

# SPIRITUALITY IN MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE

By BERNARD BERGONZI

FIFTY YEARS AGO, IN 1944, T. S. Eliot's *Four quartets*, which had been appearing in separate sections, were published in a single volume. Henceforth they were read as one long poem and have been subject to much commentary and analysis. *Four quartets* is one of Eliot's two most important poetic works, the other being *The waste land* of 1922. Conventionally, the *Quartets* are regarded as religious poetry, in contrast to *The waste land*, which is often described as iconoclastic and despairing, a brilliant though obscure anatomy of the loss of faith and meaning in the contemporary world (and specifically London just after the First World War). When he wrote the earlier poem Eliot had moved from a Unitarian upbringing in America to unbelief, but it was a mode of unbelief that was strongly drawn to comparative religion. He was a fascinated reader of Frazer's *The golden bough* and was keenly interested in mythology. At Harvard he had studied Sanskrit and eastern philosophy and religions and their traces are very apparent in *The waste land*: one section takes its title from the Buddha's Fire Sermon, and the poem ends with Sanskrit words, which Eliot describes in his notes to the poem as 'a formal ending to an Upanishad. "The peace which passeth understanding" is our equivalent to this word.' The poem also refers to the death of Christ, seeing it in anthropological terms as an exemplar of the hanged god of the fertility myths:

After the agony in stony places  
The shouting and the crying  
Prison and palace and reverberation  
Of thunder of spring over distant mountains  
He who was living is now dead

Eliot was reported as saying that at the time he wrote *The waste land* he might easily have become a Buddhist; but he also wrote that he found it necessary to abandon his eastern studies, as to have taken them any further would have meant ceasing to think like a western man at all. In

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1927 Eliot adopted British nationality and was received into the Church of England, a double act of allegiance which indicated his strong association of religion with culture. The anthropological interest in Christianity of a few years before had turned to actual belief and commitment. The spiritual struggles associated with Eliot's act of conversion were obliquely and metaphorically suggested in the poetic sequence *Ash Wednesday* (1930). From the eighteenth century onwards, western writers and scholars had been interested in eastern religions, sometimes prompted by the conviction that Christianity had nothing to offer them. Eliot took the uncommon course of progressing from oriental modes of faith to orthodox Christianity, but he did not entirely turn his back on them.

*Four quartets* is a major religious poem, but its spirit is very inclusive. The first *Quartet*, *Burnt Norton*, was written in the 1930s, but the others, *East Coker*, *The Dry Salvages* and *Little Gidding* were all written during the Second World War and are associated with places that were important for Eliot, personally or historically. *East Coker* was the village in Somerset which his ancestor Andrew Eliot had left for America in the seventeenth century; the *Dry Salvages* are a group of rocks off the coast of Massachusetts, familiar to the poet from holidays in childhood; *Little Gidding* was the religious community founded by Nicholas Ferrar before the English Civil War, representing a tradition of Anglican spirituality that meant much to Eliot. The first *Quartet* provides a series of abstract but poignant reflections on the nature of time and eternity; but the others are more personal, as Eliot tries to make sense of his situation as a middle-aged man, a poet and a Christian, at a time when England, his adopted country, is enduring the dislocation and suffering of war. When he writes in *East Coker*, 'O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark', he is echoing the words of Milton's Samson, and at the same time noting the dominance of the blackout in the first winter of the war, and suggesting the uncertainties of the time, both personal and communal.

In *Four quartets* Eliot meditates on, and in places struggles with, ultimate questions about life and death and the meaning of human existence. He is particularly concerned with the intersection of time and eternity, where a moment of transcendence or at least of unusual significance intervenes in the daily round. Other writers have had comparable insights: Wordsworth called them 'spots of time', and James Joyce, 'epiphanies'. It is the intense concern with ultimates and hints of transcendence which characterizes *Four quartets*; the work can be read with appreciation, as a record of spiritual struggle and growth, by non-believers, as can the poetry of George Herbert, another of Eliot's

Anglican heroes from the seventeenth century. There are, in fact, few overtly Christian references and, as Helen Gardner shows in her book, *The composition of Four quartets*, Eliot deliberately removed some from the drafts of the poem. In *East Coker* he summarizes St John of the Cross on the *via negativa*, and in the same *Quartet* Christ is presented as 'the wounded surgeon' in a section which most critics agree is poetically inferior. In *The Dry Salvages* we read:

These are only hints and guesses,  
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest  
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.  
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.

