

ANALYSIS

Ash Wednesday (1930)

T. S. Eliot

(1888-1965)

“*Ash-Wednesday*...was published in 1930 as a profession of his faith in the Church of England and represented a statement of the faith which he had called for at the end of ‘The Waste Land.’ By employing certain portions of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and a sermon of Lancelot Andrewes in the frame of reference within which this poem of doubt and faith is constructed, Eliot manages to objectify the emotions he desires to evoke, concerning the security, the emotional satisfaction, and the profound truth that he can find only by accepting the traditions of the Church.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“Eliot’s later poems, from *Ash Wednesday* (1930) through the *Four Quartets*, which were inaugurated by ‘Burnt Norton’ in 1935, must be judged like any other poems, not on the basis of whether we accept or reject their theology, but of whether they have conveyed in moving rhythms the sense that, whatever their author’s final beliefs, he is here reflecting perceptively and persuasively on human nature as we know it. By any such test, *Ash Wednesday* may well prove to be his most integrated long poem, as it certainly is a remarkable musical whole. Its themes are not calculated for popularity. They do not give voice to easy affirmation. Their realm is that of a Purgatorio, where suffering is made more acute by doubt, by ‘stops and steps of the mind’ between skepticism and assurance. But their integrity to actual experience allows them to fulfill what Eliot believes to be one of the most valuable services of poetry, its power to make us ‘a little more aware of the deeper unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly an evasion of ourselves.’”

F. O. Matthiessen

Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1356

“The new dominating figure is that of a Lady, but inseparable from her is a garden, a rose, a fountain and two yew trees. These all form a new symbolic *centre*, in which the poet finds a renewal of life. They alternate with a desert of sand and of blue rocks, and there are further contrasting images of sounds and silence... In *Ash Wednesday*, what Jung calls the ‘dangerous moment,’ the hovering between the possibility of permanent distortion or of the total arrest of growth on the one hand, and the possibility of fertility springing from spiritual renewal on the other, is over. That was present throughout ‘The Waste Land,’ but was at its greatest intensity in ‘The Hollow Men.’ There, ‘unless the eyes reappear,’ the spirit seems doomed to permanent imprisonment in the ‘dry cellar’ of the ego. But in *Ash Wednesday* that danger is past...it means that the new redeeming symbols are established as the new centre from which the new life will radiate and in which it has its being....

The emotional condition may seem little different from that in ‘The Hollow Men,’ but the *attitude* toward the condition is changed completely. The complete passivity of the opening poem has nothing in it of negative frustration. In place of hopeless abandonment to the blighting power of the Shadow, the compulsion to evade and escape, there is the willed renunciation and patience of a *chosen* attitude. Jung describes this as a condition of ‘not doing,’ which is quite different from that of ‘doing nothing’... The symbols themselves dramatize the inner conflict, while the conscious will collaborates by its own disciplines. In Eliot’s poem this is represented forcibly by the reminders of traditional worship to which the poet turns perpetually in his distress. The individual vision of his personal redeeming symbols comes and goes, but prayer is a technique of concentration to which he reverts throughout. The poem returns again and again to it; to the submission of the penitent, to the ordering power of a discipline, to the placing of the individual within the traditional corporate experience of the race....

The work of Dante, he says, 'belongs to the world of what I call the *high dream*, and the modern world seems capable only of the low dream.' *Ash Wednesday* certainly belongs to the world of high dream, and its reminiscences of the world of Dante have been pointed out frequently. More particularly the figure of the Lady inevitably recalls that of Beatrice. Eliot's own remarks on the *Vita Nuova* suggest strongly that he sees in the story of the relationship of Dante to Beatrice a mixture of the personal and the imaginative which parallels something in his own life... When distinguishing between 'romantic' and 'classical' mysticism, Eliot declares that it is characteristic of romantic mysticism to *substitute* divine love for human love, whereas in Dante the effort was to enlarge the boundary of human love so as to make it a stage in the progress toward the divine.... In this Jung would concur, and would interpret both Beatrice and the Lady as examples of the *anima* archetype, the woman image which, according to his theory, regularly appears at this stage in the process of 'transformation.' The *anima*, in spite of its name, is in no sense a 'soul' image in the religious sense. It is the 'contra-sexual component' alive in every man, and its images, like the other archetypes, have both creative and destructive aspects....

