INDIAN LITERATURE

Traditions. Part-I of her study surveys the Indic texts and traditions with which Eliot was familiar and discusses how Eliot came to acquire his knowledge of Eastern philosophy and modes of speculation. His initiation in Indian thought began when he was a boy with Sir Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia*. As an undergraduate at Harvard, he was introduced to a more sophisticated understanding of Buddhism by Irving Babbitt, a leading exponent of the “New Humanism” and later translator of the *Dhammapada*. Eliot returned to Harvard, after a few years in Paris, for further studies in philosophy. “Two years spent in the study of Sanskrit (and Pali) under Charles Lanman,” Eliot was to write in *After Strange Gods*, “and a year in the mazes of Patanjali’s metaphysics under the guidance of James Woods, left me in a state of enlightened mystification.” The “subtleties” of the Indian philosophers, Eliot then felt, made “most of the great European philosophers look like school boys”, but he also came to the conclusion that the categories of Indian thought were so different from the distinctions common to European philosophy that he would have to forget, and this he did not wish to do, “how to think and feel as an American or a European” if he at all hoped to penetrate “to the heart of that mystery” of Eastern speculation.

The Eliot papers at Harvard and King’s College, Cambridge, which contain *inter alia* his class and lecture notes, and the syllabi of the courses that he took, suggest that his knowledge of Sanskrit texts extended to small portions of the Vedas, the Upanishads, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Pancatantra*, and the epics; and among scholarly works, he knew of Deussen’s studies in Indian philosophy. At Harvard Eliot also attended a series of lectures on Buddhism by a visiting scholar, Masaharu Anesaki, and he studied parts of the Jatakas, Nikayas, and the *Saddharma-pundarika*, and Henry Clarke Warren’s *Buddhism in Translations*. In 1918 he even reviewed, for the *International Journal of Ethics*, a book on Upanishadic philosophy. Kearns also points out that the whole climate at Harvard was conducive to taking Eastern texts seriously. The Philosophy Department counted among its
and of the contrary tendency to resort *ad infinitum* to studies such as "Eliot and Hulme", "Eliot and Whitman" or "Eliot and Russell".

The appropriation of the term "influence" as an analytical device, though it lacks the rigour to function as such, enables Kearns to assimilate Eliot to the more universal traditions of "metaphysical literature" and "wisdom poetry" (e.g., pp.161,217, 231). Thus it becomes possible to argue, and so in effect Kearns does, that as Eliot was greatly influenced by "wisdom" literature, it was but natural that he should be moved by Indian literature as one of the supreme embodiments of man’s quest for "wisdom". This commonplace view of Indic literature leads to rather predictable readings of Eliot’s poetry, though the analysis of *The Waste Land* and the *Four Quartets*, which constitutes the final part of the book, is not unrewarding at places. Kearns cogently argues, for example, that the opening lines of *The Waste Land*,

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain [1]

are informed partially "by the concept of unconscious motivation in the *Yoga-sutras* and in many texts of the Pali canon" (p. 201), and that the lines "On Margate Sands/ I can connect/ Nothing with nothing", reflect "a universal experience of dikkha . . . stemming from the ‘deception of all worldly experience’". Similarly engaging is the suggestion, apropos *The Waste Land*, that the voice of the thunder is taken from the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* (p. 33), or that the "water-dripping song" owes something to "many technical treatises on meditation, both Indic and Christian" (p. 217). However, even if it can be inferred that Eliot’s references to Indian texts were not merely scattered and arbitrary, but rather partook of some order and perhaps of some not merely ephemeral interest in the spiritual traditions of the East are we entitled to conclude that a sense of Indic traditions informs Eliot’s poetical and prose works to
such a degree as to warrant assigning these traditions an abiding place in Eliot's intellectual, spiritual, and moral world viewpoint.

Wisdom everywhere is the same; in Kearns' words, "it is the part of any text that survives translation" (p.19). Indic texts were for Eliot a fount of wisdom and a preparation for certain important Christian insights as well (p.vii). Eliot undoubtedly found also that certain principles and norms he prized were even more highly valued in the Indian tradition. In his famous essay on "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), he had argued that the artist must aim at the extinction of personality; nothing of the artist must remain in his work. What else was the Indian literature with which Eliot was familiar a testimony to but the imperative to merge the individual personality into the whole? In what other classical literature had anonymity been so sanctified? More significantly, in apprehending two different traditions, Eliot was discovering the difference that the two traditions can make to one another. Though to Eliot's mind speculation was congenial, he found Eastern religions less than palatable; and the very fact that he at all made a distinction between the two suggests how far removed he was from the Indian tradition. A firm believer by his own admission in the idea of Original Sin, Eliot was acutely aware that the Upanishads subscribe to no such doctrine. It is understandable why the Bhagavad Gita, a considerably later work where the idea of sin receives a more prominent exposition, remained Eliot's favourite Indic text, "the next greatest philosophical poem to the Divine Comedy within [his] experience". Kearns notes that the greatly attenuated concept of sin "in both Buddhist and Upanishadic traditions" was not sufficient to meet Eliot's "deepest needs for atonement, forgiveness, and reconciliation both with God and with the human community", but nonetheless she unfortunately attempts to mitigate this difference between Christianity and Eastern traditions.

"The Indic traditions" of which Kearns speaks amount in reality to no more than a handful of books, principally a few of the major Upanishads and the Gita. The India of Eliot, and

regrettably of Kearns too, is very much the Indologists' India. (Even Emerson, of whom Kearns takes only the slightest notice, had a much wider conception of "Indic traditions" than Eliot.) On such a slim foundation has a whole book been written, and it is no accident that a vast range of Western intermediaries and influences through whom Eliot found his way to some Indic traditions occupy a prominent place in Kearns' study, the author returning every now and then to more detailed expositions about the relationship of Eliot's poetry to Indic traditions almost as a reminder to herself not to stray too far from the subject. Whatever Kearns' proficiency as a critic of English literature, her familiarity with Indian literature and indological scholarship cannot be said to extend too far, as her phrase "no less an authority than Max Muller" vividly shows (p.132). (It makes little difference that Kearns' reference here to Max Muller turns out to be hardly favourable, for to describe him at all as a formidable "authority" is to betray a certain ignorance about the state of contemporary indological scholarship.) To speak of "Indic traditions" as though they could be encapsulated within the Upanishads, the Gita, the Yoga-sutras, and a few books of the Pali canon is analogous to the Western intellectual's tendency to equate modern Indian literature solely with the names of R.K. Narayan, V.S. Naipaul, Ved Mehta, and Ruth Jhabvala. No doubt Kearns is constrained in her explorations to discuss what Eliot himself knew of "Indic traditions"; and that Eliot ultimately knew so little is a telling fact about how much voyaging into far-off lands the Western writer has generally dared to do.

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