These lines, in their tentative, hesitant nature, represent the authentic spirit of Eliot's spiritual explorations. Also in *The Dry Salvages* there is a reminder of his earlier study of the Hindu scriptures, when he invokes the words of Krishna, an avatar of the god Vishnu, in his address to the warrior Arjuna.

For Eliot, belief involved an element of scepticism; he wrote in an essay on Pascal:

For every man who thinks and lives by thought must have his own scepticism, that which stops at the question, that which ends in denial or that which leads to faith and which is somehow integrated into the faith which transcends it.<sup>1</sup>

This mode of belief, and Eliot's awareness of spiritual traditions beyond the Christian, has brought him a responsive readership in the latter half of the twentieth century, among believers and non-believers alike. At the same time, *Four quartets* stands in a significant relation to the dominant literary culture in contemporary Britain. This, like society at large, is post-Christian and secular, not obviously concerned with transcendent values; indeed, some influential critics and theorists, writing in the wake of Marxism, specifically define themselves as materialist. Nevertheless, the English people, though not great churchgoers, remain interested in religion and obscurely in favour of it. And students of English literature, whatever their personal values, are likely to encounter Christian poetry, whether in the work of Donne and Herbert and Milton in the seventeenth century, of Hopkins in the late nineteenth century, or of Eliot in the middle of the twentieth century. There is, too, the larger consideration that so much lyrical and reflective poetry of the past two hundred years contains gestures and aspirations towards a spiritual order, even

when its doctrinal framework is not at all Christian. Again, Wordsworth's 'spots of time' are indicative. To read poetry in a determinedly 'materialistic' way, though it is often done in the modern academy, is somehow to read it against the grain.

*Four quartets* remains, then, something of a scandal: a major religious poem appearing in a secular age. It has not been successfully imitated. Eliot was immensely influential in the making of poetry in the twentieth century, but his work, unlike that of Thomas Hardy or W. B. Yeats, was peculiarly difficult to use successfully as a model. To that extent it stands alone. But there are later Christian poets who may have been inspired by Eliot's example if not by his idiom. R. S. Thomas, who was born in 1913, is a retired clergyman of the Anglican Church in Wales. He is certainly one of the finest British poets of his generation, and his religious poetry has, I think, a distinction comparable to Eliot's. As with Eliot, there is an element of scepticism in Thomas's faith, intense though it is, and some of his best poems convey a sense of profound struggle, as in the closing lines of 'In the Church':

There is no other sound  
In the darkness but the sound of a man  
Breathing, testing his faith  
On emptiness, nailing his questions  
One by one to an untenanted cross.

That poem appears in Thomas's book, *Pietà* (1966); the title poem is a simple but wonderfully compressed lyric:

Always the same hills  
Crowd the horizon,  
Remote witnesses  
Of the still scene.

And in the foreground  
The tall Cross,  
Sombre, untenanted,  
Aches for the Body  
That is back in the cradle  
Of a maid's arms.

His most recent collection, *Mass for hard times* (1992), shows that in old age he is writing as well as ever. The cross remains a central motif in his poetry:

Of whom  
 does the scarecrow remind  
 arms wide as though pierced  
 by the rain's nails, while  
 the motorist goes by insolently  
 wagging his speedometer's finger?

One of the most powerful poems in the book is 'Tidal', where a single sustained metaphor develops a parallel between the poet directing prayers at God and the tides continually assaulting the land; the idea and structure, though not the verse form, recall Herbert. The poem ends:

My returns must be made  
 on my knees. Let despair be known  
 as my ebb-tide; but let prayer  
 have its springs, too, brimming,  
 disarming him; discovering somewhere  
 among his fissures deposits of mercy  
 where trust may root and grow.

Thomas's language is always elegantly fluent and controlled, but there is often a harsh note in his spirituality, even a tendency to argue with God, in a tradition reaching back to Job. But he can write in a gentler vein, as in 'A marriage', a poignant and exquisitely beautiful poem on the death of his wife after fifty years of marriage.

Elizabeth Jennings is another widely admired and accomplished poet of Christian convictions. She was born in 1926 and her first collection appeared over forty years ago. She is not primarily a religious poet, though religion is one of the central human themes which recurs in her work, together with love, memory, time and art. She is a cradle-Catholic, and she recalls her heritage in a number of poems, like 'A serious game', capturing a memory of childhood:

A toy oven stood for a tabernacle  
 And two pencils in egg-cups were candle-sticks,  
 A toy train on a string was the thurible  
 And I a priest and server murmuring my own gibberish  
 Meant to be Latin and sounding so to my ears.  
 Day after day long, morning and afternoon  
 I mumbled the old words, sent up imagined smoke . . .

