

## Mystical Sensibility and Misogyny in T.S. Eliot's Early Poems

Leila Bellour  
Mila University Centre

### 1-Eliot's Mystical Sensibility

Since, his early years, Eliot was inclined to mysticism, which was already in vogue during the modern age. Mysticism appeared in Modernism as panacea to heal the sick spirit of the modern man. But the kind of mysticism, which was rife in that period, is of a sentimental or psychological sort. Contrariwise, the mysticism endorsed by Eliot is of a religious kind. During his study at Harvard, from 1908 to 1914, Eliot read voraciously books on religion and mysticism. Daven Michael Kari states: "While attending Harvard from 1908 to 1914, Eliot read many works on mysticism and the psychology of the religious experience. Eliot was fascinated by the lives of the saints and mystics."<sup>1</sup> Eliot read for mystics like St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross. The latter was known mainly for his suffering, which compels Eliot to associate the mystical experience with suffering and torture. Eliot's religious and mystical yearnings can be traced back to 1910. According to Gordon, "The year 1910, in fact, marked the beginning of a religious ferment and a rebellion against the world's dull conspiracy to tie him to its lifeless customs."<sup>2</sup> Eliot's interest in Christian mysticism and sainthood reached its peak in 1914, the year Eliot was completing his last year in Harvard. Mysticism appeals to Eliot because it elevates the soul and enables it to reach

the Absolute, which is a state of wholeness. Indeed, Eliot's early years show his keen interest in the Absolute, which seems to be of a religious nature. Jayme Stayer states that "The Absolute and its enemies—time, women, sexual desire, social customs—are ubiquitous in the notebook."<sup>3</sup> One is tempted to opine that Eliot's misogyny incites him to escape from sex by means of mystic yearnings.

In a world marked by an utter split of things into binary oppositions, Eliot becomes interested in tying binaries and in relating separated things. His interest in the blending of mystical experience and Bradleyan philosophy is evident in his early poems, which are included in *The Inventions of the March Hare*. The saint poems, in particular, reveal Eliot's attraction to sainthood. Jayme Stayer states that

In his attempt to make sense of his experience and the world, the young Eliot frequently revisits certain difficulties in his notebook: (1) the problem of the self's relation to the Absolute, which in Eliot's case includes a nascent spiritual awareness; (2) the problem of solipsism, or how the internal self relates to external realities, especially realities that are sordid or at odds with conventional feelings; and (3) the problem of the sexual impulse and how to negotiate between its insistent claims and socially proper modes of expression and behavior. Eliot's mature poetry would find compelling solutions to these problems, but it is in the notebook that the poet first

maps out their terrain (“Searching for Early Eliot” 111)

In The Clark Lectures, Eliot identifies two kinds of mysticism: classical and romantic mysticism. Such classification of mysticism emanates from his readings of Evelyn Underhill and William James. According to Eliot, “The Aristotelian-Victorian-Dantesque mysticism is ontological; the Spanish mysticism is psychological. The first is what I call classical, the second romantic.”<sup>4</sup> Classical mysticism, in Eliot’s view, is the intellectual preparation to practice “the divine contemplation” in order to achieve “the development and subsumption of emotion and feeling through intellect into the vision of God.” (The Varieties 103-04) Examples of classical mysticism includes Aristotle, Aquinas, and Dante. One of the main qualities of classical mysticism is its impersonality. According to Eliot, classical mysticism “is wholly impersonal-as impersonal as a handbook of hygiene-and contains no biographical element whatever; nothing that could be called emotional or sensational.” (The Varieties 102)

Classical mysticism is also marked by a unified sensibility. Dante is considered by Eliot as a classical mystic, because, according to him, in Dante, “you get a system of thought and feeling; every part of the system felt and thought in its place, and the whole system felt and thought; and you cannot say that it is primarily ‘intellectual’ or primarily ‘emotional,’ for the thought and the emotions are reverse sides of the same thing.” (The Varieties 182-83) So, in Dante, there is a unification of thought and

feeling, which is missing in some mystics. Very much like the metaphysics discussed in his doctoral thesis on F.H. Bradley, who loomed large in his philosophical studies, Eliot's gives an effusive support to the kind of mysticism, which comprises a unity of thought and reality.

