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FEEDBACK SECTION A: PERFORMANCE AGAINST ASSESSMENT CRITERIA:

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Argument

Presentation

FEEDBACK SECTION B: OVERVIEW AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS:

"Squeezing and squeezing the word":
T. S. Eliot's Ash-Wednesday

47267
English Literature
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Abstract

This undertaking is a reaction to the suggestion by a critic of literature in the modernist period that difficult poetry conveys less meaning than poetry that is more easily accessible. This dissertation seeks to prove the meaningfulness of one particular difficult poem, T.S. Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday* as a means of disputing this assertion. *Ash-Wednesday*, a later collection of six poems published between 1927 and 1930 is rarely afforded the detailed analysis which is so often bequeathed on Eliot's more well-known works. When critics do write about it, they are often far more interested in the ideas and themes expressed, rather than the language Eliot uses, though the two so often go hand in hand. This dissertation is admittedly not concerned with conveying a complete picture of Eliot's wider attitude to faith, and attempts instead to examine in detail the means by which he brings out connotations from words in such a way as to enrich their signification. Of course it is impossible to analyse the meaningfulness of a poem without dealing with its meaning, and there have been attempts made to show how minute details of word interactions contribute to generating particular attitudes which often characterise the work on a larger scale. Sadly, not all of them have been covered, however, for the sake of detail. The essay is broadly split into an introduction, a definition of the tenets of meaningfulness that this essay will be using, and then a detailed discussion of various different methods of generating meaning which are evinced in the course of the poem. This discussion is separated into three categories; the first is entitled Considering the Turn, and deals with the central symbol of the poem, and the way Eliot's treatment of it, and the words around it, enrich the poem with significance. The second is entitled Considering Allusion, and considers the effects engendered by Eliot's usage of literary allusion, and the third is entitled Considering Structure, and considers the way in which elements of the poem without direct connotations affect meaning, such as metre, sonic effects and visual structure.

Thanks

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Introduction

It is an accusation regularly levelled at T.S. Eliot, that his poetry is "difficult".[1] The word is not without shades of qualitative judgement: one of its definitions is "troublesome", which implicitly suggests a degree of distaste.[2] The notorious anti-modernist Max Eastman said as much quite plainly. As an outspoken critic of difficulty, he wrote various diatribes against it, such as *The Cult of Unintelligibility*, in which he asserts, with an almost paranoid tone, that "I think the first feeling you will have is that the author isn't telling you anything. It may seem that he isn't telling you anything because he doesn't know anything. Or it may seem that he knows something, but he won't tell. In any case he is uncommunicative. He is unfriendly. He seems to be playing by himself, and offering you somewhat incidentally the opportunity to look on".[3] Though Eastman was not writing specifically about *Ash-Wednesday*, *The Cult of Unintelligibility* does mention Eliot as one of the writers prone to employing this style.[4] This Essay seeks to provide a thorough and persuasive rebuke to this statement with regard to Eliot, by means of a close analysis of his use of language and allusion in *Ash-Wednesday*. It should hopefully become apparent in the course of this study that "uncommunicative" is the one thing Eliot is not; by the example of *Ash-Wednesday*, we might nominate him as one of the most communicative poets of the 20th century, or any other period in the history of the English Canon

It may be worth noting that this essay does not seek to provide a comprehensive study of the usage of these effects in Ash-Wednesday, a sad result of space constraints. It will be considering specific examples from relevant sections of the six poems and analysing the unique effects encountered therein, hopefully providing a relatively complete survey of the broad *types* of effects Eliot employs. This leads on to a note that this essay will not be concerning itself with the Intentional Fallacy because the direct subject with which it deals is the meaningfulness of Eliot's poetry, rather than his biography. It may indeed be that Eliot is somehow able to enrich his language with so many apparently carefully constructed webs of connotation purely by luck rather than art, though this is highly improbable, and this essay isn't long enough to attempt a proof.

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[1] Philip M. Martin, *Mastery and Mercy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957) p.84
[2] "difficult, adj." *OED Online.* Oxford University Press, March 2014. Web. 05 May 2014
[3] Max Eastman, 'The Cult of Unintelligibility", *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, April 1929 p. 632
[4] Ibid p. 637

