



T.S. ELIOT'S TRANSLATION OF RELIGIOUS MYSTICISM TO LITERATURE: RICHARD OF SAINT VICTOR AND SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS

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Abstract

T.S. Eliot read and quoted the great European mystics, among them Richard of Saint Victor and Saint John of the Cross and was influenced by the Biblical prophets. Their works coincide not only in religious beliefs, but there is a parallelism between Eliot's linguistic devices and style and religious concepts like the disappearance of the Ego. The expression of the mystical experience through images implies a theory of imagination which uses visible things to explain the invisible and provides a source for meditation, in the same way as Eliot understands poetry as a means to make humanity aware of its need to turn to God.

Keywords

Mysticism, Rhetorical Devices, T.S. Eliot, Richard of Saint Victor, Imagination, Saint John of the Cross, Dark Night of the Soul

Introduction

T.S. Eliot, knowledgeable of the texts written by the great Christian mystics and of critical works on mysticism, not only quotes passages from them in his work, but he refers to this phenomenon in different ways. Both, prophets and mystics, coincide in transmitting the idea of a God who is not away from the world and towards whom men can turn. This is the idea which sustains Eliot's religiosity in his poetry, his theatre, his sociological works and his literary criticism, and the one which links prophetism and mysticism. The prophets feel with God, they suffer his suffering and rejoice with his joy. They are connected with the divinity's wishes to such an extent that their understanding overwhelms them and makes them desperate: "Mystics as well as prophets represent the man who makes himself "capable of God", because it is this capability the thing which defines and measures the sympathy for it is the necessary mediator for all religious experience". (Corbin, 1993, P.134).

Heschel (1982:88) describes the prophet as *Homo sympathetikos* because of his relation to God and his interpretation of prophetism is based on this and the idea of a God of *pathos*, who represents his will through feelings interpretable for human beings. Eliot understands and shares this vision of the great men and women of religion, but he clearly distinguishes his experience (although sometimes very close to the mystical phenomena) from that destined to saints, martyrs and mystics. In "Dry Savages" from *Four Quartets* we read the following reflection:

[...] But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint –
No occupation either, but something given
And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,
Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.
For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That is not heard at all, but you are the music

While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.

Eliot's interest in mysticism leads him to discuss the subject in his critical works. In the Clark Lectures, offered in the Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1926, he makes a distinction between 12th century mysticism, represented by Richard of Saint Victor, and described as *ontological*, and that from the Spanish 16th century, in which Saint John of the Cross and Saint Theresa are the most outstanding figures, which he names as *psychological*. Eliot reinterprets these definitions and calls ontological mysticism *classic* and psychological mysticism *romantic*. Although the poet will make use of both traditions, in these lectures he clearly shows preference for 12th century mysticism, for its impersonality and its stylistic austerity.

At that time, Eliot still had many prejudices against Romanticism inherited from his teachers and shared with his friend Ezra Pound. The excesses of the romantics, always imposing their poetical "I" and their personal experience as the centre, wearied the new generation of creators who wished to be as different as possible from that tradition. Years later, Eliot will change his opinion about romantic poetry and poets.

Another reason why the poet admires Richard of Saint Victor is the mystic's influence in the work of Dante, so praised by Eliot. In the *Divine Comedy* (translation of Finn Cotter) we even find a direct mention of the figure in Paradise (chapter X, vv. 124-132):

See, flashing further on, the burning breath
Of Isidore, of Bede, and of that Richard
Who was more than a man in contemplation.

Richard of Saint Victor's works

Richard of Saint Victor was born in Scotland but he spent his monastic life in France, in Saint Victor's Abbey. The founder of the victorine religiosity was Huger of Saint Victor, who initiated a tradition based on the study of the Bible, theology and the contemplative discipline. Richard, heir of this vision of monastic life, wrote several books which guided the young monks through the different stages of meditation. The two which will be referred to are: *The Twelve Patriarchs* and *The Mystical Ark*. These two works are allegories which take passages from the *Old Testament* and reinterpret them as teachings for the perfection of the soul. The exercise of searching for new meanings for the biblical word is not a personal choice of the author, but a duty of every Christian. This is the way in which interpretation was understood at the time in which the works mentioned were composed, and this conception derives from a theological complexity which frees and widens religion to an extent which our time can hardly comprehend due to the obsession for an impoverishing historicism.