In his criticism of romantic mysticism in The Clark Lectures, Eliot denounces John of the Cross and St. Teresa, and he evinces a vindictive hatred to the Spanish mystics. Eliot states that "There are several mysticisms. But it may be as well to make clear that to me the Spanish mystics of the sixteenth century-St. Theresa, St. John of the Cross, Luis of Granada, St. Philip Neri [...] and St. Ignatius, are as much psychologists as Descartes, and Donne, and as much romanticism as Rousseau." (The Varieties 84) Eliot's vituperous hatred of romantic mysticism is due to its confusion between ecstasy and divine enlightenment. This form of mysticism is psychological, because It tends to equate the logos with the psyche/self. Eliot's saint poems vitriolically criticize this sick spirituality.

The romantic mystics' major fault is their tendency to substitute divine love for human love. In this respect, Eliot writes: "But what I wish to emphasize is that the tendency of St. Theresa is to *substitute* divine love for human love, and for the former to take on the characteristics of the latter." (The Varieties 166) Eliot's eulogizing of Dante is due to his ability to use and transform human love into a higher divine love. In this regard, Eliot states that "Dante and his contemporaries were quite aware human love

and divine love were different, and that one could not be *substituted* for the other without distortion of the human nature. Their effort was to enlarge the boundary of human love so as to make it a stage in the progress toward the divine.” (The Varieties166)

Eliot castigates romantic mysticism because he considers it considers it biographical, in contrast to classical mysticism, which is impersonal and reticent about the searing personal experience. In his vehement criticism of such kind of mysticism, Eliot considers Crashaw’s and St. Theresa’s religion as a substitution for a lost parental love. In Eliot’s words,

There are a few main points to remember about Crashaw. He was born into an atmosphere of religious devotion. He lost his mother, and even his step-mother, very early. It is possible that unsatisfied filial cravings are partly responsible for his adoration of St. Theresa. (Incidentally, it is possible that St. Theresa herself suffered from somewhat the same trouble; we remark that in her vision of paradise, the first persons she identified were her father and mother). (The Varieties 163)

So, this form of mysticism is psychopathological. It is a furious and unreasoning passion, which compensates for an emotional turmoil. The view of religion as a substitution for human love is supported by Freud in his book *Leonardo Da Vinci*.

Central to mysticism is a search for a transcendental experience, which seeks to make opposites melt. Hence, mysticism

is geared rigidly towards a the unification of body and mind, matter and spirit, subject and object. Another term Eliot uses for ‘unified sensibility’ is ‘mystical sensibility’. What Eliot admires most in Dante is his ability to unify thought and feeling. For Eliot, in Dante, “There is no imagined struggle of soul and body, only the struggle toward perfection.” (The Varieties 114) So, Dante occupies a central place in Eliot’s critical oeuvre because he represents the unified sensibility, which is missing in the Eliotic age. He is inclined towards mingling thought and feeling, body and soul, binaries which have been severed since Descartes. In his early years, Eliot dethroned the psychophysical dualism of body and mind/soul. Thus, he was very much concerned with the relationship between body and mind, matter and spirit, subject and object. This mystical inclination towards an indissoluble oneness is also found in the French poet Jules Laforgue. What Laforgue wants, Eliot writes, “is some way of salvation in which both the mind and the feelings, the soul and the body, shall cooperate towards fulness of life.” (The Varieties 285)

The modern age’s dissociation of sensibility is evident in the sundering of body and soul in human relationships. In love, for instance, there is either a union of bodies or a union of souls. In other words, the fulfillment of desire is thought to lie in the complete union of bodies or souls, which results in the dichotomy body/soul. According to Eliot, “The separation of soul and body in this way is a modern conception » (The Varieties 229) Lawrence is an example of this modern dualism because of his tendency to

glorify the unity of souls. Donald Child quotes Eliot, who excoriates Lawrence for his dualistic philosophy of human relations. According to Eliot, an “illustration of Lawrence’s ignorance, and a fault which corrupts his whole philosophy of human relations [...] is his hopeless attempt to find some mode in which two persons—one of the opposite sex, and then as a venture of despair, of the same sex—may be spiritually united.”<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the modern disease of the dissociation of sensibility has a throwback to the seventeenth century. Eliot states that “sensibility and intellect have been divided against each other since the seventeenth century; I assume this part of my thesis: I only point out that this, like the problem of soul and body discussed in the third lecture, is another dichotomy not found in the *trecento*; and that Crashaw is one of those who are on the side of feeling rather than thought.” (The Varieties 162-63) So, Eliot’s theory of the dissociation of sensibility is a modern version of the Cartesian split, which Eliot vehemently criticized in the Clark lectures.