The poem as a whole has much that is mysterious and ambiguous in it, in spite of several elucidations, and we cannot hope to find any easy allegorical content of the various symbols. They remain 'complexly opalescent,' as do the constantly shifting moods and tones. And just as it takes us into a new world of psychic experience, so is its rhythmical organization, imagery and language unlike any earlier poem of Eliot. It swings with the 'turning world' of the poet's inner consciousness, while it is framed and controlled by the unchanging ritual of common prayer.

It has been pointed out that the condition in the opening poem is that of the initiate who enters the 'dark night' of St. John of the Cross. He must achieve 'a spiritual detachment from all things, whether sensual or spiritual, and a leaning on pure faith alone.... The desert of 'The Waste Land' is seen in a new light.... The three white leopards have puzzled commentators, but perhaps Eliot did have a dream in which he saw them. They are in the tradition of all the devouring myths in which the hero is swallowed and emerges regenerated, just as the scattering of the bones tells of the same psychic reality as the dismemberment of Dionysus or of Osiris. The leopards are devouring beasts, but obviously at the same time beneficent ones. Their whiteness and their quiet pose show them to be harmless: they lose terror in beauty. Moreover, as the bones know very well, the loss of the parts devoured by the leopards has made it possible for the brightness of the Lady to shine upon them. The ego which had been dispersed gladly relinquishes itself....

The Garden is a many-faceted symbol, suggesting the Garden of Eden where God walked 'in the cool of the day'; the earthly Paradise of Dante; the rose-garden of the *Romance of the Rose*; and the medieval hymns to the Virgin which allegorize the rose and the 'garden enclosed' of the *Song of Songs* as the womb of Mary. At the opening of the lyric, however, the Lady is the mediating figure between the two sequences of love, carnal and spiritual, and therefore subsumes both.... She is the rose of memory and forgetfulness... The torments of the temporal, the meaningless, and all the ambivalence of love in its aspect of desire, are transcended in a vision of the Mother of the Word: '...the Garden / Where all love ends.'... The poem ends with further allusions to Ezekiel.... The 'clear visual images' of the third poem give perfect 'sensuous embodiment' to the allegorical content.... The whole poem has been in a rhythm of rotation and transition between states of feeling centered in the presence or absence of the Lady."

Elizabeth Drew
T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry
(Scribner's 1949) 98-108, 115

"*Ash-Wednesday* is one of the most important religious poems which have been written in English during the present century. Although Eliot's religious position is specifically Anglo-Catholic, the poem has a broad validity for all religious experience. The poem describes the progress of the soul from despair to hope, from unbelief to belief. The hopelessness in the early stanzas seems as profound as that expressed in 'The Waste Land,' and more apathetic: 'Because I do not hope,' the poet says—and 'I no longer strive to strive.' But by means and in ways which defy scientific description, the upward movement of the soul begins in Section 3, where the poet employs the symbol of an ascending stair.

At the second and at the third turning of the stair, the soul pauses to look back upon the 'twisted shapes' below—its former unhappy states. At length, the soul attains the goal happily epitomized in the phrase

from Dante, 'Our peace in His will.' The poem concludes with a prayer to the 'Blessed sister, holy mother.' In developing and expressing his thought, Eliot has drawn upon the Bible, Dante, and the liturgies of the Roman and English Churches. Like much modern poetry of the intellectual school, *Ash-Wednesday* is a difficult poem, even to the sympathetic reader, and gives up its meaning slowly."

