# MEMORY AND DESIRE IN ELIOT'S "PRELUDES"

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> Not the intense moment
> Isolated, with no before and after,
> But a lifetime burning in every moment.
> *East Coker*

The problem of reconciling consciousness and its objects is complicated by those aspects of consciousness announced in the opening lines of the public *Waste Land: memory* and *desire.* Memory is unverifiable. Eliot's old teacher Bertrand Russell puts the problem: one cannot distinguish memory images from pure imagination, i.e., willed illusion. How can one place any reasoned confidence in that "feeling of pastness" which suggests that there is a difference between the present moment of awareness and past moments of awareness? To suggest that a complete world created one moment before the present, containing all memory and knowledge, is beyond proof may be "uninteresting" to Russell, beyond posing the problem as insoluble, though his *Autobiography* suggests his confidence in the pastness of the past and its real existence. But it cannot be so to Eliot. Eliot is attracted to Russell initially, and learns much from him at the outset, but he cannot stand on the same ground, as he rapidly discovers. He cannot, because his *desire* is such as to disallow a focus upon the instrument of the mind, the logical structures the mind makes, as Russell can comfortably do. Eliot must come to terms with the maker of such instruments, the mind itself. The "Preludes" is the first significant dramatization of this struggle which is to rise to a climax in the final section of *The Waste Land,* at a point where we may bring Tiresias into conjunction with the "key" which releases Eliot from the necessity of that literary device of point of view and from an entrapment in the Bradleyan dilemma of thought's relation to object.

If memory is difficult of verification, desire seems inexplicable. Hence the vague restlessness in that carefully controlled sequence of the "Preludes," a sequence of poems composed over a period of four years, in America and France, coming to only fifty-four lines. In the first section *evening* is a collective for the images of its thirteen lines, which in their movement, metrics, and rhyme suggest a compressed Shakespearean sonnet. The time is present, and if there is a past for memory to reflect upon, it is indistinguishable from the present. Indeed time present, time past, and time future are

emptily included in the singular "six o'clock," a verse which effectively rests a time interval approximating that of the tetrameter verse which is the basic measure of Section I. Empty timelessness (the condition opposite that of the still point we shall come to) is suspended in the descriptive extension of the third line, which completes the first quatrain: "The burnt-out ends of smoky days." There is an illusion of action in the next eight lines, random and inconsequential, with a suggestion of conclusion in the last line, set off by space from the preceding ones, yet yoked by couplet rhyme *(stamps-lamps).* But there is hardly conclusion in "And then the lighting of the lamps"; the light available is at best one of the senses, the established tone emphasizing the futility of such light to dispel the settling darkness. The darkness is hardly remarkable enough to warrant metaphorical tags such as Shakespeare conjures from similar images: death's second self, for instance. The isolation of this "entity," this awareness, from the "out there" is signalled in the adjectives that attach to attempts to name the outer world, and we may reflect how far removed the gusty shower of "Preludes" is from the hint of rain in the final section of *The Waste Land.* Nor is there much of a suggestion of judgment in the adjectives attached to nouns in the "Preludes" as there is in the description of the Thames in *The Waste Land.* We have rather a despondent acknowledgment of isolation: *withered* leaves; *vacant* lots; *broken* blinds and chimney pots; even the cab-horse is, hopefully, *lonely.* To simply name the objects of that other world is a species of pathetic fallacy, requiring no metaphor or personification.

One need only compare analogous phrases from another "romantic" poem to see the oppressiveness of the closed world the mind of "Preludes" contends with. In the first paragraph of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," a reflective awareness is opening upon a larger world with increasing confidence, through "steep and lofty cliffs," from under its own "dark sycamore." In the midst of a "deep secluded" wood there is notice, even if uncertain, of a larger life of the mind which the mind alone must take credit for in Eliot's poem. Wordsworth, in his poem, is recording a coming to himself in a dark wood, that darkness lying in the mind. One sees him accepting metaphor as more than device, through a coincidence too particularly appropriate to be coincidence. At high noon, at midyear, midway a river on its way to the sea, he reflects upon his own point midway life, as Dante has done before him; and he certifies metaphor as more valid than a quaint device of words, being persuaded by the correspondences between the mo-

ment in his mind, and the moment of nature's world that his senses certify to him.