Other poems recall a painful confession in early adolescence with a bullying priest, and a period when the poet nearly lost her faith through reading philosophy and regained it through reading poetry.

Elizabeth Jennings' mature spirituality is serene and infused with love, though always conscious of the sufferings of the world. It is evident in her latest book, *Times and seasons* (1992), which followed her *Collected poems* of 1986, particularly in the sequences for Christmas and Easter, and in a poem such as 'Ordination', addressed to a Dominican friend. The line dividing authentic religious poetry from merely devotional verse is a fine one, and most of the time Elizabeth Jennings stays on the right side of it, aided by great technical skill and a fine ear for rhythm and cadence. She is a dedicated poet, with a soft voice but a strong poetic personality.

Poetry, like music, has long been regarded as providing an approach to the spiritual and the transcendent, whilst eluding doctrinal categories. But in contemporary Britain, as in much of the western world, the novel is the dominant and most popular form of imaginative literature. The novel, at least in its realistic forms, is usually secular and this-worldly, interested in religion, if at all, as a social phenomenon – as with Anthony Trollope's clergyman – rather than a source of ultimate values. The greatest English novelists, such as Jane Austen and George Eliot, have been acutely concerned with the moral rather than the spiritual dimensions of human existence. But writers who work in the modes of fantasy and fable rather than straightforward realism are more potentially open to transcendent possibilities (meaning by that more than the sensationalism of ghost stories, or the so-called fiction of the supernatural).

William Golding, the Nobel prizewinner who died in 1993, was a distinguished example. He can be regarded as a religious writer, though he made no overt commitment to Christianity. Golding does not invoke God, but all his writing is pervaded by the conviction that human beings have a more than human destiny. His first novel, *Lord of the flies*, made his reputation, and is still his most famous book. As is well known, it is about a group of English schoolboys marooned on a desert island, who try to establish a model of civilized society but fail in the attempt and in the end revert to barbarism. 'The Lord of the Flies', or Beelzebub, was one of the names of the Devil and Golding's novel is a determined exploration of the nature of evil. He claimed he knew a lot about boys, having been a schoolmaster for many years, and hence about human nature in general. But Golding's personal experience of war provided a deeper impulse for the book, which was published in 1954, less than ten years after the end of the Second World War. An island story of a kind familiar in English literature is overshadowed by Hiroshima and Auschwitz; at the same time the sheer narrative power of *Lord of the flies* meant that it could be enjoyed by readers who were not aware of the deeper implications of the story. It deserves its fame, though I prefer Golding's

second novel, *The inheritors*, which is more poetic and delicately suggestive in presenting its themes. It is set in prehistoric times, when Neanderthal man is threatened and ultimately superseded by *homo sapiens*. Golding skilfully unfolds the story from within the limited consciousness of one of the Neanderthals. He shows us a people lacking the capacity to reason but finely intuitive, in touch with each other's minds and the rest of nature. Inevitably, they are no match for *homo sapiens*, with his tools and weapons and superior intellect. In *The inheritors* Golding brilliantly brings together two complementary myths, one religious, the other scientific: the loss of innocence in Eden, and the triumphant evolutionary ascent of humanity. *The spire* is an outstanding later novel, in which Golding explores and dramatizes the spiritual struggles and moral conflicts which accompany the construction of a great medieval cathedral, unnamed but reminiscent of Salisbury.

During the 1940s and 50s critics and reviewers often referred to something called the 'Catholic novel', which was supposedly exemplified in England by Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, and in France by Georges Bernanos and François Mauriac. It is not certain that this concept was really very meaningful, as I have discussed elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> but it remains true that Greene and Waugh are important novelists who were also Catholics, in a line of distinguished Catholic literary figures which includes Newman, Hopkins and Chesterton, all of them converts. It can be a source of strength to a writer to be at odds with generally current assumptions, and Greene and Waugh had the advantage of writing against the assumptions both of residual English Protestantism and of contemporary secularism. They wrote realistic novels which were responsive, according to their authors' temperaments and interests, to religious values and the pull of the transcendent. Realistic fiction which attempts this can succumb to an element of melodrama, as is evident in the greatest of Christian novelists, Dostoevsky; and Greene and Waugh did not entirely escape it. They were interested in acute spiritual dilemmas in exotic settings, which were remote from the daily lives of most English Catholics; Greene in particular took them to a pitch of imaginative extremity. The 'whisky priest' who is the central figure of *The power and the glory* acknowledges himself to be a public sinner and unworthy of his priestly function, but is he not also a saint? Can Scobie, the doomed hero of *The heart of the matter*, escape damnation? In Waugh's *Brideshead revisited*, will the reprobate Lord Marchmain, long estranged from the Church, be reconciled with God on his deathbed? In such situations spiritual issues tend to exist in a difficult tension with the demands of drama, or melodrama.

