

KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE IN THE WORKS OF T. S. ELIOT,
IN THE LIGHT OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF F. H. BRADLEY.

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
The University of Manitoba

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Peter Graham Ellis

April 1968

Abstract of Thesis submitted by Peter Graham Ellis.

Knowledge and Experience in the Works of T.S. Eliot
in the Light of the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley.

The aim of this thesis is to examine the influence of the philosophy of F. H. Bradley on the works of T. S. Eliot. This will involve a discussion of Bradley's main philosophical position and also of those aspects of Bradley's philosophy which are to be found in the thought and philosophy in and behind Eliot's works.

The philosophy in Eliot's works will be seen from the treatment of time, history, memory, and personality in Chapters I, III, and IV. The philosophy behind Eliot's work, the philosophy which created the (unstated) poetic theory which appears in the method of presentation of material, will be seen from a study of the concepts of knowledge and experience in both Bradley's and Eliot's philosophical works, in Chapter II.

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PREFACE

From October 1911 until June 1914 T. S. Eliot was a graduate student at Harvard as a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. During these years and one spent at F. H. Bradley's College, Merton College, Oxford, Eliot prepared a dissertation under the supervision of Bradley's disciple Harold Joachim. From the autumn of 1915 until April 1916, earning his living as a schoolmaster, Eliot completed this dissertation in London and despatched it to Harvard, but he never returned to Harvard to complete the degree requirements.

Josiah Royce spoke of the dissertation as "the work of an expert."¹ The original title of the dissertation was "Experience and the Objects of Knowledge in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley" and it was first published in 1964, edited and provided with notes and a bibliography by Professor Anne Bolgan of the University of Alaska.

In his Preface to the published version, Eliot remarks "how closely my own prose style was formed on that of Bradley and how little it has changed in all these years."² Of any other influence that Bradley's metaphysics

¹ Quoted by Eliot in the Preface to Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H.Bradley. Faber and Faber, London, 1964, p.10. All quotations from Knowledge and Experience are from this edition.

² ibid. pp.10-11.

might have had on Eliot's own thought he says nothing, although we may take it as significant that he does not contradict the attention brought to the dissertation by Hugh Kenner in The Invisible Poet, ^{but} although he says "Forty-six years after my academic philosophizing came to an end, I find myself unable to think in the terminology of this essay. Indeed, I do not pretend to understand it," and "I can present this book only as curiosity of biographical interest".³

On aspects of prose style and biographical interest the present thesis will have little to say. The intention is to outline the main tenets of Bradley's Idealist metaphysics and to show the influence of Bradley's philosophy on Eliot's own thoughts on reality and appearance, truth, knowledge and experience. It will become at once apparent from the first chapter, dealing with the "Four Quartets" that an understanding of the nature of time is essential to Bradley's and Eliot's treatment of experience. For this reason, and because much of the terminology required to speak of the metaphysics of these two men is introduced in a study of "Four Quartets", this poem is dealt with first instead of towards the end, as would be the natural order if Eliot's works were treated chronologically.

³ *ibid.*

The second chapter continues to treat the relationship between time, experience, and knowledge as this is manifested in the method of presentation of the three poems "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "Gerontion", and "The Waste Land", with a discussion of Eliot's approach to language as a means of communication.

Chapter three deals with appearance and reality in the plays The Family Reunion, The Cocktail Party, The Confidential Clerk, and The Elder Statesman. And the final chapter investigates "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in the light of Bradley's theory of time and history. For Eliot and Bradley the prime concern would seem to be the relation of the world of time to eternity, of the timeless moment to what precedes and goes after it, and, as will be seen, this question is inseparable from the questions that have been dealt with in the previous chapters: what is knowledge, what is experience, time, appearance, what is reality?

Eliot himself has provided the perfect caveat for anyone discussing the philosophy to be found in his poetry; the validity of a philosophy becomes of only secondary importance once it has been turned into poetry:

A philosophical theory which has entered into poetry is established, for its truth or falsity in one sense ceases to matter, and its truth in

another sense is proved.⁴

⁴ Eliot, Selected Essays, Faber and Faber, London, 1966, pp.288-289. All quotations from Eliot's Selected Essays are from this edition. "The Metaphysical Poets"

CHAPTER ONE

Aspects of Time in "Four Quartets"