The Tenets of the Argument

Before embarking on this attempt to quantify the communicativeness of Eliot's poetry, it will be necessary to expend some words in defining the terms of the communication in question. Language is a symbolic medium which ostensibly serves to represent definite objects in the material world, and we call this process denotation. If someone were to ask you to "put the cup on the table", language would be functioning purely to represent categories of 'real' objects, actions and positions. In *Judgements of Meaning in Art*, Lewis White Beck explains why language cannot function solely on this level, however; "in an ideally simple case, we would have a sound or a mark universally agreed upon for every discriminable entity. Such a "perfect language" would be absolutely transparent in both the objective and the intersubjective dimension. It would, however, be so complex that it would be unusable; its structure would be as complicated as the world itself, and for practical purposes we might be able to find no structure in it at all. One of the greatest differences lies in the fact that our language consists largely of class names, not proper names; a distinctive feature of class names is that they themselves form classes, and the whole apparatus of the calculus of classes gives the schematism of connotational structures".[5] For example, if someone said "red", a category which contains a technically infinite variety of hues, language would function self-reflexively, referring to other concepts symbolically represented through language: the concept of a bullfighter might be conjured in our minds, or a pair of lips, or blood. This is connotation, in which we relate the representational entities of language to each other, in a complex web of meaning. Within this structure, language functions independently of the material entities that it symbolises; a possible connotation of "black" might be "clouds", since clouds are often described as black. In reality though, the denoted entity, the cloud, can never really possess the denoted quality, black, since clouds are made up of water vapour, which diffuses light in such a way that they cannot appear truly black when the sky is lit. It may be that this linking connotation came into existence by virtue of the fact that "clouds" and "black" both often evoke a negative emotion in humans, or that clouds are usually white, so darker clouds, by juxtaposition, would be termed black. This process, where the connotative meaning functions independently of the denotative meaning is called "semantic dissociation".[6]

Poetry functions primarily by means of connotative, rather than denotative signification, as Beck argues persuasively in *Judgments of Meaning in Art*.[7] Indeed we might treat this as a key tendency of poetry as opposed to descriptive prose, in much the same way as Beck separates documentary and art photography: "when photography

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[5] Lewis White Beck, 'Judgments of Meaning in Art', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 41 (1944) 169-178 (p. 173)
[6] Ibid 178 (p. 175)
[7] Ibid 169-178

reaches the status of art, it no longer lets the attention go through it to the object so directly that it can not enrich itself with a variety of connotations (and thus ceases to be "photographic" in the ordinary pejorative sense of the word)".[8]

Hopefully it now becomes clearer why Eastman might have termed modernist poetry "uncommunicative"; it lacks the accessible explicit denotation of a poem such as Wordsworth's *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*, which paints a clearly defined experience of the material world with the lines "When all at once I saw a crowd/A host, of golden daffodils/Beside the lake, beneath the trees/Fluttering and dancing in the breeze".[9] We are told, in the historic sense, that the poet actually walked in the countryside and saw some flowers. Of course, this poem is still lent its aesthetic interest by means of connotation, such as the metaphorical description of a "crowd" of daffodils: the word has social connotations and we wouldn't usually apply it to flowers. *Ash-Wednesday* doesn't feature experiences which tell us, as historians, what the poet *did*; Eliot describes "leopards" which eat his "liver" and "heart", clearly something he didn't literally experience.[10] The words of the poem rely more on semantic dissociation, and thus function more on the connotative plain than Wordsworth's does. In turn, from this, we might argue that *Ash-Wednesday* is closer than *Daffodils* to pure poetry than prose. It appears that Eastman dislikes this because it doesn't supply him with a single accessible meaning which he can attribute to the poem, yet it doesn't at all mean that the poem itself is any less *meaningful*.

Theodore Morrison supports Eastman's attitude, though more moderately, in *Ash Wednesday: A Religious History*, writing that "the poem is difficult, and the attempt to spread out its meaning for the prose eye does not receive much encouragement from some of Mr. Eliot's own utterances, in which he seems content to believe that a poem may contain many meanings".[11] He explicitly notes the distinction that this essay has been trying to make between prose meaning and poetic meaning, while clarifying what exactly the problem facing Eastman was. The question we seek to answer has now become more tightly defined; can a multiplicity of meanings convey more or less than a simpler, more strictly defined one?

It may be useful to first consider something Eliot himself wrote on the subject. When describing the sermons of Lancelot Andrewes, he wrote how Andrewes "takes a word and derives the world from it; squeezing and squeezing the word until it yields a full juice of meaning which we should never have supposed any word to possess".[12] In the *Turnbull Lectures* he suggests how this process of squeezing and yielding is practiced in a line of

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[8] Lewis White Beck, 'Judgments of Meaning in Art', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 41 (1944) 169-178 (p. 178)

[9] William Wordsworth, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2004) p.84

[10] T.S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930) p. 11

[11] Theodore Morrison, 'Ash Wednesday: A Religious History', *The New England Quarterly*, 11 (1938) 266-286 (p.266)

[12] T.S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes* (New York: Doubleday Doran, 1929) p.15

Mallarmé's poetry, "Tonnerre et rubis aux moyeux" ("Thunder and rubies up to the wheel hub"), writing that "poetry is *incantation*, as well as imagery. "Thunder and rubies" cannot be seen, heard or thought together, but their collocation here brings out the connotation of each word".[13] The suggestion, by the phrase "brings out" seems to be that these connotations are already in some way intrinsic to the word itself. "Incantation", conversely, is suggestive of magic. "Magical" suggests that this has been effected "by supernatural means"; that something paranormal is conjured into existence by this combination of words.[14] Both of these statements are simultaneously true; by combining words, the poet brings out specifically controlled connotations from within the word, while also generating a magical effect by evoking particular connotations which wouldn't necessarily be attached to each word on its own, but are immediately obvious in combination.

