

TRACING T. S. ELIOT'S SPIRIT

A. David Moody

TRACING T. S. ELIOT'S SPIRIT

Essays on his poetry and thought

*

'unappeased and peregrine'



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1996

First published 1996

Printed in Great Britain at the Athenaeum Press Ltd, Gateshead, Tyne & Wear
Set in Monotype Bulmer

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Moody, Anthony David.

Tracing T. S. Eliot's spirit: essays on his poetry and thought / A. David Moody.

p. cm.

ISBN 0 521 48060 4 (hardback)

1. Eliot, T. S. (Thomas Stearns), 1888-1965 - Criticism and interpretation.
 2. Eliot, T. S. (Thomas Stearns), 1888-1965 - Religion.
 3. Pilgrims and pilgrimages in literature.
 4. Spiritual life in literature.
 5. Quests in literature.
- I. Title.

PS3509.L43Z7873 1996

821'.912-dc20 95-47586 CIP

ISBN 0 521 48060 4 hardback

T. S. Eliot's lifelong quest for a world of the spirit is the theme of this book by leading Eliot scholar A. David Moody. The first four essays in the collection map Eliot's spiritual geography: the American taproot of his poetry; his profound engagement with the philosophy and religion of India; his near and yet detached relations with England; and his problematic cultivation of a European mind. At the centre of the collection is a study of the Latin poem *Pervigilium Veneris*, a fragment of which figures enigmatically in the concluding lines of *The Waste Land*. The third part of the collection is a set of five investigations of Eliot's poems, dealing particularly with *The Waste Land*, *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*, and attending to how they express and shape what he called 'the deeper unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being'.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Virginia Woolf (Oliver & Boyd), 1963

Shakespeare: 'The Merchant of Venice' (Edward Arnold), 1964

'The Waste Land' in different voices, ed. (Edward Arnold), 1974

Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet (Cambridge University Press), 1979, 1994

The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot, ed. (Cambridge
University Press), 1994

**FOR MY HOSTS
AND TO MY STUDENTS
PAST AND PRESENT**

Acknowledgments

- 'The American strain' (1988) was the Centenary Memorial Lecture of the T. S. Eliot Society, and was published in *The Placing of T. S. Eliot* ed. Jewel Spears Brooker (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991).
- 'Passage to India' (1988) was first delivered to the All India T. S. Eliot Seminar, Delhi University, and published in *The Fire and the Rose: New Essays on T. S. Eliot* ed. Vinod Sena and Rajiv Verma (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- 'Peregrine in England' (1988) was first delivered as the T. S. Eliot Centenary Lecture at the University of York.
- 'The mind of Europe' (1993) was delivered at the Lund T. S. Eliot Colloquium and published in *T. S. Eliot at the Turn of the Century* ed. Marianne Thormählen (Lund University Press, 1994).
- 'Pervigilium Veneris and the modern mind' (1995) is published here for the first time.
- '*The Waste Land*: "To fill all the desert with inviolable voice"' (1972), was delivered in a series of lectures at the University of York marking the 50th year of *The Waste Land*, and published in '*The Waste Land*' in *Different Voices* ed. A. D. Moody (London: Edward Arnold, 1974).
- 'The experience and the meaning: *Ash-Wednesday*' (1987) was written for *Approaches to Teaching Eliot's Poetry and Plays* ed. Jewel Spears Brooker (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1988).
- 'The formal pattern' (1988) was a keynote lecture at the T. S. Eliot Centenary Conference of the National Poetry Foundation, and was published in *T. S. Eliot: Man and Poet* vol. 1, ed. Laura Cowan (Orono: University of Maine, 1990).
- '*Four Quartets*: music, word, meaning and value' (1993) was written for *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot* ed. A. David Moody (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Acknowledgments

'Being in fear of women' (1994) was first delivered in an earlier version to the T. S. Eliot Society of Japan (1990), and in this revised form to the T. S. Eliot Society in St Louis in 1994. It is published here for the first time.

I owe my warmest thanks for their invitations and generous hospitality to Jewel Spears Brooker; Noel Stock; Vinod Sena; Marianne Thormählen; Sashiko Yoshida; Tatsuo Murata; and Carroll Terrell.

I am grateful to the British Council and its representatives for financial and other assistance in connection with my visits to India and to Japan. Travel grants from the British Academy facilitated my visits to the United States.

I am indebted for their generous advice, assistance and support with various of these essays to Jacques Berthoud, James Binns, Jack Donovan, Robin Hood, Cleo McNelly Kearns and Joanna Moody.