Though in his critical essays, he assumes the role of the unflinching leader in revolting against the binary opposition body/soul, in real life, Eliot is Cartesian in his philosophy of love. T.S. Eliot’s disgust for the body is partly due to the Cartesian body/soul split, which becomes a norm in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this dualism, the balance is tilted towards the body or the erotic side at the expense of the spiritual one. According to Rev. J. Hudson Ballard, “Everyone who is abreast of the times is aware from his reading in the newspapers and magazines of the startling increase

and spread of sensuality throughout the civilized world [...] Wherever civilization has spread, the passions of the body are also conquering.”<sup>6</sup> Despite the developments it brings about, modernity results in sexual deviance and spiritual decadence. Freedom sullies morality, and makes the individual more absorbed in sensual pleasure.

In an age marked by an utter decline of the spiritual fervor, Eliot’s mother, who was a gifted and talented woman, used to write religious poetry, which left indelible traces on her son’s religious and literary sensibility. Eliot’s mother was very much influenced by the writings of St. Savonarola for whom she read voraciously. She even composed a poem entitled “Savonarola, a dramatic poem”, which Eliot published later after her death. Savonarola was struggling to defeat the flesh and its pernicious effects. In a letter to his father, Savonarola writes: “men of courage and of great heart such as art thou, must subdue the flesh and control it by exercise of reason.”<sup>7</sup> So, Eliot’s mother teaches her son to sacrifice his will and his entire self. Eliot’s interest in mysticism is due partly to the depravities, immoral impurities and blasphemies of the modern world. In one of her poems, Charlotte Champe Stearns writes to the reader: “Loose the spirit from its mesh/From the poor venture of the flesh”<sup>8</sup> So, this desire for purification, which requires the extinction of the flesh appeals to Eliot, who views the body with disdain despite his call for a unified sensibility. Eliot exerts all his efforts to escape from the physical body, because spiritual improvement requires the denial and



annihilation of emotional vice. He prefers a life of reason to a life of sense. Eliot's mysticism involves self-annihilation and disconnection from the physical body.

Eliot extends the relation between body and soul to a larger concern with the relation between male and female. Stayer maintains that "Eliot's search for meaning included not only metaphysical questions of the Absolute, and philosophical questions about the nature and reliability of experience, but physical questions of sexuality." ("Searching for Early Eliot" 23) Gender and sexuality are pivotal concerns in T.S. Eliot's early poems. The publication of Inventions of the March Hare further evinces his concern with male and female binary opposition. In fact, Eliot's theory of the dissociation of sensibility includes the dissociation between man and woman, which Eliot advocates and supports.

Though Eliot's misogyny is a reflection of his culture's gender attitudes, the seeds of his repulsion for the flesh can be traced back to his Unitarian origin. Since his childhood, Eliot was warned against pleasure. He grows with the lesson that the sexual act was abominable and repellent. Since sexual pleasure was forbidden to him, Eliot was shut from the world of sensuality. William Greenleaf's religion was concerned with self-restraint, remorse for emotional morbidity, and the awakening of the pangs of conscience. Eliot's Unitarian family taught him selflessness and the dedication of his passions and emotions to the public interests. In a book she writes about her father-in-law, Charlotte C. Eliot

states: “He practiced a rigid self-denial, which sometimes conveyed the impression of asceticism, but it was exercised with a practical object in view, and not as spiritual self-discipline.”<sup>9</sup>

What Eliot considers the main fault in Unitarianism is its optimistic view of life. Earl K. Holt III states that “In Eliot’s early poetry, images of damage and ruin served as a corrective to Unitarian optimism, which he viewed as falsely denying the reality that evil and sin, or even hardship and decay, existed in the world.”<sup>10</sup> Eliot distrusts his grandfather’s religion, because despite its rigidity, it does not quench the spiritual yearnings he was longing for. In her discussion of Eliot’s Unitarian roots, Robert Sencourt states that