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[13] T.S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994) pp. 271-2
[14] "magic, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2014. Web. 05 May 2014

Applying the Argument in Microcosm

A suitable first application of these principles might be towards the title of the poems, *Ash-Wednesday*. Ash merely denotes burned matter, and Wednesday a day of the week. Together, however, they generate a web of connotation which succinctly evokes various important concerns of the poems. They immediately suggest a Christian theme, by the association with the festival of Ash Wednesday, which memorialises Jesus' 40 days of temptation in the desert by the devil.[15] The fact that this day begins Lent, a period of repentance, suggests a contrite attitude on the part of the poetic persona, and the time of year at which it occurs, at the end of winter and the beginning of spring, evokes a sense of spiritual rebirth. The ashes are suggestive of mortality, while their function in the Christian ritual, in which "the priest, dipping his thumb in ashes, marks the sign of the cross on the forehead while he intones: "Remember, man, that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return" reminds us of their Biblical relevance, from Genesis 3:19, when God reminds Adam and Eve that "you are dust, and to dust you shall return" as they leave the Garden of Eden.[16] This calls to mind, in turn, as George Williamson writes, "the need of man to turn from the world to God", aware of his own mortality in face of God's eternity.[17] This also prefigures the essential thematic concern of the "turn" later in the poems. From the title we might assume that the poem is in some way re-enacting the ritual of Ash Wednesday, and we are led to wonder whether Eliot takes the role of the congregant, being led to faith, the priest, leading his readers towards a spiritual rebirth, or both. The poem has the title in common with a sermon of Lancelot Andrewes, performed on Ash Wednesday 1619, about which Eliot had already written, which shares many of *Ash-Wednesday's* concerns.[18]

This brings us to another important aspect of Eliot's usage of connotation; often his words have their context built in to them not just by the nature of language itself, but by their previous uses in literature. It is understandable why Eastman would have thought this 'unfriendly'; the meanings which a poet achieves with allusion are not easily accessible to the non-specialist reader. Before dealing with the question of the meaningfulness of literary allusion, it might be helpful to build a secure foundation for this argument by first considering those meanings which emerge purely from language, rather than allusion. It may be worth adding that in this essay "allusion" is being taken to specifically mean references of style or content to previous literary works, for all connotation comes within the wider sense of allusion.

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[15] Denis Faul, 'Thoughts on Sunday', *The Furrow,* 14 (1963) 180-188 (p.180)
[16] George Williamson, *A Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976) p. 168
[17] Ibid
[18] B.C. Southam, *A Student's Guide to T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994) p. 22

Considering the Turn

Ash-Wednesday I begins with a clause repeated in two different configurations:

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn[19]

Within the religious context established by the title, and the repeated usage of the personal pronoun "I", we are lead to assume that the "turn" in question is one of personal faith. The particular action of the word "turn" is ambiguous; we don't know whether it is one towards or away from faith. The word "again" controls this ambiguity, however: it suggests a repetition, thus implying that Eliot has already enacted a turn. In light of the titular suggestion of a movement "from the world to God", it becomes apparent that the turn Eliot has already made to is one towards faith, while he hopes not to turn away from it.[20] This is an early example of the way in which Eliot closely reins in ambiguous connotation to express a clearly defined meaning, though without losing the connotative possibilities of his means of expression.

The choice of the word "turn" in particular is also interesting; it is a common usage both in the Bible and in Bishop Andrewes' 1619 sermon, yet is a relatively inactive verb; Eliot is not running or striving towards salvation, he merely turns.[21] There could be various reasons for this. Eliot criticised Donne as someone who sought "refuge in religion from the tumults of strong emotional temperament which can find no complete satisfaction elsewhere", voicing a preference for Andrewes' "more pure", "medieval" faith for the reason that "his intellect was satisfied by theology" rather than his emotions.[22] A verb of desperation would have implied an emotional basis to this decision, while the "turn" suggests a controlled and considered movement, more synonymous with the intellect than the emotions. It may also be intended to suggest the ease with which he effects the movement to faith from more secular notions; Eliot does not strive towards faith because it is not distant or difficult to reach, it is easily accessible and imminent. Thus, usage of "turn" implicitly supports the explicit statement that Eliot doesn't "hope to turn [away from faith]" by its suggestion of the continual nearness of faith to the unbeliever. There is a tension in the usage of the word, however; the ease of the "turn" suggest that it is also easy to turn away once more. From this detail we unfold a wider tension in the first line; "I do not hope to turn again" is an

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[19] T.S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930) p.9
[20] George Williamson, *A Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976) p. 168
[21] B.C. Southam, *A Student's Guide to T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994) p.223
[22] T.S. Eliot, *Essays Ancient and Modern* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936) p.27

ambiguous phrase; on first reading it might suggest "I have no hope of turning again", yet in light of the equivocation of the turn, we are led to question whether it can also suggest "I do not want to turn again". This tension unfolds more clearly through the first three lines, as Eliot reconfigures the first in two different forms, implying an extensive consideration of this action, the result, we might assume, of conflicted thoughts. Similarly, the second line is possessed of a complicating multiplicity; on one hand it suggests that Eliot is drawn to faith by a lack of "hope" – despair, while it could also imply that he is content as a believer, and doesn't need to "hope" vainly any longer. This reading would also imply that his turn to religion is intellectual rather than emotional; he doesn't need to "hope", with its attendant uncertainty, because his convictions are intellectually grounded.