In *The Twelve Patriarchs*, Leah represents virtue and Rachel wisdom. The children that Jacob has from both of them and from their respective slaves are the fruit of the qualities they symbolize, which are not only important as themselves but also for the order in which they have to appear. For example, Ruben, Leah's first-born, is "fear of God", necessarily previous to the other qualities which the soul has to acquire in its learning of meditation.

The archetypes which Richard of Saint Victor uses in *The Twelve Patriarchs* to interpret experiences are a resource which, like Eliot's poetic characters, prevents the direct expression of the author to the reader. In *The Mystical Ark* the materials and the shapes are the elements which bear symbolic meaning, in a text which would be the continuation, this time for those already initiated, of the first book. Eliot praises this second work with the following words: "you will also observe that it is wholly impersonal –as impersonal as a handbook of hygiene- and contains no biographical element whatever; nothing that could be called emotional or sensational" (Eliot, 1993, p.102). The preventing of showing the author's personality is not only connected to the controversy with the romantics, but also to the idea shared by all the mystics that it is necessary to destroy our own ego to acquire a conscience of our humanity which is the essence of every human being, surpassing the personality which we could call "psychological".

Eliot also admires Richard of Saint Victor's work because: "For the 12th century, the divine vision or enjoyment of God could only be attained by a process in which the analytic intellect took part; it was through, by and beyond discursive thought that man could arrive at beatitude. This was the form of mysticism consummated in Dante's time. It is different from the mysticism of Ignatius, Theresa and St. John of the Cross" (Eliot, 1993, p.99). In the particular genealogy which describes the path to perfection, Rachel dies when she gives birth to Benjamin, who represents contemplation: "Benjamin is born and Rachel dies, because when the human mind is carried above itself it passes beyond all narrowness of human reasoning. All human reason succumbs to that which the mind catches sight of from the light of divinity when it has been raised above itself and snatched up in ecstasy. For what is the death of Rachel, except the failure of reason?" (Richard, 1997, p.131).

The sacrifice necessary to advance in the process of asceticism does not affect only thought but even affections. The mind must be free from any interference, from any distraction. "All thoughts empty as well as

noxious, which do not serve for our benefit must be judged to be strangers. In truth, we possess them like domestic servants or slaves, whom we involve for our use or benefit. But because a singular love loves solitude and seeks for a solitary place, it behooves us to throw out the entire crowd of such sort, not only of thoughts but also even of affections, so that we may at liberty to cling more freely and more joyfully to the embraces of our beloved one” (Richard, 285). T. S. Eliot knew of these processes also through the work of Evelyn Underhill, which he read in Harvard between 1908 and 1914: “He [the mystic] must call in his scattered faculties by a deliberate exercise of the will, empty his mind of the of its swarm of images, its riot of thought. In mystical language he must “sink into his nothingness”” (Underhill, p, 303). Again, one of the books mentioned by Underhill, and from which Eliot obtains material for his *Four Quartets*, is *The Cloud of Unknowing*, English anonymous from the 14th century, where we find the same idea: “And although the bodily wits can find there nothing to feed them on, for them think it nought that thou dost, yea! do on them this nought, and do it for God’s love. And let not therefore, but travail busily in that nought with a waking desire to will to have God that no man may know” (p. 214). Eliot expresses it in “Burn Norton” in the *Four Quartets*:

Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property,
Desiccation of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy,
Inoperancy of the world of spirit

But before arriving at this stage in the learning of meditation, there must be hard work during a long time for which imagination is the clue element: Bala, Rachel’s servant, that is, wisdom’s tool. In *The Twelve Patriarchs* we read: “reason never rises up to cognition of the invisible unless her handmaid, imagination, represents for her the form of visible things. For through the appearance of visible things she rises to knowledge of invisible things” (Richard, p. 57).

