was no literary tradition on the Stearns side, but there was, occasionally, a certain moral fervour. The statue called 'The Puritan' in Springfield, Massachusetts, shows one of the Stearns ancestors striding along vigorously with his huge Bible grasped under one arm and, in

the other, a pilgrim's staff.* A reserved uncle, the Revd. Oliver Stearns, used to startle his students at Harvard Divinity School with sudden hot floods of eloquence. Whatever he saw to be true or right, that would he say and do, 'though the heavens fell'.[22]

It is curious to read Charlotte Champe Eliot's poetry in the context of her son's work. Charlotte writes habitually of 'the vision of the seer' and 'the prophet's warning cry'. Her poems recount definitive incidents in the lives of the chosen: the Apostles and 'The Unnamed Saints', St. Barnabas and St. Theodosius. Her heroes are 'truth-inebriated', 'God-intoxicated' disciples of Emerson and Channing; her Savonarola, her Giordano Bruno, her St. Francis trust the private vision. Her image of the thinker who, from unfathomed depths, seizes on the sublime truth is almost identical with the dominant figure in T. S. Eliot's numerous poems of 1911 and 1912.

Charlotte's strength is essentially that of a preacher. All the force of her poetry lies in passionate argument and dramatic illustration. She speaks particularly to those who 'by gift of genius' are set apart; her message is to endure with faith periods of religious despair:

> Ye who despair
> Of man's redemption, know, the light is there,
> Though hidden and obscured, again to shine . . .
> ('Saved!')

Charlotte's gift is didactic; she lacks the inventiveness and imaginative freshness of the great poet. Her son, using exactly the same traditional images, rescued them from triteness—the beatific light, the fires of lust and purgation, the pilgrimage across the 'desert waste',[23] and the seasonal metaphor for spiritual drought that pervades Charlotte's poetry. In the extremity of 'the dying year' the boughs in her garden go stiff and dry, no flower blooms, while a new power awaits its birth.[24] 'April is the cruellest month,' T. S. Eliot was to write, 'breeding lilacs out of the dead land'. Mother and son used the same group of traditional images to register grace. In 'The Master's Welcome' Charlotte hears children's voices. Bells signal recovery of faith after a period of doubt. Water—the 'celestial fountain' and 'the healing flood'—promises relief after long ordeals.

* Saint-Gaudens's statue of Samuel Chapin was done in 1887. Thomas Stearns (1710–84) married Abigail Reed, great-granddaughter of Chapin.

Charlotte mapped out the states of being between loss and recovery of grace, a map her son redrew in his poetry with vivid, ingenious twentieth-century touches. The essential difference was Charlotte's optimism. She felt an assurance of grace which her son could not share. T. S. Eliot's faint-hearted character, J. Alfred Prufrock, feels obliged to frame an 'overwhelming' question but shirks it. In the context of his lack of nerve, it is curious to note the many serious but quite commonplace questions Charlotte poses in her poetry: How does one face 'blank annihilation'? Is life worth living since we know we must die? 'And is this all this life so incomplete?' 'What shall I do to be saved?' Eliot must have known all the crucial questions and answers before he left his mother's side, but it was to be many years before he made them his own.

In a talk, 'The Influence of Landscape upon the Poet', Eliot called himself a New England poet because he had been so deeply affected when, like Frost, he had come East as a child.[25] He was always happy near the sea and would remember with joy his boyhood summers at Cape Ann.[26]

In 1896 Eliot's father built a large, solid house for his family at Eastern Point, near Gloucester, on an uncultivated rough coast, surrounded by wild bush and slabs of rock going down to the sea's edge. The upper windows overlooked the granite shore, the white sails over the sea and, looking the other way, the harbour. Eliot remembered Gloucester harbour as one of the most beautiful on the New England coast.[27] A photograph by his brother Henry shows it at the turn of the century, the tall masts of what was then an all-sail fishing fleet dominating the village in the background with its clapboard houses and sloping roofs. From the beginning, fishing was the main preoccupation of Gloucester. When a divine came among the first settlers in the seventeenth century and said: 'Remember, brethren, that you journeyed here to save your souls', one of the brethren is reported to have remarked, 'And to ketch fish'.[28] In Eliot's day fishermen between trips lounged at the corner of Main Street and Duncan Street and told yarns of storms and shipwrecks on the half-hidden rocks offshore from Cape Ann. Working in hard winter gales, the deep-sea fisherman put out from the schooner in a tiny dory which often capsized or went astray in fog or snow.

And when a man lived through such an experience, he told the kind of yarn Eliot listened to as a boy, of human daring and tenacity beyond belief.