The religion of the future, as envisaged by C.W. Eliot, would be neither gloomy nor ascetic. It would snap its fingers at authority, whether of bishop or of the Bible. It would not personify nature, and would cease to use anthropomorphic terms in thinking of a Supreme Being. It found the idea of sin irrelevant, and that of the redemption therefore still more so. It would sweep away the idea of universal sacrifice.[...]it wanted nothing of the cross or passion of the Kingly Redeemer. No curses, no sadness, no sacrament, no saving of souls would arrest its steady forceful push towards the progress, comfort, efficiency and well-being of Americans. It would concentrate on people’s safety and welfare by service

to progress and contribution to the common good.<sup>11</sup>

To sum up, Unitarianism is taken to task because it does not acknowledge the idea of the original sin, and it denies the existence of any exterior authority. It ignores sadness, sacrifice, and its main aim is to improve the lot of the individual.

Eliot was more inclined to his puritan origin than to the Unitarian one. Gordon states that

Unitarianism arose in America in the mid- eighteenth century, during the Great Awakening, in opposition to the old Puritan conviction of man's innate sinfulness. The Unitarians were confident of man's innate nobility [...] They rejected the Puritans' doctrine of damnation, their tests of Orthodoxy and heresy, and undemocratic distinction between church members. (Eliot's Early Years, 12)

Eliot's belief in the reality of sin impels him to develop a very pessimistic philosophy of life, which he views blackened with suffering. His belief in the Original Sin has always instilled in his heart a sense of guilt. So, he views suffering as an atonement for all his sins and a means that might bring about purgation.

Puritans are obsessed with the purification of the soul and with the problem of heaven and hell, which compels the person to restrain and annihilate his evil instincts and desires to reach sainthood. Alzina Stone Dale states that "at the root of being a Puritan was an individual's experience of conversion. Puritan

preaching and teaching were designated to call out not only rigid self-discipline, painstaking examination of conscience, and a sense of wickedness, but also the profound awareness of amazing grace, which made the elect person a saint.”<sup>12</sup> So, the belief in the individual’s feeble spiritual nature perpetuates in Eliot a life-long quest for grace.

The fact that Eliot’s parents were descendants from seventeenth century New England puritans had a deep impact on his religious sensibility in his early years before his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism. The influence of Eliot’s mother, in particular, impels him towards a constant search for salvation and purification. Stone Dal remarks that Eliot’s mother “instilled in him an undying pride in his ancestors and a strong sense of their values. She herself was deeply interested in the characteristic Puritan search for salvation along with being public-spirited.” (T.S. Eliot: The Philosopher-Poet 13) Of utmost significance, Puritanism is a religion, which subjects women to male authority. Amanda Porterfield states that

Puritan language about grace implicitly defined the nature of sexual satisfaction in terms of an encounter between male authority and female submission. This language helped promote ordinary marriage as the appropriate context for devotion to God. It also promoted a kind of sexual pleasure that was based on the conjunction of husbandly authority and wifely submission.<sup>13</sup>

According to Amanda Porterfield, Puritanism is a “more radical form of Protestantism characterized by intense preoccupation with conscience and self-control”(Female Piety 18). Augustine: Eliot’s reading of St. Augustine also has an impact on his repulsion for the body.

The influence of Buddhism on Eliot’s view regarding the flesh is undeniable. In his early years, Eliot had almost become a Buddhist because of the latter’s revulsion to the body. According to Peter Ackroyd, “Eliot’s flirtation with Buddhism in his later Harvard years [...] may well be connected with the aloofness and invulnerability”<sup>14</sup> Eliot’s interest in Buddhism, in his early years, is due to its emotional and sensual detachment. In his discussion of Eliot’s drive towards Buddhism, Ackroyd states that

Eliot’s attraction to Buddhism was not simply a philosophical attraction. *Nirvana* is extinction-the annihilation of desire, the freedom from attachments-and there was, as can be seen in his poetry, an over-riding desire in the young Eliot to be so free. The absolutism of Buddhism is quite as relentless as anything he had found in Maurass and, although he was perhaps attracted to it for much the same reason, the Eastern religion had more romantic affiliations for someone who wished to break free of the familial bonds which otherwise held him. (T.S. Eliot 47)