Preface

In my own mind the title of this book is *Tracing T. S. Eliot's Peregrinations*. I have heeded the advice of those who should know that to have the polysyllabic *peregrinations* in the title would do the book no good. Still its unique complex of meanings makes it an indispensable word in connection with Eliot; and one which, just because it is not in common use, is all the more apt for Eliot's uncommon life in thought and poetry. So long as his work is current we will need to keep the word current. The meanings of *peregrination* start from the ordinary 'transplanting into another country', as Eliot transplanted himself from his native America to England; but when we come to 'travelling into foreign lands' the sense becomes metaphysical, Eliot's travels having been mainly into foreign regions of the mind and spirit; that connects with the further sense of 'travelling as a religious pilgrim' in quest of places especially devoted to the life of the spirit; and finally we are brought to the general idea of 'man's life on earth viewed as a sojourn in the flesh', with the implication that the spirit belongs elsewhere. Thus the whole word fits Eliot perfectly. In Caesar's Rome *peregrine* was applied to visiting aliens. In Christian times it became the word for pilgrims for whom Rome represented the eternal city of God. Dante has one of his souls in purgatory remark that if he were to become a citizen of that city even a Roman would be peregrine in Rome. In a similar vein Eliot in *Little Gidding* has his ghost and double find himself able to speak because

the passage now presents no hindrance
To the spirit unappeased and peregrine
Between two worlds become much like each other.

He is there proposing a moment in which his actual world of burning London is one with the soul's world of purgatorial fire,

so that the live pilgrim feels himself for the moment to be not an alien but in his true city. That, with its subsequent revelation of 'The dove descending' in redeeming fire, is the culmination of Eliot's peregrinations.

This book brings together my retracings and mappings of some of Eliot's pilgrim ways. I have thought of them as my own peregrinations, following Eliot's, since my pursuit of his meanings has frequently taken me into alien territory and brought me into the presence of strange and disorientating revelations. I cannot say I have been in quest of these latter, nor that I have cultivated a pilgrim attitude. The contrary might be nearer the truth. Nevertheless, I have been drawn into the labyrinth of Eliot's ways and have felt compelled to come to terms with the experiences to be had there. As to why I have been so drawn and compelled, it must be because he powerfully articulated an ideology which has shaped European culture, and which has shaped my own life, but from which my life's experience has detached me. What Eliot believed is alien to me, and still it is ineradicably at work in me and in my society and this makes his work of profound concern to me. On the face of it I should be going counter to his pilgrimage; but the ways of the mind and of what we like to think of as our inner selves are not so simple as either for or against. One goes counter to an Eliot only by going along with him, though in one's own spirit and in one's own mind. It is therefore his destination (if any) that one must reach, and his way that one must trace, before one can be sure of where one stands.

The peregrinations in question do not proceed on more or less straight lines, such as might be drawn from St Louis, Missouri, where Eliot was born, through Boston to London and so to the small church near Oxford where he was received into the Church of England. To my mind they rather make up a labyrinth. A labyrinth winds the spirit questing in darkness in one sense and then the reverse, and inwards and then away again, until all bearings are lost; and this is the preparation for an experience, at its centre, of another order of things, possibly of enlightenment or

transcendence. The point of the journey is not to get to somewhere else – you emerge more or less where you went in – but to be changed by it, to come out a different person, or in an altered state of mind. By way of the labyrinth the mind and spirit depart from a world that is not wholly theirs and arrive in a region that is all their own. Eliot's poetry is devoted to those arrivals; and these essays are devoted to observing them.

The labyrinth is a very ancient symbol, and was instrumental, we must assume, in some primitive ritual. The Cretan labyrinth is well attested, and the early Celts incised the symbol on rocks in Cornwall and Ireland. But what is most interesting in relation to Eliot is that this prehistoric sign, together with some relic of its ritual, was handed on into the Christian era. There is a labyrinth in the pavement of the nave of Chartres cathedral, and pilgrims on their way to Compostella would tread it. It can serve then as a symbol of how a formal pattern and practice from the pagan past could persist into the Christian tradition and survive the conversion of its meaning. I like to think that in tracing Eliot's labyrinth I am also retracing an older tradition which subsists beneath the one he affirmed. In some medieval churches the clergy performed a dance through their labyrinth or maze. Fancifully perhaps, I prefer to associate my mappings of Eliot's maze with the dance by which bees (who also figured in Cretan cults) show each other the way to the nectar. That gives an image for these essays as a sort of bee's dancing of the labyrinth of Eliot's peregrinations.