Walter Blair
The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 1071

"*Ash Wednesday* is a poetic contemplation expressing the religious ideas which Eliot had worked out in 1927-28. The major theme is the neo-Platonic love of Dante, Cavalcanti, and other medieval Italian poets; the Lady who dominates the poem is a symbol of perfection or beauty through which man may be drawn to God. There are many echoes of the Bible and of Church litanies."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 490

"This, then, is the meaning of *Ash Wednesday* (1930): 'Teach us to care and not to care.' *Ash Wednesday* is an acolyte's poem. He would still learn to give, sympathize, and control; but now he grants fully that the way to such powers is the way of positive denial and discipline. He would learn to know and to love the world for what it is, so as to be able to renounce it fully. The fragmented, futile, anarchic world is to be transcended; history is to be comprehended mythically and thus also to be transcended. But now the myth is mythic only to those of Eliot's readers who cannot assent to it. We are caught up in the paradox of mythic consciousness—that for those who believe in what we outsiders call a myth, it is not myth.

The mythic truth of 'The Waste Land' was a truth pertaining to that area in the psychic cosmos at which historical process was touched and stabilized by a supervening theistic order. The fragments of history, understood mythically, manifested the fragmented consciousness of modern man. But in *Ash Wednesday* mythic understanding itself is transcended, because it is discovered to be available to man directly, not mediated by the fragments of history. Myth begins to be absorbed into Christian doctrine and so gradually is bereft of its quality as myth. The poet now would drain himself of even his historical consciousness. He would leave behind even his image of himself as the myth-maker of 'The Waste Land'...

The structure of *Ash Wednesday* is tied to a continual, if at times only implicit, reference to the Christian doctrine which tells how through time man may transcend time.... The three white leopards and the lady...are part of the poet's private myth—the myth which, by means of his prayerful discipline, he has come to envisage—and they lead to something beyond myth. The structure of the poem and its action work so as to make the poet's readers grant him the need and the power (a boon of his prayer) to make such a myth, but only in order to transcend it.

The poem, in fact, registers the dialectic of that prayer; it evokes a series of psychic states whereby the poet moves from 'Because I do not hope to turn again' to 'Although I do not hope to turn again.' 'Because' signifies that the poet is confined and constrained by the myths of this world. 'Although' signifies that he accepts his confinement and constraint and therein is on his way to the single myth, the only myth, the myth beyond myth, Truth. He no longer acts 'because'; he acts in spite of, 'although.' He grants his sad condition in his sad world, and so comes directly to apprehend and to confront his deepest need. It is, in short, a need not to be himself, not to be in history, not to be bound even to the mythic structures of history.

The ruins of the self begin to be reconstituted into a whole, the principle of the reconstitution is not generally but particularly mythic. It finds its vital center in an absolute beyond myth—that revealed by Christian dogma. The poet must be lost, and his world and his history lost with him, so that he can be found....only through abject submission and the surrendering of all that makes him a man might he transform his humanity—or rather, might he be granted the power to work the transformation. Only the blind eye can create. This is the only sort of creation proper to him who would learn to give, sympathize, and control. The insistent repetitions of the poem, held together merely by their loose parallelism, not controlled by the usual analytic devices of language—such repetitions insistently register the movement of

the human spirit in the process of exhausting itself of its humanity, so to be filled with something larger. 'And let my cry come unto Thee' the poem concludes.

The weakness of *Ash Wednesday*, if indeed it is a weakness, derives from its excessively meditative, disciplined manner. We are allowed to see how the poet disciplines himself into the discovery of a yet larger disciplinary force. This is at once a progress of the soul and a psychomachia. Yet there is nothing in the poem which we can conceivably imitate or recognize—nothing like the clearly etched allegorical figurations in medieval poetry. Likewise there is not much we can see.”

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 309-12

“The first three sections of the poem appeared separately in periodicals, indicating that the six sections which make up the *Ash Wednesday* should perhaps be considered as individual poems on the same theme rather than as one long poem. The sections are meditative, associative, and circular rather than logical, and deal with a state of mind which is only suggested and never clearly delineated. The dominant imagery is religious, and in several places the style approaches that of a litany. As the title suggests, the major theme is penitence, the difficulty of the spiritual life, and the need for renunciation of both despair and hope; although some readers have difficulty with its theology, *Ash Wednesday* remains one of Eliot’s most finely structured and melodic poems.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)