The role of imagination

In *The Mystical Ark*, Richard of Saint Victor reformulates the allegoric Bala defining the third kind of contemplation in his gradation in the process of perfection of the soul in the following way: “the third kind of contemplation is that which is formed in reason according to imagination. We truly use this kind of contemplation when by means of the similitude of visible things we are raised up to speculation of invisible things.” (Richard, p. 162). Henry Corbin, in his study of Sufi mysticism, describes the working of, as he calls it, creative imagination: “On the one hand, it makes spiritual realities descend to the reality of images [...], on the other, if imagination transmutes that which is sensory it is by rising it to its own subtle and incorruptible modality” (Corbin, pp.184-185).

Eliot understands poetical art as the means by which transformations in the human being may take place and this is very close to the third kind of contemplation according to Richard of Saint Victor, because poetry: “may help to break up the conventional modes of perception and valuation which are perpetually forming, and make people see the world afresh, or some new part of it. It may make us from time to time a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate” (Eliot, 1978, p. 155).

We must distinguish imagination from fantasy, the former is the tool for visionary and symbolic literature while the latter takes us away from reality through free idle drifts. As Victoria Cirlot explains about the work of the mystic Hildegarda von Bingen, vision takes place, in fact, in an intermediate land where the worldly and the divine meet and which can only be apprehended through the *inner senses*. “the shapes which appear before the inner eye “are like”, “are similar to”, but are never the earthly shapes. The phenomena of vision, so rightly studied by Henry Corbin, does neither take place in Earth nor in Heaven. What presents itself has only the appearance of earthly shape. It is, properly speaking, a symbol. Imagination and visionary faculties coincide, far from fantasy which does not.”(Cirlot. P. 20).

Imagination must be controlled, because in disorder it is an obstacle for meditation, but, once it is under our power, it is the perfect tool and, that is why, other mystics, like Lull or Ignatius, have also pointed out its importance. The source where to find the appropriate material for the mind for those who undertake these practices is the Bible. The thoughts and imaginations are connected to God and the sacred text offers all kinds of images, comparisons, parables, reflections and endless resources for the practitioner. In fact, during the Middle Ages and later on, creating a tradition which exists still today, the Bible has not only fed imagination but has been the model and has modeled lives: “The history of the Old and New Testament enlarges itself like a huge shadow on people’s lives, who had to resort to the sacred texts searching relation and similitude to understand their own lives. Figural thought invades biographies and autobiographies, in such a way that the individual act acquires real sense in its

relation with the archetypal and it is this latter the one which provides the frame for its valuation and comprehension.”(Cirlot-Gari, p. 34).

The Bible is the model and the book from which all the images which have lived through tradition in the mystical texts have come from. The appreciation of these texts as literature begins with Longino’s comment on the *Genesis* in his work *About the sublime*, where he also gives great importance to imagination. Although the Greek and Roman classical works of literature were the model and reference for any educated man, as the life of Saint Agustin shows, the scholars soon found all kinds of examples of rhetorical resources in the Bible, slowly making the sacred text almost the only book needed for education.

Rhetorical devices

To think about the resources available for languages for the development of mystical texts and poetry is not simply an occupation for those who care about style. It is not only that form and content are inextricable, but that the relationship between language and the world takes on transcendent meanings. First of all we must remember that we discuss texts not mystical experiences, so the mystical writers "can not do without symbols and images" (Underhill, 1960, p.79) because although their experience does not have images, they need them to express it. "the great mystics, Ruysbroeck, San Juan de la Cruz, and Santa Teresa, make a clear distinction between the ineffable reality and the image perceived under which it is described. Repeatedly, we are told by Dionysius and Eckhart that the "object" of contemplation has no image. (Underhill 79). The ineffability of their experience is what defines and explains why the texts search for the limits of language to appeal to intuition rather than to reason.