Wordsworth comes to a new consciousness, but in Eliot's poem only *morning* comes to consciousness, *morning* itself a weak collective like *evening*. The *morning* collects, through images, an additional assertion of separation of each of Bradley's "closed circles," the small world of each consciousness which is peculiar and private and so capable of being registered only as masquerades such as will be more fully displayed by Prufrock. Indeed *morning, evening* name a mask for the entity or awareness of Eliot's poem. Nor will Keats's negative capability serve as a key to unlock the private world upon the Other. To assert that "*your* soul" is constituted of a "thousand sordid images" flickering against the ceiling only certifies "*my* soul," the realization of which calls up the sardonic tone at the end of Eliot's poem. To hear the "sparrows in the gutters" is not to enter that world of the *you,* futilely addressed in the third section of the poem. How forlorn the prospect of shouting with Achilles in the trenches. Neither the *street* (another collective substitute for the closed world of the poem's awareness, as *evening* and *morning* have been) nor the *you* share a common "vision." At best the *you* is a metaphorical projection of the self upon that object clasping yellow soles of feet in soiled hands—and we are prepared through this section for the first line of Prufrock by this realization. Neither *street* nor *you* shares a vision with the speaking voice; neither Wordsworth's Nature nor his Dorothy can signify community larger than the self in Eliot's poem. The speaking voice then can only enunciate additional images which float hollowly in its own locked world. The mind as a mansion for all lovely forms, the memory as a dwelling place for all sweet sounds and harmonies, has become a ghostly horror house through which awareness drags its sad weight.

And yet that is not quite all. There is a *desire* which will not be stilled. There are eyes that seem assured of certain certainties, even if they will not or cannot reflect them clearly to reveal vision such as Dorothy's eyes do to Wordsworth on the banks of the Wye or Beatrice's to Dante on the shores of Lethe.[1] The conscience of this blackened street, and the consciousness that inhabits the "Preludes," is impatient to assume the world. There is a momentary movement as if the key is about to be turned in the lock. Then fear-haunted desire succumbs to fear. The certainty of illusion is the only certainty, where desire is but fancy. The poem concludes that, through fancy, the desire only "curls" around images and "clings" to them. The joyful declaration of a Wordsworth that something is deeply interfused in nature, resident of setting suns,

round oceans, and the mind of man through the forms that inhabit his mind—the confidence that there is a larger and more inclusive existence than individual awareness—is not to be trusted. Wordsworth can hear the "still, sad music of humanity," with its powers to chasten and subdue the consciousness, because of his sense of a presence which he accepts as valid perception; *desire* is to Wordsworth a valid spring in the opening of the door of the separate self. But in the "Preludes," there is only

> The *notion* of some infinitely gentle
> Infinitely suffering thing.

That *thing* seems at best the awareness in its own locked world, in which the poem is suspended. Lacking the daring risk of a surrender to illusion, it must recover its poise, laugh sardonically, wiping a hand across the mouth. The *your* of the line third from last is most private, hardly turned out toward the reader as we shall find that word doing in "Gerontion." It declares those worlds, which Donne and Shakespeare found cunningly contrived of angelic sprite and earth, to be merely revolving, each on its axis, each a peculiar and private world incapable of constellation.

If that were all that one might conclude, if the "argument" implied by the "Preludes" were one subscribed to completely by Eliot, the poem must need be his last. After this, silence, as in Rimbaud, whom Eliot finds fascinating till he comes to that larger silence and stillness such as might be represented by St. Thomas Aquinas's closing his book and writing no more. What Eliot cannot escape, and what therefore keeps desire alive as it did in Wordsworth, is the haunting presence of what Husserly calls "Original Intuition." That the poem exists at all is an evidence of that intuition and a contradiction of the poem's fears. It is the same intuition that will not let a Coleridge rest in the pure mechanics of mind out of David Hartley, or Wordsworth find peace in the solipsism of Bishop Berkeley. For, as the "Preludes" attempts to dramatize, consciousness is of *something;* it cannot exist without some self-evident something of which it cannot be concluded the first cause; nor can it conclude that the coming to rest of that something in the consciousness, the settling of dregs in sterile water, is the final cause. Self-awareness cannot exist unless it is at least aware of itself, a point resurrected by Husserly and dwelt upon subsequently by Bradley and Whitehead. (The point is as ancient as Augustine, in whom Eliot is to rest considerable confidence on this question.) The feeling in the "Preludes" is a something separate from the awareness of them, a separation which a Whitman pursues backward through the multiplicity of Chinese boxes, the "I's" of his poems. It is a *feeling* seeking a rest between *conscious-*

*ness* and the *something* contained by consciousness. We as readers know that entity—that consciousness—through the images floating in it, the "forms" Wordsworth celebrates; and to the extent that we do, we break the walls of our own closed world, moved by pathos. By the act of the poem itself, Eliot keeps that possibility open, even as he concentrates upon the likelihood of illusion. In doing so, he pinpoints the central intellectual problem of his poetry, with an intensity which indicates it a very pressing, personal one.

NOTE

1. Eliot, late in life, recalls his first encounter with Dante at the time of the "Preludes":

> There was one poet . . . who impressed me profoundly when I was twenty-two . . . one poet who remains the comfort and amazement of my age. . . . In my youth, I think that Dante's astonishing economy and directness of language—his arrow that goes unerringly to the centre of the target—provided for me a wholesome corrective to the extravagances of the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline authors in whom I also delighted.
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> "To Criticize the Critic" (1961)