## 2-“The Burnt Dancer”

Like the other saint poems, “The Love Song of St. Sebastian” and “Death of St. Narcissus”, “The Burnt Dancer” contains a conflict between sensuality and asceticism in which the personae aspires to overcome animalistic lust and disordered desire by immolating itself in the flame. The personae of this poem is a black moth, who is dancing in the mid of the yellow ring of flame, and beating his wings tirelessly. This sadistic blissful self-punishment seems to be an atonement for the sin of his desire. According to John of the Cross, for whom Eliot read at Harvard years, “THE reason for which it is necessary for the soul, in order to attain to Divine union with God, to pass through this dark night of mortification of the desires and denial of pleasures in all things, is because all the affections which it has for creatures are pure darkness in the eyes of God,”<sup>15</sup> The circular movement of the dancer indicates a continuous torment without pause. The ring wherein the moth dances also signifies solitude, which is one of the major qualities of the mystics. According to Gordon, writes: “There were two aspects to purgation, *Mysticism* taught Eliot: detachment and mortification.” (*T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* 89)

In this sharp cleavage between body and soul, the moth wants to escape from his bodily condition, because he loathes the flesh. Caught in the purgatorial flames, which are symbolic of the fever of sin, the moth wants to divest himself of sexual desire and expiate his lust. In his mystic quest, redemption and salvation need

a violent asceticism and destruction of the body, which is the hub of desires. Like the Christian martyrs, the moth views strong passions as detrimental to the spiritual drives and impediment to man's ascent to the kingdom of God.

The moth forsakes sensual pleasure and earthly values, and he submits to the "golden values of the flame"<sup>16</sup> Though it procures pain and suffering, the latter are pleasurable because they are purgatorial. The speaker wonders what virtues this moth shall use in a world that seems to be deprived and far from the grace of God. He asks: "What is the virtue that he shall use/In a world too strange for pride or shame?/ A world too strange for praise or blame/Too strange for good or evil:"(62) The speaker might be the mouthpiece of Eliot, who is complaining about a world of frittered values. Manju Jain contends that "Eliot's hostility to contemporary civilization is evident also in "The Burnt Dancer", where the personae's other self is a black moth, a vagrant from another world."<sup>17</sup> According to Evelyn Underhill, mystical experience is sparked by a prostration and dissatisfaction with the spiritual bankruptcy in the world. In Underhill's words, "it is the first business of the missionary to create, if he can, some feeling of dissatisfaction with the world within which the practical man has always lived and acted; to suggest something of its fragmentary and subjective character."<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, the moth's journey from the very far star takes place at night, a time, which is very significant for the mystics. The night here might be metaphorical. By setting the journey of the moth at

night, Eliot might have in mind John of the Cross, who states that “For the Understanding of this it must be known that, for a soul to attain to the state of perfection, it has ordinarily first to pass through two principal kinds of night, which spiritual persons call purgation or purification of the soul; and here we call them nights, for in both of them the soul journeys, as it were, by night, in darkness.” (Ascent of Mount Carmel 56) The color of the moth, which is black, is also significant. In Christianity, it symbolizes of mortification and purity. According to Michael Ferber, “As the color of death and mourning, black has been adopted by Christians has a sign of death to this world (mortification) and thus of purity or humility.”<sup>19</sup>

Though the moth’s dance is not an expression of worldly pleasure, he experiences a hidden spiritual pleasure that no one remarks. Some critics interpret the act of dancing as an attempt to transcend the physical to the spiritual. Ramsay Burt, for instance, states that “the greatest dancers somehow transcend the body in a quest for the purely spiritual. This putative metaphysical transcendence is a transcendence of the base, physical facts of anatomy and gender.”<sup>20</sup> The speaker asks what kind of secret this moth has brought from the distant star. Though the reason of his coming is never explicitly avowed, he seems to have come to warn against desire and the ravages of the flesh. The black moth is a messenger who has come to redeem this vile world. The speaker asks: “Of what disaster do you warn us Agony nearest to delight?”(62)The tormented moth, who is burning in fire