A common feature of mystical writings, prophetic works and Eliot’s literary works is the fact that they try to describe the relationship between man and God, rather than try to describe divinity itself, "the prophets rarely speak of God as he is himself, as ultimate being. It is God in His relationship with mankind and the world, who is the subject of their words. "(Heschel, 1962, vol. II, p.215). In describing the approach of man towards the Divine, allegory has played a key role throughout the centuries. Since the allegorical method can be understood as a sequence of metaphors or, better still, as an extended metaphor, let’s analyse the idea that sustains the validity of this rhetorical device in the mystical texts. What Sebastian Balet says about the English metaphysical poets of the 17th century in (Vega, 2002, p.94) applies to all mystical literature:” the nexus between language and experience is not only of similarity, but of correspondence" and he quotes Frank Kermode: "The world was understood as a vast divine system of metaphors, and mind was at its greatest extent when it was observing them" (p.401). In the realm of the strictly human, this idea has some parallels with Eliot’s concept of "objective correlative": “The only way to express emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative" in other words, a group of objects a situation, a chain of events that will be the formula of that particular emotion, so that when the external facts, which should lead to sensory experience, is given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (Eliot, 1972, p.100).

In fact, Grove A. Zinn, in his introduction to the texts of Richard of St. Victor describes the allegorical method of the monk with nearly equivalent words "persons, actions, or other" circumstances "provide the basis for a symbolic or spiritual interpretation [...] A sequence of events in the outside world becomes a symbolic sequence of events in a person's inner life. "(Richard, p.11). Eliot explicitly gives us his opinion about allegory recognizing its value, "allegory itself may simply be a form of expression of a mind passionately eager to find order and meaning in the world, but it can find or establish order in ways we have ended up neglecting. (Eliot, 1993, p.98). Somehow all of Eliot's literary work is allegorical, his descriptions of empty repetitions and copies of the lives that do not recognize their meaning and, moreover, his hope for a humanity that could turn to God and take control of its destiny, are the representation of a personal and collective conversion, of a soul and history trying to get closer to divinity. Because, in spite of all the sordid corners of the city, there's always a hint of hope in Eliot that grows throughout his life and work and strengthens his faith and religious conviction. However, if we look superficially we see only bits and dispersion, absurdity and despair. The technique of collecting disparate elements to create a set with emotional significance is not only part of Eliot’s aesthetics, but we can place it in a much wider artistic context, and appreciate the words of Ernest Marx, 1934 about Surrealism, "the approach of two (or more) elements of opposite nature causes the most violent poetic explosions." William James was probably who provided Eliot with a theoretical reflection on subject: "the work of William James, especially his theory of association, probably meant a lot to Eliot and others, before Freud acquired his fame." (Schmidt. P.132). Also, the music derived from repetition and homonymy in the poetry of Eliot gives us a sense of secrecy comparable to primitive taboos (Schmidt. P.106) that also reflects that the rhythm and sounds of poetry are also part of the rhetorical devices used by mystics and poets alike. The poetry that goes beyond the materiality of the world continues to correspond to which Richard of St. Victor describes as the third kind of contemplation, in which "we sense the quality of the unseen by their similarity to visible things" (Richard. P.190), returning to the idea of metaphor as a fundamental element of spiritual knowledge. Eliot came to this view by his reading Symbolist aesthetic and through the work of Middleton Murry, friend of the poet, for whom the role of images is to "define the indefinable spiritual qualities. All metaphors and similes can be described as the analogy through which the human mind explores the universe of quality and maps the non-measurable world "(Schmidt, p.153). The poetic language of the biblical prophets, on the

other hand, "makes the prophetic words, like the Psalms, distinguished by the richness, plasticity and the boldness of the images" (Schmidt, p. 222), also parables and even symbolic actions are always metaphors to explain the relationship between God and his people. Writers have used these elements to express events that actually occur constantly and are therefore "transhistorical", understanding this word according to H. Corbin: "events taking place at a different level from the banal physical reality, events are transmuted into symbols spontaneously." (Corbin, pp. 45-46). When Richard of St. Victor takes the genealogy of Jacob as an allegory of the stages of perfecting the soul, he is undertaking it as a trans-historical event which does not deny history, but makes it a much deeper truth than a series of facts only true at a given time.