The main butt of Bradley's attack on various schools of philosophy were the Empiricists and Pluralists. To the Empiricist the life of the mind is made up of discrete events. According to them we come to know one fact at one moment, another at another, and each fact that we know, each item of knowledge, is independent of all others in that knowledge of one fact is not dependent on knowledge of any other. This is not to be confused with understanding; one fact can help us to understand another, but to the Empiricist it is a cardinal error to identify the conditions of knowing with the conditions of understanding. Hugh Kenner points out the similarity between the acquisition of knowledge as the amassing of separate facts, and the Empiricist's system of recording knowledge by mere conjunction of things known, where a man says he knows this and this and this; such is the advancement of learning advocated by Bacon. Quoting from Thomas Sprat's History of the Royal Society the passage on style in recording scientific experiments, "the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver'd so many things almost in an equal number of words", Hugh Kenner says

This argues an atomistic view of things: they lie in great numbers opaquely before the mind, awaiting arrangement and selection. The mind, on the other hand, is wholly separate from them. 1

¹ Hugh Kenner: The Invisible Poet, T.S.Eliot, London Methuen & Co. 1965, p.44. All quotations from Hugh Kenner are from this edition.

This briefly summarizes several of Bradley's chief objections to current philosophy. With the Empiricists' view of knowledge and experience went a corresponding view of reality. The external world according to their view, like the internal, consists of discrete facts or events, each one of which is independent of all the others. The two views are really inseparable, for it is difficult to see how anyone could hold a belief in the atomistic nature of reality and not also of knowledge. The ambiguity in the word 'fact', meaning both event and knowledge of an event, expresses the identity of the two views.

For Bradley on the other hand, reality was an unanalyzable whole, and any philosophic system that fell short of this view was for him not simply a part or component of the whole but a meaningless abstraction. The main distinction between the Empiricists' view, which is Pluralism, and Bradley's Monism is the discrepancy between thought as we practice it, knowledge as we think we know it, and reality as it really is. Richard Wollheim sums the point up thus:

We think on the assumption that the world is like a vast jig-saw puzzle which can be taken to bits and studied fragmentarily, whereas, in fact, it is more like a work of art whose point, whose life, whose existence depends on being taken whole, on being seen as one.

² Richard Wollheim, F.H. Bradley, Harmondsworth Penguin Books, 1959, p.47.

Our thought, then, is not adequate to the true nature of reality. If we are presented with a unified scene which we describe by saying "The cow is to the right of the tree", then we impose a symmetrical shape and grammatical categories on a situation which does not until then have these relations. Bradley's point is that once we have imposed relations and categories on what was originally a whole, we are powerless to reconstitute the unity, for our only approach to this is by thought, and thought by its nature analyzes and dissects. Since reality is "a single Experience, superior to relations and containing in the fullest sense everything which is"³ the thought that is to be adequate to it must also be seamless.

How, then, do we know that reality is a seamless unity if, as soon as we attend to it, we find it divided and containing relations? Bradley's answer is that in the process of knowing there is a condition prior to thought, and this condition he calls "Immediate Experience". It is a concept which Eliot deals with in some detail in his Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley, and it has some relation to the unified sensibility of the metaphysical poets. The example above of our thought of the cow and the tree not only made relations between the two objects

³ F. H. Bradley, Essays on Truth and Reality, London, Oxford University Press, 1962. p.246. All quotations from Truth and Reality are from this edition.

but implied a distinction between the scene and the observer. Such a distinction Bradley does not allow in Immediate Experience.

We have experience in which there is no distinction between my awareness and that of which it is aware. There is an immediate feeling, a knowing and being in one, with which knowledge begins; and, though this is in a manner transcended, it nevertheless remains throughout as the present foundations of my known world.

4

The experience is, we should note, an immediate feeling, not a thought, and not knowledge. At any moment one's actual experience, however relational its contents, is finally non-relational.

What analysis leaves forever outstanding is no mere residue, but is a vital condition of the analysis itself. Everything which is got out into the form of an object implies still the felt background against which the object comes, and, further, the whole experience of both feeling and object is a non-relational immediate felt unity.

5

Eliot, in the first chapter of Knowledge and Experience, which has the same title as the essay from which the above two quotations are taken, "On Our Knowledge of Immediate Experience", makes the point that the various steps in knowing described in "an actual piece of knowing in the mind of an adult man" are abstractions, not known as separate objects of attention: "They all exist at the same time; there is no priority in our experience of one element or another".⁶

⁴ Bradley, Truth and Reality, pp.159-160.

⁵ Bradley, Truth and Reality, p.176

⁶ Eliot, Knowledge and Experience, p.17.