* * *

There is a statement of Eliot's to which I have recurred a number of times, as if it held the clue to his work. Towards the end of *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* he spoke of his moments of spontaneous composition, and characterised them as not 'inspired' in the obvious sense, but rather like 'the sudden lifting of the burden of anxiety and fear which presses upon our daily life so steadily that we are unaware of it'. Such moments left him, as he put it in 'The Three Voices of Poetry', in a state 'of

exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation, which is in itself indescribable'. That echoes, not the Sanskrit equivalent of 'The Peace which passeth understanding' at the close of *The Waste Land*, but rather the earlier moment of that poem in which 'I knew nothing, / Looking into the heart of light, the silence'. It has to be faced that if these moments in and out of life are indeed the heart of Eliot's mystery then what they reveal remains impenetrable. For as the statement in *The Use of Poetry* reminds us, what we are dealing with has its source in a region of the poet's private being to which even he rarely penetrates. And yet nevertheless the poetry does make itself accessible and intelligible to its fit readers. It does so, however, rather by speaking to us of where we live and have our own secret being than by revealing the secret life of the author. In our experience of the poetry we have to do then with a double nexus of poetry and being, though it is one in which the being in question, which is at once the poet's and our own, is articulated only in the poetry and is otherwise a mystery of which we cannot speak. What we can and must try to speak of is the being in the poetry, and it is this which has most of all engaged my attention.

Perhaps the most profound challenge of Eliot's poetry from 'Prufrock' through to *Little Gidding* is that the experience at its heart is at one and the same time a positive ecstasy, a being rapt out of oneself, and the annihilation of everything that one is. The poetry is determined by 'the spirit unappeased and peregrine' which seeks union with the divine being, while it can tell us only what that search means for the human being. Most of all it means alienation – alienation from others and from human society. But in the alienation is found both a motive and a sense of direction. Eliot's negatives are always turned to positive account. So his peregrinations proceed by a principle which can be likened to that of the jet engine: it is the counter-thrust that provides the gravity-defying force. The poetry is powered by desire and passion; but these reach their full intensity in being directed *against* their natural objects and in that way driving the poetry

towards its moments of appeasement and annihilation. 'The negative is the more importunate', Eliot once wrote. It is also, in his work, the dynamic principle bringing him to where he positively wants to be.

Thus he left America to fight for and achieve success in England; and still he kept his sense of being an alien there, while his early experiences in America remained the vital taproot of his poetry. He turned to India for an alternative religious inspiration but remained unshakeably European and of the Christian faith. And yet his Europe and even his faith had their existence in an ideal realm sustained more by cynicism, scepticism and despair than by any real hope. His love was primarily a love of women, though he loved to loathe them in the flesh and prayed only to the 'Lady whose shrine stands on the promontory'. In mapping these particular twists and turns, in the first set of four essays and in the final essay, I have found that they all lead to the one central point: that the spirit is real, and nothing else is. So America, India, England and Europe become real presences in his poetry so far as they provide a language and a space for the life of the spirit. The same is true for other human beings, and for women especially.

'I do not find / The Hanged Man', says Madame Sososttris. And I do not find Eliot's God. One would expect to be brought to some idea of the Being with which his spirit seeks to be at one. But an account of his initial scepticism and his conversion and his declarations of faith only draws a line around 'the heart of light, the silence'. The poetry keeps that silence and insists upon the unknowability of its God. Consequently we may find ourselves turned back, as happened to me in the course of writing the final essay, from exploring his theology to investigating his psychology. The drama of the fear which drives the spirit then comes to be not that of a soul in its relation with God so much as that of an ordinary self in its relations with others.

If we can speak of the self in Eliot's poems as ordinarily human it must be added immediately that it is nevertheless one which involves us in a series of extraordinary states of mind and feeling.

The essays which make up the third part of this book track the poet in his poems, but with each one pursuing him from a different angle. The process of the poet's own breakdown and recovery of psychic wholeness is traced through *The Waste Land*, in its transformation of a personal desolation into animating song. A discussion of *Ash-Wednesday* with a group of addicts provides the material for an account of how readers may find in Eliot's poetry something which connects so directly with their own lives that it reads to them like a direct report on experience. 'The formal pattern' follows the ways in which Eliot worked out his sensibility through the evolving styles and forms of his poetry, and notes particularly the emergence of a lyric voice of the inner self, and then the integration of that lyricism with a philosophic mind to achieve a genuinely metaphysical or spiritual poetic. The fourth of this set of essays is devoted to *Four Quartets*, the work in which Eliot most fully realised the unique form of his poetic personality.

The final essay, an analysis of that personality, provides the coda to both sets of essays, the first dealing with Eliot's spiritual geography, and the other with the peregrinations of the spirit in his poetry. Between the two sets, and effecting the transition between them, is a study of the Latin poem *Pervigilium Veneris*, and of the ways in which it was taken up by Eliot and certain other modern writers. Its classical sensibility serves to throw Eliot's kind of mind into quite sharp relief; but a new interpretation of its conclusion also throws new light on Eliot's incorporation of a fragment from it into *The Waste Land*. The intersections of the ancient and the modern, and of the traditional and the personal, in and around 'Quando fiam uti chelidon', are a revelation of different ways of being in poetry.