T.S Eliot and Richard of Saint Victor shared the same beliefs and a very similar aesthetic approach in spite of the centuries past and the radical modernism of the former. Eliot is a religious poet, although his innovations have influenced poets of different generations and ideology. Eliot's work is constant search for meaning, a picture of a desolate world where the only way out is to turn to God and where the only thing left for the poet is to pray. We can read the *Four Quartets* as a confirmation of faith but also *The Waste Land*, which could fit the biblical literary genre of laments for a destroyed city, ends with the words "Shantih, shantih, shantih" turning thus the whole poem into a prayer.

Saint John of the Cross

Eliot: ...intellect pushed to its depths leads to mysticism.

Interviewer: Do you not believe, that intellect and mysticism are two faculties opposed in human nature?

Eliot: All human faculties pushed to their limits end in mysticism.¹

The distinction between philosophy and mysticism was not conceived by Eliot as between opposites, but where philosophy stopped, mysticism continued even at the risk of abandoning reason into what cannot be expressed.

During his student years at Harvard, Eliot was interested in the philosophers Bergson and James, but found them insufficient. The life force and Bergson's idea of progress seemed reducing the individual's sense of existence, and the relativity of James's pragmatism represented the negation of the fundamental values that Eliot always defended.

Eliot's doctoral thesis, based on Bradley's Appearance and Reality shows agreement with Bradley's claim that common knowledge does not go far enough and we need a religious point of view.

It is also at Harvard where Eliot's religious quest began. From the Unitarian religion to which his family belonged, he could derive a moral doctrine, practice, but it was devoid of a transcendent, spiritual and interior aspect, mainly because it refused to face the problem of evil. He read the Christian mystics and Buddhism's sacred texts, for example the Bhagavad Gita, which became a great attraction and influenced his poetry. It is here where Eliot's first encounters the work of St. John of the Cross and Christian asceticism, through St. Augustine, Eckhart and Julian of Norwich.

Eliot also read a very influential book at the time: Underhill's *Mysticism*. Eliot's relationship with Underhill went on to become friendship and admiration. She collaborated with several articles for *The Criterion* (1922-1939), a publication created by Eliot and which influenced intensively the poet's spiritual life. When Underhill died in 1941, Eliot wrote a letter to the newspaper that reads: "She herself concerned with the practice as much as with the theory of the devotional life." For Eliot not only are philosophy and religion part of the same thing, but are closely linked to everyday life and through it to the whole community. The vicissitudes of his religious evolution, his involvement with the Anglican Church after his conversion in 1927 and his work are proof of that, and his admiration for Underhill, "her studies of the great mystics primarily had the inspiration not of the scholar or the champion of forgotten genius, but of a consciousness of the grievous need of the contemplative element in the modern world".

Sain John's work should also be judged by considering the link between theology, poetry and life. It is Colin P. Thompson one of the scholars who best understood this unity of the work of Saint John of the Cross. The Anglican priest, theologian and philologist, provides in his analysis a combination of religious and literary approaches:" First, he holds out the possibility of growth and progress in the Christian life, rescuing the religious instinct in man from ties to imposed forms. He creates a theology of human experience, not of abstractions."²

Sain John of the Cross wrote his works for the education of young monks and worked for the reform of the Carmelite Order. His poetry is the subject of prayer and meditation in the first stage of the ascetic process. The impact of his work in society is the consequence of his desire to express his religious experience and transform the consciousness of his contemporaries.