This, importantly, is the act of knowledge of an adult when attending to something purposely. With a lower stage of mind, a child's or our own when least active, "we do not find one or other of these elements into which we analyse the developed consciousness. We do not find feeling without thought or presentation without reflection: we find both feeling and thought, presentation, redintegration and abstraction, all at a lower stage".⁷

Five years later, in 1921, these thoughts reappeared in not too different form in Eliot's essay "The Metaphysical Poets". The same terminology is used in both contexts, as Eliot discusses the difference between "the mind of England between the time of Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning".⁸ In his discussion of immediate experience he had called the point at which feeling and thought, presentation and reflection are united "a lower stage of mind", or the developed mind when least attentive. Now, in his discussion of the dissociation of sensibility he says that the "ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary".⁹ The poet's mind, on the other hand, when it is "perfectly equipped for its work... is constantly amalgamating disparate experience",

⁷ Eliot, *ibid.*

⁸ Eliot, Selected Essays, Faber and Faber, London, 1966, p.287. All quotations from Eliot's Selected Essays are from this edition.

⁹ *ibid.*

and this amalgamation of experiences into "new wholes" is the equivalent, in terms of poetics, of the philosophic concept of immediate experience. In 1921 Eliot ascribed this dissociation to the influence of Milton and Dryden. After them "the language became more refined", but "the feeling became more crude". He uses the word "refined" later in the same essay in a context which throws some light on its use here, for our present purposes:

Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing on a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. 10

The process of refining the language towards the end of the seventeenth century is analogous to the refining of the modern sensibility: both processes move towards analysis and separation rather than towards unification and amalgamation. The "sentimental age" beginning early in the eighteenth century, introduced poets who "thought and felt by fits, unbalanced; they reflected."¹¹ In 1947 in his essay on Milton Eliot somewhat recanted his censures on Milton and Dryden, and looked further afield:

If such a dissociation did take place, I suspect that the causes are too complex and too profound to justify our accounting for the change in terms of literary criticism. 12

¹⁰ *ibid.* p.289.

¹¹ *ibid.* p.288.

¹² Eliot, Selected Prose. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1965. p.132.

It had, apparently, something to do with the Civil War, and we should seek the causes in Europe not in England alone. But whatever the causes, it seems clear that there is a similarity in thought between Eliot's literary and his philosophical writings.

It is important not to identify experience with consciousness, which is a later stage in the process of knowing. "What comes first in each of us is rather feeling, a state as yet without either an object or subject".¹³ And similarly there is no distinction between the "parts" which constitute the content of immediate experience. "I use, in brief, immediate experience to stand for that which is comprised wholly within a single state of undivided awareness or feeling", (ibid. p.173), and again, in the next essay "Consciousness and Experience", Bradley writes;

Feeling is immediate experience without distinction or relation in itself. It is a unity, complex but without relations. And there is no difference between the state and its content, since, in a word, the experienced and the experience are one.

14

Eliot, writing on this aspect of immediate experience, says,

There is no reason, so long as one feeling lasts and prevades consciousness why I should cut off part of the total content and call it the object, reserving the rest to myself under the name of feeling. It is only in social

¹³ Bradley, Truth and Reality, p.194.

¹⁴ Bradley, Truth and Reality, p.194

behaviour, in the conflict and readjustment of finite centres, that feelings and things are torn apart. And after this separation they leave dim and drifting edges, and tend to coalesce.

15

A "finite centre" is these experiences, the centre of consciousness, but while this latter description is easier to handle it is a falsification on two grounds: first, as we have seen, consciousness is not the same as immediate experience; and, second, the phrase "centre of consciousness" suggests a distinction between that which is conscious and that of which it is conscious. When the immediate experience is differentiated and we posit a self that experiences and an object experienced, the original experience is not "sense-data or sensations", it is not a stream of feeling which, as merely felt, is an attribute of the subject only and must in some way be "related" to an external world". 16

Immediate experience is not a stage which shows itself at the beginning and then disappears, but it remains at the bottom throughout as fundamental. And further, remaining it contains within itself every development which in a sense transcends it. Nor does it merely contain all developments, but in its own way it acts to some extent as their judge. 17

In the transcending and acting as the basis by which we judge the validity and interpret the meaning of the devel-

15 Eliot, Knowledge and Experience.pp.24-25.

16 ibid. p.16

17 Truth and Reality. p.161.

opments that we build upon this immediate experience, the finite centre contains its own past and future: "It has, or it contains, a character and on that character its own past and future depend".¹⁸ In this respect it is eternally present; as Eliot says "It is not in time, though we are more or less forced to think of it under temporal conditions".¹⁹

With these thoughts in mind we can more easily understand the opening lines of 'Burnt Norton' as the attempt by a finite centre of experience to relate the passage of time to the present by finding a meaning or pattern in what has developed from earlier intentions and missed objectives, to the present moment which has in itself the possibility of achieving significance in the future.