David Lodge is a Catholic novelist of a younger generation – he was born in 1935 – whose work offers a significant contrast to Greene and Waugh. He is a cradle-Catholic who experienced the disorientations following the Second Vatican Council in his late twenties, and he reflects them faithfully in his novel *How far can you go?* (called *Souls and bodies* in the United States), published in 1980. Lodge is not given to pursuing spiritual dilemmas, though in an early novel, *The British Museum is falling down*, he extracted excellent wry comedy from the Catholic ban on contraception. He is primarily interested in the English Catholics as a particular social and cultural minority, an interest evident in his first novel, *The picturegoers* (1960; reissued 1993). He presents them affectionately but not indulgently as ordinary human beings in working-class or lower middle-class settings, unlike the geographical or social exoticism of Greene and Waugh. *How far can you go?* examines their attitudes and way of life at a time of great change; it traces the fortunes of a group of middle-class English Catholics from the early 1950s, when they are students at London University, to the late 1970s when they are on the verge of middle age and have lived through the Vatican Council and *Humanae vitae*. It is a work of acute observation and admirable humanity, though the author's own attitudes tend to remain concealed. Lodge's latest novel, *Paradise news*, deals movingly with an ex-priest who has lost his faith and any sense of direction in life, and who has to encounter the reality of death and the hope of survival, matters about which the modern theology that he teaches for a living in a non-denominational college has, he finds, little to say.

Graham Greene, in his later years, after he had moved away from the tormented orthodoxy of his Catholic novels, defined himself as a 'Catholic agnostic'; Lodge, who is a great admirer of Greene, prefers to think of himself an 'agnostic Catholic'. He remains a practising member of the Church but is agnostic about the ultimate reality behind the symbolic languages of liturgy and scripture. Rather in the spirit of the theological Modernism of the early twentieth century, Lodge has abandoned much of the traditional Catholic world-view with which he grew up, regarding it as over-literal and anthropomorphic, whilst insisting that religious language has meaning. He regards it as a perennial symbolic and speculative mode in which we articulate the contradictions and anxieties which are at the heart of the human condition. If faith is problematical, hope remains.<sup>3</sup>

A writer in a different religious tradition, George Steiner, has provided a series of profound and searching reflections on the relations between art and faith in his remarkable book, *Real presences*. Steiner is a



polymathic critic, cultural historian and fiction writer, whose Jewish family left Germany in the 1930s in time to escape the Holocaust, an event which dominates his writing. Now in his sixties, he has recently rediscovered the Judaic faith of his origins, and in *Real presences* he writes in conscious opposition to the empirical, materialistic and positivistic assumptions that underlie much contemporary discussion. He dwells with fascination on the way that works of imaginative literature – and other forms of art, particularly music – embody a transforming insight into the creative process which sustains reality, and a challenging call from the Other. Steiner describes his book as ‘a wager on transcendence’, and adds:

So far as it wagers on meaning, an account of the act of reading, in the fullest sense, of the act of the reception and internalization of significant forms within us, is a metaphysical and, in the last analysis, a theological one. The ascription of beauty to truth and to meaning is either a rhetorical flourish, or it is a piece of theology. It is a theology, explicit or suppressed, masked or avowed, substantive or imaged, which underwrites the presumption of creativity, of signification in our encounters with text, with music, with art. The meaning is a transcendent postulate.<sup>4</sup>

Steiner’s rich and sometimes difficult book returns to old truths by an unfamiliar route, suggesting how, in the midst of a secular society, literature and spirituality persist in their traditional close relationship.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Essays ancient and modern* (London, 1936), pp 150–51.

<sup>2</sup> See ‘The decline and fall of the Catholic novel’ in B. Bergonzi, *The myth of modernism and twentieth century literature* (Brighton, 1986), pp 172–87.

<sup>3</sup> See B. Bergonzi, ‘A religious romance: David Lodge in conversation’, *The Critic* vol 47, no 1 (Fall, 1992), pp 68–73.

<sup>4</sup> George Steiner, *Real presences* (London, 1989), pp 215–16.