¹ T. S. Eliot interviewed in 1948. *Apud T.S. Eliot Mystic, Son and Lover*", (Donald J. Childs, 1997).

² Colin P. Thompson. *The Poet and the Mystic*. Oxford University Press, 1977).

The progress of the soul towards God

"So, to come join the soul to God's wisdom, it first has to go not knowing what to know." The proposed ascetic path in Saint John of the Cross is the negative way, the emptying of both desires and images. The "dark night" describes the stages through which man passes in his purge of the senses and soul. The dark and terrible night of the soul is the place where all rational guidance should be abandoned and faith is the only support. In the Ascent of Mount Carmel we find the rules of the ascetic doctrine of St. John in the text that accompanies a drawing of the path of ascent of Mount Carmelo: "To possess all, you should desire to possess nothing./To know everything, you should want to know nothing at all".

This language full of antithesis is of biblical origin: "The Hebrew poets fail in philosophical formulations, and in fact experience and present God in polarities" Saint John uses it to synthesize the detachment necessary to reach the divine wisdom. But the emptying of the soul in preparation to receive the light does not negate the most personal of each individual and consciousness remains, Colin P. Thompson described it as theistic union: "In monistic union the self is merged into the One and loses its identity; in Theistic union, personal identity is retained, but the soul is transformed."³

For T.S Eliot, humility is the only path to true wisdom, as it says in the verses of East Coker: "The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless." It is also in this poem where he includes St. John's verses, a clear acceptance of the asceticism he proposes. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot described the poetic process as "impersonal", avoiding the superficial feelings of self, thereby integrating the aesthetics aspect in the purification of the individual. In the third book of the Ascent of Mount Carmel, St. John speaks of the benefits that the soul receives of the dark night, but also the dangers. The "dark night of the soul" may confuse the evil man and make him lose his path. In the ongoing process of removing the images, we should be careful with visions and other sensory perceptions. In *After Strange Gods* (1934) Eliot shows its awareness of the dangers of mystical experience:

"Of divine illumination, it may be said that probably every man knows when he has it, but that any man is likely to think that he has it when he has it not; and even when he has had it, the daily man that he is may draw the wrong conclusions from the enlightenment which the momentary man has received: no one, in short, can be the sole judge of whence his inspiration comes."

The Dark night of the soul

Eliot believed in the asceticism proposed by St. John as a personal journey, which we assume can be extended to others and so we read in East Coker:

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God. As in a theatre,
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed
.....
I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light,

In 1927 Eliot became a member of the Anglican Church and was involved in institutional campaigns promoting it. Also, through its journal *The Criterion*, spread ideas and comments on mysticism, as the article "Saint John of the Cross" by Robert Sencourt (Vol. X, No. 41, July 1931) and others. His own critical production also led him to the Spanish mystics in the study of the English metaphysical poets like Marvell or Herbert and during his stay at the Sorbonne he discovered the mystical symbolism, mainly in Paul Valéry.

TS Eliot had in his library a copy of the translation of the saint's work by Allison Peers (1934), of which we can say that greatly improved the earlier of Lewis, from the early nineteenth century, which contained many mistakes in both interpretation and language.

There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value

³. *The Poet and the Mystic*, (1977).

In the knowledge derived from experience.
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been.⁴

Conclusion

Although Richard of Saint Victor and Saint John of the Cross are exponents of two different schools of western mysticism, Eliot finds interesting elements in both of them, which become part of his ideas in his poetic production. The modernity of Eliot's poems does not negate his Christian faith, but it is a new way in which faith is expressed. T.S Eliot understands the great European mystics and incorporates their teachings in his view of poetry. We can trace his affinity with the mystics and prophets in the disappearance of the Ego, the use of imagination which uses visible things to explain the invisible and his idea of "objective correlative" which is similar to Christian allegories in some respects.

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⁴ T.S. Eliot, *East Coker*.