As we read on and gain more context, the web of connotation grows exponentially, and so does the intricacy of meanings conveyed. The third line reconfigures the second, to suggest that the reason that Eliot doesn't "hope" is because he is certain in his faith: he does "not hope to turn". This reading conveys a steadfastness that belies the tricolonic repetitive structure of the first three lines, which conveys a degree of uncertainty. If we lay this against the second line, in which Clifford Davidson, in *Baptism, The Three Enemies, and T.S. Eliot* detects "despair from which he suffers" which "has deprived him of all hope", a multifaceted, conflicted picture emerges from the first three lines; Eliot seems at once confident and uncertain, hopeless and intellectually stoic.[23] Here we may once more set *Ash-Wednesday* against Eastman's complaints. Eastman writes that "it may seem that he isn't telling you anything because he doesn't know anything". On one level, Eastman is correct: Eliot appears to be experiencing various conflicting emotional and intellectual impulses, so it would follow that he would be unable to convey a singular attitude in his poetry. It seems remarkably easy for Elliot to convey these relatively complex antitheses within only 22 word, many of which are repeated, and suggests his aptitude for concisely conveying a variety of different simultaneous attitudes.

Considering Allusion

If we then reread these three lines in light of Eliot's allusions, the web of meaning grows once more. The first line, "because I do not hope to turn again" is a loose translation of the opening line of Guido Cavalcanti's *Perch'i' no Spero di Tornar Giammai*: "Perch'io non

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[23] Clifford Davidson, *Baptism and the Three Enemies and T.S. Eliot* (Stamford: Shaun Tyas, 1999) p.23

spero di tornar già mai".[24] If we add on a few words from the next line "Ballatetta, in Toscana", the phrase translates literally as "because I do not hope to return again, Ballad, to Tuscany".[25] Rossetti, in his 1861 translation in *The Early Italian Poets*, translated it as "Because I think not ever to return/Ballad, to Tuscany".[26] In the poem, Cavalcanti expresses "devotion to his lady as death approaches".[27] She is still in Florence, and he a political exile in Saranza. Dino Compagni, one of the two chroniclers of the poet's life, writes that after some time, however, "Guido Cavalcanti returned ill [to Florence], whence he died".[28]

Thus we are led to reconsider the turn in light of Cavalcanti's *Perch'i' no Spero* in various ways. On the simplest level, there is a congruence of content, which serves to cement Eliot's thematic concerns by means of a parallel literary-historical precedent. Eliot described this as the "Mythical Method", a means of "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity".[29] He wrote that "it is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history".[30] By this means, his own intellectual concerns gain significance in their similarity to Cavalcanti's. The suggestion of waning life taken from both Cavalcanti's biography and his poetry is clearly supported in *Ash-Wednesday*; Cavalcanti writes "che la morte/Mi stringe sì, che vita m'abbandona", which translates as "Death/Assails me, till my life is almost sped", while in *Ash-Wednesday I*, Eliot describes himself as "the agèd eagle", stating that "these wings are no longer wings to fly" and mentioning "now" as "the hour of our death".[31] A similar thematic congruence lies in the religiosity of *Perch'i' no Spero.* This manifests itself in tropes of devotion and subservience, of turns from the visceral to the spiritual, such as "My body being now so nearly dead/It cannot suffer more/Then, going, I implore/That this my soul thou take" and the end of "It shall be deep delight/To feel her presence there/And thou, Soul, worship her/Still in her purity".[32] *Ash-Wednesday* contains various lines which describe a similar form of worship, such as when Eliot describes how "I who am here dissembled/Proffer my deeds to oblivion" after his worldly body has been eaten by "three white leopards".[33]

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[24] B.C. Southam, *A Student's Guide to T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994) p.223

[25] George Williamson, *A Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976) p.169

[26] *The Early Italian poets*, trans. by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1981) p.127

[27] *A Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot*, p.169

[28] *The poetry of Guido Cavalcanti*, trans. by Lowry Nelson Jr. (New York: Garland, 1986) pxviii

[29] Denis Donoghue, 'Yeats, Eliot, and the Mythical Method', *The Sewanee Review,* 105 (1997) 206-226 p.207

[30] Ibid, p.207

[31] *The Early Italian Poets*, trans. by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1981) p.127
   T.S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930) p.9

[32] *The poetry of Guido Cavalcanti*, trans. by Lowry Nelson Jr. (New York: Garland, 1986) p. 75

[33] T.S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930) p.11

The sense of exile expressed explicitly in Cavalcanti's poem is also transferred to *Ash-Wednesday* by means of the Mythical Method, and the very process of allusion itself also supports this. Philip M Martin notes how "the mood and setting of the ballad" are "transplanted from the experience of a thirteenth-century Italian poet into that of a twentieth-century penitent".[34] The considerable distance in time between these two figures lives is notable here; Eliot's usage of Cavalcanti's poem in his own paints him as a literary exile in twentieth century Britain, concerned with the words of an obscure Italian rather than the actualities of his own society. Another allusion in *Ash-Wednesday I* supports this sense of exile. "Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope" is an altered quotation from Shakespeare's *Sonnet 29*, which reads "Desiring this man's art and that man's scope".[35] The sonnet itself explicitly conveys a sense of isolation, as Shakespeare writes how "I all alone beweep my outcast state", which emphasises Eliot's own state.[36] It may be relevant that both this, and the allusion to Cavalcanti, aren't quoted exactly; Eliot is isolated from an exact reproduction of the experience conveyed in those texts by his inexact reproduction of their language. He is adrift between two cultures, unable to truly reconcile his experience with either the present, or the remote literary past.