Time present and time past
 Are both perhaps present in time future,
 And time future contained in time past.
 If all time is eternally present
 All time is unredeemable. 20

When we speak of judging the validity of the present moment, we are, in a sense, making a fact of it, both as something done, and in the sense of a truly remembered object or experience, but the truth of an experience is only so in relation to the foundation upon which it is built or in relation to

¹⁸ Eliot, Knowledge and Experience, p.205

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems, 1909-1962, London, Faber and Faber, 1963, p.189. All quotations from Eliot's poems are from this edition.

the original felt experience of which it is a development; or it is true, made valid, by the nature of what in turn is built upon it. Thus we have the rather elusive concept of the present moment being influenced by and influencing the past and future. Facts, Eliot says, are not simply found in the world and laid together like bricks; but every fact has, in a sense, its place prepared for it before it arrives, and without the implication of such a system, in which it belongs, the fact is not a fact at all. Thus the character of a man is rather organic than mechanical, and is "already present at the moment of conception", but on the other hand it can be seen "to develop at every moment into something new and unforeseen. It will have, from its crudest beginnings, a character to which it will always remain consistent."²¹

We can say, then, that in these opening lines time past, present and future is spread out before us, (or before the speculating soul whose words and thoughts we read) for contemplation. Time is a 'felt whole' in which there are moments of knowledge;

the moment in the rose-garden,
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall.

(C.P. p.192)

These lines are usually, and rightly, interpreted as having

²¹ Eliot, Knowledge and Experience, p.61

reference to a religious experience, a mystical vision of eternity, the moment "in and out of time". I don't wish to diminish this aspect of the meaning of the poem, but only to show the philosophical background of those lines in the metaphysics of Bradley, and to attempt to elucidate what Eliot himself admitted to be the difficulty and obscurity of the ideas expressed.

These 'moments' then, are interpreted by the soul or finite centre as moments of knowledge. But such an interpretation is private; the immediate experience is differentiated into objects with relations between them, by the perceiver. In such cases where the self is an important part in the meaning of knowledge, 'a sort of theory of knowledge' is at work. The "self which is objectified", (that is, is seen to have a past and future) "is continuous and felt to be continuous with the self which is subject" (i.e. the self of the present, but unaware of any relationship between itself and the present) "and not an element in that which is known".²² This change from self or soul's being subject to its being object involves what Eliot calls "a transformation of object-type", "a transmigration from one world to another", and he continues, "such a pilgrimage involves an act of faith".²³ In such a transformation there

²² *ibid.* p.155.

²³ *ibid.* p.163.

is a change of point of view; in a metaphysical theory such as Bradley's theory of the Absolute there is an attempt to bind together all points of view in one.

In religious experience these points of view come together or are reconciled, 'among the stars', a pilgrimage which more than any other involves 'an act of faith'. By using these quotations from the thesis in relation to the religious reference of the second strophe of 'Burnt Norton' I want to point out the strong philosophical background to the poem, and also to emphasise that the theology is not ornamentation to Eliot's thesis, but that both spheres of knowledge can be seen in the poem on different levels of experience.

It is only from a religious or specifically Christian point of view that these lines have meaning:

The trilling wire in the blood
 Sings below inveterate scars
 Appeasing long forgotten wars.
 Below, the boarhound and the boar
 Pursue their pattern as before
 But reconciled among the stars. (C.P. p.191)

If we constantly keep in mind the religious level of experience here, then we can make sense of reconciliation of opposites, the boarhound and the boar, pursuer and pursued, the real world of physical experience and ideal world of faith. As in the opening lines we must keep in mind here a mid-

point²⁴ (in the opening lines the eternally present encircled by past and future) which gives meaning to each aspect, and which itself contains each aspect: here the point of view of the poet as he contemplates both worlds (one in which words have meaning in our practical lives and one in which the meaning of words has reference to Christian belief) and treats neither as absolute.

For the purpose of understanding this theory of points of view, one affirmative sentence from Eliot's thesis is particularly significant: 'Reality is a convention'.²⁵ He arrives at this idea through his explanation of what is the real world. 'We cannot too frequently be told', he says, 'that the world of practice is supported by interest and valuation',²⁶ and as our interests and values vary from moment

²⁴ Cf. Northrop Frye's "audio-visual aids" which he uses towards a better understanding of the aspects of time in "Four Quartets": Draw a horizontal line on a page, then a vertical line of the same length cutting it in two and forming a cross, then a circle of which these lines are diameters, then a smaller circle inside with the same centre. The horizontal line is clock time, the Heraclitan flux, the river into which no man steps twice. The vertical line is the presence of God descending into time, and crossing it at the Incarnation, forming "the still point of the turning world".
T.S.Eliot, Oliver and Boyd, London, 1965, p.77.

²⁵ Eliot, Knowledge and Experience, p.98.

²⁶ *ibid.* p.89