Admiration for the fishermen's casual acts of heroism and for their hardy self-reliance is reflected in Eliot's schoolboy compositions and sustained through his mature writings. In 'A Tale of a Whale', published in the *Smith Academy Record* in April 1905, and in 'The Man Who was King', published the following June, Eliot made proud use of sailing jargon. As a student Eliot imagined ancestors in the mould of the Cape Ann sea captains he admired. In an article called 'Gentlemen and Seamen' he extols as 'plebeian aristocrats'—men like his own ancestors, small-town patriarchs, seamen, small printers, and tradesmen, who established themselves in villages along the New England coast.[29] Eliot imagines their sombre faces, their compressed lips, their natures difficult and unyielding as a consequence of religious principle and endless struggle with the narrow resources of New England. This was the kind of man that impressed the young Eliot: an unworldly and inconspicuous pioneer, strenuous, resilient, and proud. Later, in sea scenes in his poems, Eliot again invoked the Gloucester hero. In a long section in the *Waste Land* manuscript he describes a fishing expedition to the Grand Banks, the gallant spirit of the men, and their destruction by an iceberg. Later yet, he reworked the perilous fishing expedition as a paradigm for his search for faith in 'Dry Salvages' in *Four Quartets*.

Eliot himself became a proficient sailor and the happiest moments of his youth were spent off the New England coast on expeditions, sometimes through fog and heavy seas, to Mount Desert Island or Rogue Island.[30] In 'Gerontion' (1919) and 'Marina' (1930) the dross of civilization is blown away by the sea wind, and in 'Marina' the slow lyrical awakening to redemptive love, with all its mystery and promise, is aligned with the perilous crossing of the Atlantic and slow approach to the New World, the dim New England shore with its woods and grey rocks. As a child Eliot explored the Cape Ann beaches for what the sea tossed up—starfish, a whale bone, a broken oar, a horseshoe crab.* The pools offered, for his curiosity, 'the more delicate algae and the sea anemone'. When he was ten, peering through water

* 'Dry Salvages', *CP*, p. 191. Eliot explained, in a letter to *NEW* (25 Jan. 1945) that he had used the term 'hermit crab' in error for 'horseshoe crab'.

in a rockpool, he saw the sea anemone for the first time, an experience, he remembered, 'not so simple, for an exceptional child, as it looks'.[31]

Eliot was to return again and again to the Cape Ann shore and sea for scenes of crisis and revelation in his poetry. To the Cape Ann summers of his youth he owed his model, drawn from the Gloucester fisherman, of a heroic quester living on the thin edge of mortality. His imagination fastened, too, on the still pool and the light-filled water that recurred in his poetry as a tantalizing memory of unspeakable bliss.

When Eliot was sixteen his mother published a biography of her father-in-law, William Greenleaf Eliot, and dedicated it to her children 'Lest They Forget'. 'I was brought up to be very much aware of him', Eliot said. 'The standard of conduct was that which my grandfather had set: our moral judgements, our decisions between duty and self-indulgence, were taken as if, like Moses, he had brought down the tables of the Law, any deviation from which would be sinful. . . .'[32]

William had a narrow frail body with large, calm, benign eyes. His son, Henry, recalled those magnificent eyes in his autobiography, and said that they seemed to read one's innermost thoughts. William's expression was sensitive and serene, the face of a man who looks on suffering from a citadel of moral assurance. He was not stern, but it would have been unthinkable, said his son, to argue with him or to attempt undue familiarity. 'How can one be familiar with the Day of Judgement?' said James Freeman Clark, a classmate at Divinity School. 'One feels rebuked in his presence. . . . Yet he is playful, fond of fun, and there is a sweet smile appearing on the corner of his mouth. But there is no *abandon*.'[33]

Charlotte revered her father-in-law and brought up her children to observe two of his laws in particular, those of self-denial and public service. T. S. Eliot acknowledged that his early training in self-denial left him permanently scarred by an inability to enjoy even harmless pleasures. He learnt, for instance, that it was self-indulgent to buy candy, and it was not until he was forced to stop smoking for health reasons in his sixties that he could bring himself to eat it as a substitute.[34] This kind of upbringing was, of course, not peculiar to the Eliot home. Henry

Adams, also constrained by the virtue of New England ancestors, recalled that he would eat only the less perfect peaches in his grandfather's garden.

As Eliot grew up he had to face the most important of his grandfather's laws, the subordination of selfish interests to the good of Community and Church. William Greenleaf Eliot perfectly exemplified the Eliot family's ideal of manhood, interfusing piety with public enterprise. In 1834 he moved from Harvard Divinity School to found the Unitarian Church on what was then the American frontier. A brilliant fund-raiser, he helped found both Washington University, where he served as unpaid professor of metaphysics, and the Academy of Science in St. Louis. He was an early advocate of women's suffrage and of prohibition. During the terrible typhoid epidemic of the 1840s he visited sick-beds indefatigably and during the Civil War organized the Western Sanitary Commission. In 1852, when Emerson visited St. Louis, he reported that the Unitarian minister had 'a sumptuous church and crowds to hear his really good sermons.'[35]

In a sense, William Greenleaf Eliot fulfilled Emerson's ideal of an individual with the power to remake his world. 'All history', said Emerson, 'resolves itself very easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons. . . . A man must be so much that he must make all circumstances indifferent. Every true man is a cause, a country, and an age.' T. S. Eliot once alluded to Emerson's dictum that 'an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man' in a poem which wryly examines the activities of the oblivious, pleasure-loving Sweeney in a brothel. The gambling and drinking habits of the French Catholics and American pioneers from Kentucky and Virginia (who first settled St. Louis) had called, said T. S. Eliot, for his grandfather's strong missionary hand.[36] Brought up to applaud William's reforming zeal, it is not surprising that his grandson should so boldly confront, a century later, the moral wilderness of post-war London. Even as a boy, said one cousin, 'Tom had a great sense of mission'.