The repetition of Cavalcanti's "turn" in various different configurations serves to increase its symbolic connotations. As Philip M. Martin writes, "this is concentrated poetry… Many of the words and phrases which Eliot uses conjure up others, and so possess very much more than their own face value: some… make reference to a wider and different context and setting, so that sometimes one single word draws in its association a complete story".[37] In the third stanza of *Ash-Wednesday I*, Cavalcanti's phrase is subtly altered to "Because I *cannot* hope to turn again".[38] It creates a progression within the poem, whereby the possibility of a return to Eliot's old ways becomes even more remote, as his means of expression become less ambiguous. "Cannot" reconfigures the other words in the line in a new way too. "Again", with its connoted possibility of repetition is lent pathos by its juxtaposition against "cannot", which is conversely suggestive of a complete lack of this. The element of intentionality which had been suggested by "I do not hope" is relinquished in "I cannot hope", and implies a renunciation of autonomy before God, though also a sense of hopelessness.

If we consider the usage of the word "turn" in Lancelot Andrewes' *1619 Ash Wednesday Sermon*, we are immediately drawn to its most pointed usage, as the thematic basis for the entire sermon at the beginning, with a quotation from *Joel* 2:12; "therefore also

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[34] Philip M. Martin, Mastery and Mercy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957) p.98
[35] *Shakespeare's sonnets*, ed. by Katherine Duncan-Jones (London: Arden, 2010) p.32
[36] Ibid, p.32
[37] *Mastery and Mercy*, p.85
[38] T.S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930) p.9

now, saith the Lord, Turn ye even to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning. And rend your heart, and your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God".[39] In the Biblical context the concept of the turn is already a complicated one; on one hand, the believer is the one who enacts the "turn", so posesses autonomy over this action, while on the other, God tells Christians to "turn ye even to me" with an imperative. It is a command, not a question. At certain points in *Ash-Wednesday I* Eliot tells us "I do not hope to turn" while at others he "cannot". This supports the inference that Eliot was possessed of a conflicted mind, constantly turning back on itself. Thus the complicated Biblical relevance of the "turn" with regard to autonomy mimics Eliot's own mental conflict, and the word gains connotative meaning as a representation of a conflicted mind, Eliot's mental turns enforced by its repetition. This sense is supported by the notion in Joel that the turn to God be attended by "mourning", which is suggestive of loss as well as contrition. This conflict is expressed in a more logical form by Bishop Andrewes in his sermon, as he describes the necessity of two turns, "first, a turn wherein we look forward to God, and with our whole heart resolve to turn to Him. Then a turn again wherein we look backward to our sins wherein we have turned from God, and with beholding them our very heart breaks".[40] Eliot refers to this directly in *Ash-Wednesday III* with the "turning of the second stair" when he sees "below" him a "shape" "struggling with the devil".[41] Eliot's richly evocative poetry complicates the rather dryer statements of Andrewes; that he sees his former self as merely a "shape", and thus indistinct and presumably lacking any definable materiality, suggests an irreconcilable distance between it and his current self. This is explicitly supported by the lines in *Ash-Wednesday I* that tell us how Eliot "cannot hope to turn again", for "there is nothing again". In the passage on the stair in *Ash-Wednesday III* Eliot also complicates Andrewes' statement by depicting a multiplicity of different simultaneous turns. There is the "first turning" of the second stair, then there is Eliot's own turn: "I turned". Then there is the "twisting" of the "shape". The first suggests external direction of his actions; Eliot comes upon the noun, a "turning", a physical object which invites a turn. We might assume this was prompted by Bishop Andrewes' directions in his sermon. The second is Eliot's own autonomous action of turning, and the third might represent the conflicted twisting of his former self with sinful impulses, represented by the "devil". The conflation of these three different ideas within the concept of the "turn" serves to release a large number of disparate connotations from the word; Eliot is "squeezing" the word, and in turn it yields a "full juice of meaning". This is achieved far more quickly and efficiently than Andrewes can in the 147

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[39] Lancelot Andrewes, *Sermon of Repentance and Fasting, Preached on Ash-Wednesday A.D. MDCXIX*, Anglican History, http://anglicanhistory.org/lact/andrewes/v1/wednesday4.html [05/04/14]
[40] Ibid
[41] T.S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930) p.14

usages of the word "turn" in his Ash Wednesday Sermon. We might refer to this process of extraction in the same words Eliot uses to describe the Mythical Method; it achieves "an ideal unity in experience", as a multiplicity of different meanings converge in one place, and in turn, the experience of the individual is lent a more universal relevance.[42]

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[42] Denis Donoghue, Yeats, Eliot, and the Mythical Method*, The Sewanee Review*, 105 (1997) 206-226 (209-210)

Considering Structure

If we return to Eliot's point that the mythical method is "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape" to his work, it becomes evident that he took this comment quite literally in *Ash-Wednesday*. Cavalcanti's "tornar" (or Bishop Andrewes' "turn") becomes a backbone for the work, recurring in the third and fourth stanzas of *Ash-Wednesday I,* in each of the first three stanzas of *Ash Wednesday III,* and thrice in the first stanza of *Ash-Wednesday VI.* Its occurrences (1,3,6) create a balanced reflected framework around the central number 3, one which holds particular significance in Christian doctrine, and is suggestive of the holy trinity of The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit.