experiences delight in his suffering and slow extinction. The moth is a harbinger of death, but this death is a mortification of the flesh. The speaker orders the moth to continue his delightful dance, which will apparently lead to demise, but this death is very promising because it implies purgation and resurrection. Michael Ferber states that Ovid makes a reference to ““funeral butterflies” [...] for they were often depicted on graves. The idea is that the soul undergoes a metamorphosis at death, leaving behind its earthbound larval state to take wing in a glorious form. It was adopted in Christian iconography as a symbol of resurrection.” (A Dictionary of Literary Symbols 37-8) For Dante, the butterfly evokes spiritual transcendence. The spiritual change upward is central to The Divine Comedy. In Purgatorio, the speaker asks: “do you not perceive that we are worms born to/form the angelic butterfly that flies to justice without a shield?”<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, and like in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, fragmentation of the self seems to be a major problem in this poem. In the first stanza, the moth is referred to by the pronoun “He”. In the second, the speaker addresses the moth directly. In the end of the poem, the speaker becomes the moth itself. He imagines that the dance takes place in his mind. The fire in the poem, which annihilates the speaker, is purgatorial and not that of lust, because it cleanse sinners of their sin. In Dante’s Purgatorio, the lustful walk in “the fire that refines” (The Devine Comedy 445) In her poem, “Savonarola: A Dramatic poem”, Eliot’s mother, Charlotte Champe Stearns writes: “Can Penitence alone forgiveness earn?/Or must I

not in purgatorial fire/Atone the baser promptings of desire?” (Qtd in T.S. Eliot: The Making of an American Poet 21)The speaker’s imagining of himself as a black moth is probably to dissociate himself from human nature.

He becomes a patient aching with pain. Like Prufrock, he feels like a patient “acolyte of pain.”(63) In the poem, there are striking analogies between physical and spiritual debility. Anthony Cuda states that: “In “Prufrock” and the early poems included in *Inventions of the March Hare*, he begins to experiment with physical paralysis as a correlative to the spiritual condition of vulnerability and helplessness.”<sup>22</sup> Tracing the origin of the word ‘patient’, Cuda states that “Eliot’s pun-and his use of other ‘patients’ in the early poems-rests on his knowledge that the word *patient* both pertains to patience in the modern sense and is also etymologically linked with passivity.” (“T.S. Eliot’s Etherized Patient” 397)

In his extreme delight and pleasure while burning in fire, the speaker loses “the end of his desire” (63). He wishes not only the complete vanishing of his desire, which is detrimental to the spiritual life, but also the end of his life. According to John of the Cross, “the desires weaken the virtue of the soul, because they are to it like the shoots that grow about a tree, and take away its virtue so that it cannot bring forth so much fruit.”(Ascent of Mount Carmel 77) Unlike St. Narcissus and St. Sebastian, this speaker’s martyrdom is pure and devoid from the taints of sensual desire. But

very much like the saints in these poems, the moth's pain is joyful. It was dancing while its life was flickering.

Reading the poem with regard to the Dante's The Divine Comedy, from which the epigraph is taken, illuminates the poem's major concern, which is spiritual transcendence. The epigraph is taken from Dante's *Inferno*, Canto 16, and it is translated as follows: "When three shades came running together out of a herd passing by beneath the rain of the harsh punishment"<sup>23</sup> In his commentary on the poem, Donald Schuchard states that "The Burnt Dancer" is

deeply informed by the context of the epigraph [...] taken from the description of the crimson river of flame that rains upon tormented souls damned for ungoverned desire in the seventh circle of hell [...] There Dante speaks with the burnt forms of three Florentine shades who break off from a troop that passes "beneath the rain of the sharp torment" [...] When the shades, their bodies twisted together into a wheel for awkward propulsion, ask Dante if the virtues of courtesy and valor have been lost in the "perverse country" of Florence, he affirms that they have indeed succumbed to materialism, pride, and excess. After asking Dante to remember them to friends above, they break from their wheel, "and, as they fled, their nimble legs seemed wings."<sup>24</sup>

In Dante's *Inferno*, the sinners' punishment ends by their physical metamorphosis, which signifies their spiritual salvation and

purification. The moth undergoes the same metamorphosis by its burning and becoming mere ashes. The spiritual purgation is accomplished if one also supposes that the metamorphosis takes place in the speaker's mind.