In 'Animula' Eliot pictured a youth curled up on a window-seat with the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, who feels the tug of idle dreams but feels too a call to act effectively in the busy world. Generations of Eliots before him had responded to the call to family and communal duties. Those Eliots who lived in the neighbourhood of Somerset, Wiltshire, and Gloucestershire in early

Tudor times made wills which did not forget the poor, and sent their sons to institutions of higher learning, and tended to marry rich widows of the landed gentry.[37] In 1937 T. S. Eliot visited East Coker, the village from which Andrew Eliot set out for New England, and imagined his sturdy Eliot ancestors, their furnished houses that rose and crumbled, their faces merry or solemn, their feet clogged with earth as they danced to time-honoured measures at folk festivals.[38] In a way he envied their unquestioning communal feeling, but he also bitterly resisted their endless activity. What did it come to? 'Dung and death.'

Nothing is known of the Andrew Eliot who emigrated to Salem, Massachusetts, except that he was a man of property and education and that he became a member of the First Church of Beverly in 1670 and in 1690 Beverly's first Town Clerk. He is also believed to have officiated at the Salem witch trials. By the next century the Eliots were flourishing as city people, conspicuous in the affairs of Boston. The first to distinguish himself was the Revd. Andrew Eliot (1718–78). Chubby-faced, with neat features and a double chin, he seldom gave controversial sermons from his pulpit in the New North Church. His Calvinism was moderate in temper but he practised it most earnestly. When Boston was blockaded during the Revolution, he was the only congregational minister, apart from Samuel Mather, to open his church every Lord's Day. When he was proposed as successor to President Holyoke at Harvard, and again after the resignation of Locke, he declined because of religious duties. One acquaintance used to call him 'Andrew Sly' because of his political prudence and circumspection. When he felt his temper rising he used to retire until he had controlled it.[39]

The Eliots were not heroes but they had a taste for one kind of daring, the moral challenge. T. S. Eliot was interested in Sir Thomas Elyot who risked reproving Henry VIII to his face on account of Anne Boleyn, and in *The Boke Named the Governour* (1531) attacked kings for their luxury and frivolity, and pleaded with them to rule for the common good. Two centuries later, in 1765, the Revd. Andrew Eliot preached a censorious election-day sermon before the colonial governor of Massachusetts. Both Eliots escaped charges of treason because their tones were sober. They felt strongly about morals, conduct, and the public good, but they did not resort to flaming rhetoric.

There was much in the model Eliot man to admire. Throughout his life, T. S. Eliot was to feel the disjunction between his poetic impulse and his compulsion to conform to the Eliot ideal. 'The primary channel of culture is the family', he wrote; 'no man wholly escapes from the kind, or wholly surpasses the degree, of culture which he acquired from his early environment.'[40] As a student in Boston, Eliot worried about the kind of practical career his family would applaud. But by the time he settled in England, he came to feel the claims of his poetic nature had priority over the claims of his family: 'The Arts insist that a man shall dispose of all he has, even of his family tree, and follow art alone. For they demand that a man be not a member of a family or a caste or of a party or of a coterie, but simply and solely himself.'[41] Eliot puzzled and alarmed his parents by staying in London in 1915 instead of finishing his doctorate at Harvard, and by spending years writing poetry that was published only sporadically and in little-known magazines. His father died in 1919 under the impression that his youngest child had made a mess of his life. Yet, although T. S. Eliot resisted the family pattern he also followed it, first as a poor clerk like his father in the early Mississippi days and, later, when he became a publisher, as a successful man of business. To the end of his life he faithfully performed the kind of responsible daily labour that had been, for generations, the self-affirming activity of the Eliot family.

Bred in a family which belongs at the very heart of Boston Unitarianism, Eliot's fervent nature found no nourishment there and, by the time he enrolled at Harvard, he had become completely indifferent to the Church.[42] The religion taught by William Greenleaf Eliot was morally strict rather than spiritual. He was not concerned with perfection, or doctrine, or theology, but with a code that would better the lot of humanity. He passed on to his children and grandchildren a religion which retained Puritan uprightness, social conscience, and self-restraint, but which had been transformed by the Enlightenment. T. S. Eliot was taught to be dutiful, benevolent, and cheerful. He was always acutely sensitive to the sinister power of evil, but was taught a practical common-sense code of conduct. Eliot once mentioned that his parents did not talk of good and evil but of what was 'done' and 'not done'.[43] In abandoning Unitarianism, Eliot