* * *

This is a different kind of book from my *Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet* (1979, 1994). That was devoted to seeing his work as a whole. In this I have been able to concentrate on one aspect of it at a time; and to do so, moreover, from different angles of vision. As maps

differ in their projections according to the particular features they are designed to represent, so in each of these essays the approach is adapted to the particular intent. This means that the one phenomenon, Prufrock's wit, for example, may be perceived in various ways in the various essays; and that *The Waste Land*, to take another example, may be read in different and contrasting lights; or again that alternative accounts can be given of Eliot's quartet structure. I regard this as an advantage, since while a single-minded account may be compelling, the truth of our experience of things is that the more there is to them the more they require us to be of more than one mind.

Another difference between this and that earlier study is that there I was essentially working things out for my own peace of mind without giving too much thought to a possible readership. But all of these essays, with just one exception, were written with particular occasions and definite audiences in view. The series on the ways in which America, India, England and Europe figure in Eliot's thought and poetry was written in response to invitations to lecture in St Louis, Delhi and Calcutta, York, and Lund. It seemed especially appropriate to go into Eliot's 'mind of Europe' in Lund at a time when Sweden, along with other European countries, was deeply uncertain about its commitment to the developing European Community. It would have been an appropriate close to that series had I been able to accept an invitation to present a version of '*Pervigilium Veneris* and the modern mind', which I had already written, to the 1995 meeting in Boston of the International Society for the Classical Tradition, but circumstances unfortunately prevented that. The series directly addressing the poems includes two contributions to books, the one on (as e. e. cummings might have put it) not teaching *Ash-Wednesday*, and one which distils many years of reading, reflecting upon and attempting to teach *Four Quartets*. 'The formal pattern' was a keynote lecture at the National Poetry Foundation's Eliot Centenary Conference, where it seemed proper, given that Foundation's support of live poetry, to consider Eliot's poetic art.

The essay on *The Waste Land*, written in 1972, the fiftieth anniversary year, is of a much earlier vintage than the rest, and may be taken to mark the starting point of my serious work on Eliot. The final essay, the last to be completed, has evolved over fifteen years. It stems from an address on the nature of Eliot's religion given to the York Minster Lecture Society in 1981, and from a lecture on 'Eliot's Use of Fear' delivered at the College of St Paul and St Mary in Cheltenham in 1983. These provided material for a fresh attempt to deal with Eliot's fear in the 1990 Guest Lecture of the T. S. Eliot Society of Japan (a companion lecture to the Ezra Pound Society of Japan had the title 'Pound's Amor'); a further much-altered version was given at the 1994 meeting of the T. S. Eliot Society in St Louis (as 'Two Sections from Thirteen Ways of Looking at T. S. Eliot'); and in the final writing it has become 'Being in fear of women'. There may be something instructive in that little history. All the internal directions of Eliot's work would have us focus upon its spiritual dimension; but in the end a fuller experience of the work brings us to the realisation that the soul's quest for the divine union is not the whole story.

On my first visit to St Louis the generous arrangements of my hosts introduced me to its wealth of Eliot associations and made it for me then all Eliot. That was one deeply informative and enriching experience. My second visit afforded another, but of a different kind. This time Saarinen's soaring Arch of Western Discovery seemed to accentuate Eliot's East Coast, European and Indic orientation – if St Louis was the portal to the American West then that was a direction he chose not to follow. Then in the Art Museum there was a work to make one check one's bearings on Europe, and on literature. This was Anselm Kiefer's 'Burning of the Books'. The shelves as of an ancient library carry large folio-sized sheets of lead blackened and twisted by fire, while spears and shards of glass lie fallen on the floor all around. *Kristallnacht*, one thinks; and the crystalline light of pure mind. The entire tradition of human learning and wisdom might have been in those

books which could be reduced, by a new European barbarism, to blackened lead, the antithesis of the enlightened mind. Eliot would have had nothing to learn from Kiefer about the endemic barbarism of Europe. But what one misses in his work is the grief and horror of the tragedy, the terrible pain of the loss of wisdom. Perhaps he did not expect enough of the tradition. But it was something else that most affected me in that high-ceilinged well-lit room devoted to the 'Burning of the Books'. Several sheets of dense, demanding and fundamentally distracting commentary on the work were provided on one wall – words, words and more words, ideas, abstractions, theory. Person after person entered the room, sought the guidance of the commentary, became lost in it, and passed out again with just a departing glance at the work itself. It had become the impenetrable illustration to an unreadable text – a case of being blinded by criticism. Criticism too can be barbaric, can make leaden the books it should serve. I have tried to write in a way which would encourage my readers to read and to see Eliot for themselves.

22 viii 95