The poems are also given shape by Eliot's careful control of his versification, which in turn adds to the web of connotation. In the first stanza, the lines are, on the whole, written in iambic pentameter, but then "I no longer strive to strive towards such things" creates an emphatic caesura which upsets the rhythm of the entire line; if "I" was removed, the line would adhere perfectly to the metre, yet the "I" upsets it entirely by moving each foot up a place, so the reader is repeatedly met with trochees when they expect iambs.[43] The placement of the "I", outside of the metrical adherence of the rest of the line is suggestive of isolation, and also a solipsistic attitude; in the metrical structure of the line, the metrical coherence of the external (the "things" Eliot no longer strives towards) is reliant on the self: "I". This caesura also serves to signal a sort of volta, as Eliot's thoughts turn from his previous "desire" for "this man's gift and that man's scope" to the present; he "no longer" strives "towards such things". There is a repeated juxtaposition of the personal ("I") against wider abstract concepts in *Ash-Wednesday I*; "I" is placed near the beginning of a line, and interacts with loosely defined concerns such as "time" and "things". This structuring supports this solipsistic attitude on the part of the speaker; these abstract experiences are always secondary to the self, and the form conjures an atmosphere of isolation. These lines possess varying metrical shapes which support the different configurations of experience they convey. In many lines, the "I" takes the unstressed foot after "because" ("Because I do not think", "Because I cannot hope", "Because I know I shall"). The "I" is rendered more emphatic by the fact that it begins each iambic phrase, while "because" suggests a continuing train of thought by means of causality; x happens "because" y happens "because" z happens. This in turn serves to support the solipsism suggested by the repeated "I", by the fact that this long train of thought keeps returning, cyclically, to the self.

In the following lines of *Ash-Wednesday I*, this picture of selfhood and causality is developed in a way which initially appears confusing, though is in fact very carefully controlled:

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[43] T.S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930) p.9

> Because I do not hope to know again
>
> The infirm glory of the positive hour
>
> Because I do not think
>
> Because I know I shall not know"[44]

Beginning the second stanza with "Because", as Eliot also does in the first, third and fifth, immediately begs the question of what came before. It is a poetic form of in media res, as the poem begins in the middle of the action, the action in this case being a personal dialogue. It suggests conflict which existed before the initial boundary of the poem, and implicitly puts forth the poem as an attempt to reconcile this dialogue: as a conclusion, of sorts. The word "because" is a term of justification, and connotes a degree of confidence in a prior statement. By leaving out this prior statement, Eliot is able to achieve the "incantation" of which he writes in *The Turnbull Lectures*; but in this case it is not the "collocation" that "brings out the connotation of each word", but the opposite.[45] By removing the expected phrase assemblage of the word, its instability, outside of its context, is exposed. "Because" without any prior statement implies uncertainty; the justification will necessarily be groundless, having no assertion on which to build. The poem itself is exposed as a wider "incantation", or a ghost, almost a justification of something undefined. In light of this we might seek, to some extent, to refute, with regard to *Ash-Wednesday*, Eliot's assertion that he was a "classicist in literature"[46]. Robert D. Spector suggests the qualities that define "Eliot the Classicist" are that he "balances and weighs, modifies and adjusts, offers thesis and antithesis, and emerges with a synthesis".[47] The apparent baselessness suggested by the lack of a prior statement before "because" supports the poet's assertion that "I do not think", and exposes an unforeseen connotation of the word.

If we consider the four lines above in light of this, they can be seen as a rejection of the dialectical method. They are structured not as binaries of thesis/antithesis: instead, the thought follows a single direct narrative pathway backwards. Eliot knows he won't know, so doesn't think, so doesn't hope to know again. The inverse chronology of these lines, coupled with Eliot's description of himself as an "aged eagle" in the first stanza, conjures an atmosphere of retrospection in old age.[48] The statement that "I do not think" suggests that this ageing reminiscence lacks the curiosity of youth. Eliot no longer knows "the infirm glory" of the positive hour, and is decided in his beliefs, his narrative of thought is singular, not conflicted. The last of these lines, "Because I know I shall not know", is nihilistic in its

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[44] T.S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930) p.9

[45] T.S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994) p. 271

[46] T.S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes* (New York: Doubleday Doran, 1929) p. vii

[47] 'Fei-Pai Lu, *T. S. Eliot: The Dialectical Structure of His Theory of Poetry*' reviewed by Robert D. Spector, *Books Abroad,* 41 (1967) p. 342

[48] *Ash Wednesday* p.9

approach. It is a reformulation of the Socratic paradox, and ostensibly tells us that Eliot chooses not to "think" because he understands philosophically the limits of human understanding. The word "shall" widens the impotence this line suggests, the future tense of it implies that Eliot has no possibility of ever knowing, and some varied connotations of "know" are released.