### 3-“First Debate Between the Body and Soul”

In this poem, which was composed in 1910, there is a conflict between the body and the soul, which was a major concern in his mother's poems. The theme is also very common in the English literary tradition. The title, for instance, recalls to mind Andrew Marvell's poem “A Dialogue Between the Soul and the Body” Man's major impediment towards perfection, in the poem, is the flesh. The speaker is a devout to the pure idea, which refers to something thoroughly intellectual, devoid of the stains of emotions. Rambling in the street, he heard a street piano “Insisting; “make the best of your position”/ The pure idea dies of inanition.”<sup>25</sup> The speaker has a deep disgust for the flesh and an aversion for emotions, which is evident in the refrain “The withered leaves/Of our sensations.” The speaker seems to be engaged in a hot battle to makes his sensations cease and to stop his ability to feel.

Though the eye, the corporeal part, which induces emotions and feelings “retains the images”(64), the speaker's brain remains impotent and passive in regard to these images. As he says, “The sluggish brain will not react/Nor distills/The dull precipitates of the fact/The emphatic mud of physical sense.”(64) The blindness of the old man, in the opening lines, is an objective correlative for the death of the senses, particularly the eye, which is the most

dangerous corporeal part. The old age evokes the debility of sentiments. At the end of the poem, the speaker beckons the Absolute, or the soul, to save him from physicality and to help him transcend the sensual world. He says: “Absolute! Complete idealist/Assist me to the pure idea-Regarding nature without love or fear.”(65)

#### 4-“The Little Passion”

The poem is probably written in 1914, and it shares one of the main thematic concerns of his early saint poems, which is the dialectic relationship between the body and the soul. The cross, in the poem, refers to “Descent from the Cross”, the title suggested by Eliot in his letter to Conrad Aiken. In his letter to Aiken, dated 25 July 1914, Eliot writes: “I enclose some *stuff*-the the *thing* I showed you some time ago, and some of the themes for ‘Descent From the Cross’ or whatever I call it.” (The Letters 48) According to Valerie Eliot, “The Descent From the Cross (which appears to be the provisional title for the collection of poems he was writing at this time, including ‘The Love Song of St. Sebastian’) refers to the central panel in Rubens’s great triptych in Antwerp Cathedral, which TSE had recently seen.” (The Letters 48) So, this poem is also concerned with sainthood and martyrdom.

The man in the bar is spiritually dead. The bar invokes alcohol, which induces, according to Eliot’s grandfather, all mighty sins. He confesses his spiritual emptiness as follows: “I feel/ As if I’d been a long time dead.”<sup>26</sup> The line recalls to mind “So through the evening” in which the speaker says: “It seems that have been a

long time dead/Do not report me to the established world.” The death declared here might not be only a spiritual one, but it might refer to an emotional drought. In a letter to Conrad Aiken dated 31 December 1914, Eliot writes: “In Oxford I have the feeling that I am not quite alive-that my body is walking about with a bit of my brain inside it, and nothing else.” (The Letters 81) The title of the poem suggests emotional passivity, or a state of emotional slumber.

The man, who intends to sacrifice himself, like Christ, was leading a futile and empty life, which is symbolized by the image of circularity as follows: “After those hours of streets and streets/That spun around him like a wheel.”(57) The agony, in this poem, is in the garret, unlike the Christ’s agony, which occurred in the garden. This disillusioned man is caught between spiritual yearning and erotic drives, which make him “div[e] into dark retreats” But he is aspiring to transcend this state of in-betweenness by following the spiritual path, which is evidenced in the refrain “following the lines of lights”(57), which points to spiritual enlightenment and illumination. The man, in this poem, is a pilgrim, who is walking the streets at night is in search for purification and redemption. This quester is following “the lines of lights”, which lead “to one inevitable cross/whereon our souls are pinned, and bleed.”(57) The streets that the quester follows lead him to crucifixion.