By carefully controlling line breaks, Eliot is also able to manipulate the sense of a word or line as it is read. When we have seen only the first four lines of the second stanza, they suggest the nihilistic submission before the Socratic Paradox that has already been discussed. If we then extend this reading to the fifth line of the second stanza, the suggestion of the Socratic Paradox, though clearly connoted, becomes secondary, and we read the lines together as telling us that Eliot doesn't hope to return to the positive hour, "Because I know I shall not know/The one veritable transitory power". Context defines the connotations Eliot is able to squeeze from the word. The context of each word is always changing as we read; thus it becomes apparent that connotation is not fixed by the act of printing; and is rendered malleable as we make our way through the text. It allows Eliot to create complex shifting interactions between words, and it is possible to track these shifts, much as we might follow the actions of a character in a novel. When we have read up to "Because I know I shall not know", the second stanza creates a sense of helplessness. When the fifth line is added, the linear progression of causality of second stanza is revealed as cyclical; G. Wilson Knight, in *T.S. Eliot: Some Literary Impressions* notes that "the one veritable transitory power" and the "infirm glory of the positive hour" are synonymous, and the lines that preceed them are too: "because I do not hope to know again" and "Because I know I shall not know".[49] On one level this adds an extra element of hopelessness, as the train of thought is shown to be going nowhere. On another, however, this can be seen as an extension of the poem's "turn" theme, as thoughts form loops, turning on themselves. This repetition serves to enhance the connotations of the "turn", suggesting a continuous retroversion which belies the ostensible meaning conveyed by Eliot's assertion that "I do not hope to turn again". Differing forms of this repetition feature heavily in *Ash-Wednesday I*, such as the lines which begin the third stanza:

Because I know that time is always time

And place is always and only place

And what is actual is actual only for one time

And only for one place[50]

The binary parallelisms they create, of a/a/b/b in sentence structure, and a/b/a/b in theme works directly against the explicit meaning these lines convey. They express the

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[49] G. Wilson Knight, 'T. S. Eliot: Some Literary Impressions', *The Sewanee Review*, 74 (1966) 239-255 (p. 243)

[50] T.S. Eliot*, Ash Wednesday* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930) p. 9

specificity and isolation of each experience, yet the parallel structures work against this assertion by intimately linking these different linguistic concepts, and the experiences they convey, together. Similarly, the repetitions of "time" and "place" suggest the grandeur and breadth of these concepts, which work against Eliot's assertion of the specificity of experience.

Russell Fraser, on the poetry of George Herbert, wrote that "His syntactic strategies, boiling down to repetition, conjure the reader, taking hold of him by the lapels".[51] Repetition serves to gain the reader's attention and emphasise the sense of the particular word. Fraser describes Herbert's process as "repetition with variation to enforce the idea".[52] Fraser seems to have assumed on Herbert's part a degree certainty in exactly what he was saying, and this is evident in some lines from a poem such as *The Wreath.*

> A wreathed garland of deservèd praise,
>
> Of praise deservèd, unto Thee I give,
>
> I give to Thee, who knowest all my ways,
>
> My crooked winding ways, wherein I live[53]

The structure mimics an actual wreath, as overlapping repetitions form a circular movement. These repetitions are almost exact, so the words barely gain any new context, and in turn cannot be enriched by any new connotations. They "enforce the idea", and Herbert seems to have completed the train of thought before writing the poem. Eliot's repetitions achieve something quite different. They suggest a poet who is turning over an idea as he writes. *Ash-Wednesday V* begins:

> If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent
>
> If the unheard, unspoken
>
> Word is unspoken, unheard;
>
> Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,
>
> The Word without a word, the Word within
>
> The world and for the world[54]

This passage functions in a similar way to the first three lines of *Ash-Wednesday I*, as the word is turned about on itself and reconfigured. Unlike sections of *Ash-Wednesday I*, however, the dialectical mode is clearly evident. While *Ash-Wednesday I* is concerned with the personal turn to faith, as George Williamson writes, "Part V deals with the revelation of

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[51] Russell Fraser, 'George Herbert's Poetry', *The Sewanee Review*, 95 (1987) 560-585 (p.570)

[52] Ibid, p.570

[53] The English poems of George Herbert, ed. by Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) p.239

[54] T.S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930) p.18

the Word in the present world".[55] In the first line the "word" is configured as something vital and material by the conditional mood and the connotations of the verbs "lost" and "spent". In the second, however, the normal immaterial experience of the word is invoked by "unheard" and "unspoken", though the parallel structure gives both an element of their previous counterparts, and we associate "have" with "hear", and "spend" with "speak", and the materiality of the word becomes apparent, in the similarity of the relationship between the analogous pairs. If we listen to a recording of Eliot himself reading *Ash-Wednesday*, his pronunciation supports this, as "world" is pronounced as a homophone of "word"; the two meld into one, sonically, and their connotations mesh together.[56]