### **5-“Circe’s Palace”**

The title of the poem evokes the scene of Circe in The Odyssey. In The Odyssey, Circe, who uses magic and witchcraft,

employs the sirens to turn men into swine by singing to them beautiful songs. So, Odysseus's friends who entered Circe's palace were transformed into swine. The speaker, in the poem, seems to be in company with other explorers, who want to divulge the secrets of this palace, which is inhabited by a mysterious lady called Circe. The flowers that no one knows refers to the woman's sexuality. For Freud, femininity is a dark continent, which is enigmatic, puzzling, and unknowable. In his essay "The Question of Lay Analysis", Sigmund Freud writes: "We know less about the sexual life of little girls than of boys. But we need not feel ashamed of this distinction; after all, the sexual life of adult women is a 'dark continent' for psychology"<sup>27</sup> Circe is also a stranger, a foreigner, who is the subject of curiosity. Men's approach of the island is prompted by a fervid desire for knowledge of the feminine whose Otherness needs to be deciphered.

The abundant flowers "Around her fountain [...] that no man knows"<sup>28</sup> are symbolic of the lady's femininity. This woman, who is so attractive that she arouses men's curiosity, is also very repulsive and frightening since the beautiful flowers surrounding her fountain "sprang from the limbs of the dead". Circe is seemingly a cannibal. The fertile palace and its blooming flowers feed on men's blood. The "limbs of the dead" recall to mind the "bloody cloth and limbs" in "The Death of St. Narcissus" (Poems Written in the Early Years 28) She seduces men, by her charming and bewitching beauty, then she kills them. She is to use John Keats's words, the beautiful lady without pity. Circe is the

archetype of the female who has a hypnotizing power over man, and who poses a serious threat to his masculinity.

After reaching the reality of the horrific nature of the lady, the palace explorers decided not to return. The speaker says: “We shall not come here again.”(20) Eliot expresses his intense fear of the devouring feminine by using the myth of Odysseus. Remarking the poem’s concern with fear from the feminine, Seymour-Jones states that “The dream sequence of ‘Circe Palace’ [...] represents in Freudian imagery his fears of women as he experienced them at Harvard: creatures who threatened him with impotence, engulfment and annihilation.” (Painted Shadow 40) The hideous streak and stain on the flower articulates the speaker’s vehement repulsion for the feminine. This misogyny is also overtly avowed in another poem, “The Conversation Galante” In this poem, a male speaker says to a lady with whom he has a conversation: “You, madam, are the eternal humanist/The eternal enemy of the absolute”<sup>29</sup>

Circe is a sadistic person whose fountain “flows/ With the sound of men in pain” (20). Eliot might have borrowed the devouring power of Circe from his readings of Hawthorne and Poe. According to Gordon,

The sinister and emasculating witch who presides over this garden of experience gathers strength from Madeline Usher and Rappaccini’s daughter, who radiate an energy that Poe and Hawthorne regard as dangerous, perverse or abnormal [...] Eliot’s earliest heroines followed a



tradition in which women exist as stereotypes of poison or saccharine, devouring energy or sickly pallor. (Early Years, Eliot 25)

In this poem, sexuality is associated with death. Circe's eroticism is equated with animality, danger, and murder, which are embodied in the Panthers and Python in Circe's garden.

The Palace is not romantic; it is a very savage and wild place. In the forest near the palace, "Panthers rise from their lairs" (20) and in the garden there lies a sluggish python. The slow and lazy python is an objective correlative for effeminacy and masculine debility, which are caused by Circe. It indicates loss of potency and masculine vigour. Likewise, the peacocks around the palace are the souls of men Circe killed. Their slow walking vindicates women's power to deprive men of their masculine vigor.

### **Conclusion**

There was a conjecture of influences that shaped Eliot's misogyny. The religion of his family, which views sex as sinful, had a great impact on his misgivings about women. Following the path of the mystics, Eliot makes herculean efforts to transcend the body, which he views as a source of shame and blasphemy. Despite his rallying cry for a unified sensibility, in Eliot's early poems, there is a stunning dissociation of the body and soul/mind, male and female. The male speakers, in Eliot's early poems, want to be shut from the world of sensuality in order to reach the Absolute. Their misogyny is manifested in their profound hatred of the flesh and sentimentalism, which they associate with

the feminine. They prefer a life of emotional paralysis, because they view women as threatening to their masculinity and virility. They aspire to escape from the flesh by dint of mystical yearning.

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