The complex sonic patterns in this passage, though highly artificial, also suggest the tumult of a circling thought. "If the unheard, unspoken/Word is unspoken, unheard" creates a chiasmatic rhyme scheme of a/b/a/b/a, which then descends into chaos in the next three lines of dense internal rhyme which we might track out as b/a/a/b/a/a/a/a/a, while the themes of the rhyming words are similarly disordered, unheard, world and world as (a) and unspoken as (b). The synthesis of "world" and "word" is supported by the imagery of unification in the last two lines, as the "world still whirled/About the centre of the silent Word", and its suggestion of the perfectly contained consolidated singularity of the atomic form. "The Word", when capitalised, is the proper noun which denotes the word of God at the beginning of John 1; "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God".[57] In light of this, the performativity of this passage is revealed: as we start to become unable to tell "world" and "word" apart, the speech act itself consummates John's synthesis of these two concepts; it is a very tangible performance of the dialectical method, and serves to demonstrate Eliot's impressive mastery of language. By means of this performativity, his poetry is able to forge entirely new connotative linkages between words, so that the direct experience of language supports the sense he means to convey. In this way, we might say that, in fact, Eliot is able very clearly to "enforce the idea" by means of repetition, as Russell Fraser wrote of George Herbert, though that which Eliot employs may be slightly more nuanced.

As this essay draws to a close, it may be useful to consider the structural relevance of the conclusion to *Ash-Wednesday VI*, "And let my cry come unto thee". It is an allusion to *Psalm 102*, "Hear my prayer Lord, And let my cry come unto thee".[58] In a catholic mass, the priest calls the first half of this, and the congregation reply with the second. Ostensibly it is a confirmation of Eliot's place as a churchgoer, as the personal of "my" is subsumed within the

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[55] George Williamson, *A Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976) p.180
[56] T.S. Eliot, *T. S. Eliot reading Ash Wednesday*, Youtube.com
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEUlzDTGd44> [20/04/14]
[57] John, 1.1.
[58] Psalms, 102

congregation, presumably representative of the wider ranks of the Christian faith. The self is also simultaneously subsumed within "thee": God. The line evokes a broad unity of faith, yet its structure belies this; the line is isolated from the rest of the poem and forms its own stanza. This suggestion of isolation leads us to consider the implicit yearning of the phrase; Eliot asks that God might "let" his cry come unto him. This complicates the sense expressed; there is unity, but also a sense of distance and unfulfilled desire. The "cry" is a fitting expression of this; it vocalises confidence in a belief, but also desperate longing, which suggests that Eliot is unable to fully disentangle himself from an emotional conception of faith. This is evident throughout *Ash-Wednesday*, in the poem itself and the poems it alludes to. When Eliot writes that "these wings are no longer wings to fly/But merely vans to beat the air", it appears at first to be merely an evocation of impotence; Eliot being treated metaphorically as a bird, yet there is also violence implicit in the word "beat" which suggests thwarted passion and anger.[59] Similarly, when Eliot writes that "I" "proffer my deeds to oblivion", he directly contradicts the biblical assertion of *Acts* 10:4 that "thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God", and conveys a repudiation of his earlier deeds. The word "proffer" and its suggestion of a ritual offering lends the passage an ironic note by the fact that this offering is made to something as uncaring as "oblivion". If Eliot is being ironic, we would assume it is a reaction to certain negative emotions, and if he is being sincere, the hopelessness of the passage is enormous. Either way, there is clearly inescapable feeling in these words. If we consider Eliot's emotion in the final line once more, it becomes apparent that he has returned in a way to the start of the poem. As has already been discussed, both the first line and the last convey a complicated attitude to personal faith. In both, the speaker is at once certain of his faith, and faltering, considering it intellectually, yet highly emotively, attaining spiritual unity, but completely alone. The poem enacts its final "turn", and is revealed to be circular.

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[59] T.S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930) p.10

Conclusion

In attempting a conclusion, it might be sensible to impersonate Eliot and "turn" back to the beginning of this essay, to the words of Max Eastman. We might address the comment that "In any case [the difficult poet] is uncommunicative", as it sums up what he means to convey in *The Cult of Unintelligibility*, and supplies us with a single condensed comment against which to direct a response. "communicative" is defined as "effective as a means of conveying information".[60] It has hopefully become evident that Eliot's poetry is extremely effective as a means of conveying information. Certain lines of *Ash-Wednesday*, as has been shown, convey extraordinary amounts of information, incredibly succinctly. Words are squeezed until they yield a "full juice of meaning", and an enormous number of connotations can be extracted from them. Eliot achieves this squeezing by myriad means. He sets words against each other, directing this interaction so as to extract specific connotations in specific circumstances. He manipulates form in many different ways to draw attention to certain words and certain interactions between words. He is aware of the physical properties of certain words which evoke certain meanings. He creates complex strings of allusion to previous literary works, which signify particular attitudes and ideas. To say that T.S. Eliot wasn't communicative would be a narrow-minded and frankly lazy stance to take.

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