

## Indologists' India

**T.S. Eliot and Indic Traditions**  
**A Study in Poetry and Belief**  
by Cleo McNelly Kearns  
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### EXTRACT

Indic texts acted not only as a repository of images and local allusions for Eliot and, in time, as a preparation for certain important Christian insights, but often, and often more deeply, as a deliberately evoked catalyst for fundamental changes in his thought and style. In the major classics of Hindu and Buddhist traditions Eliot found perspectives that intersected at crucial points with his own growing religious convictions, his work in philosophy, and his interest in techniques of meditation and their relation to writing. In general, however, these classics offered not simply points of confirmation of previously held ideas but valuable challenges to established points of view. Eliot learned, then, to appreciate the multiple perspectives involved in his Indic and Western studies less for their sameness than for what he called "the difference they can make to one another".

Readers of Eliot's poetry in India and elsewhere have been for long puzzled by the enigmatic ending with the words "Shantih shantih" to *The Waste Land* and those almost nonchalant references to Krishna in "The Dry Salvages". What may have Eliot meant to convey in these lines? How far did his knowledge of Indian texts extend? Is the presence of "Indic traditions" to be detected through a larger part of his poetical works, or is it confined to a few stray passages?

The aforementioned questions and many others are explored in exhaustive detail in Cleo McNelly Kearns' *T.S. Eliot and Indic*

## 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

William James, from whose *Varieties of Religious Experi-* Eliot took careful notes, and Josiah Royce, the most well-known idealist philosopher in the United States, and the teacher under whose supervision Eliot wrote a doctoral thesis on Bradley. Indeed, there was at Harvard such a constellation of figures and forces converging to "influence" Eliot and veer him towards an exploration of Indic traditions, that it would have been surprising if Eliot had somehow managed to remain immune to these new trends.

In his early critical writings, Eliot had insisted on the primacy of facts, and even claimed that "the work of art cannot be interpreted; there is nothing to interpret." Only when interpretation puts "the reader in possession of facts" is it legitimate. The groundwork for understanding the place if any of "Indic thought" in Eliot's work is admirably laid in Kearns' study and about the *facts* of this interaction there will henceforth be little dispute. But Kearns does not confine herself to facts: the middle (and largest) section of her study discusses the various influences—religious, philosophical, and literary—on Eliot; and indeed her entire study revolves, rather unhappily, around the question of "influence". Not to mention the ancients or Dante or the Elizabethan dramatists, among his contemporaries alone Eliot is said to have been "influenced" by William James, Royce, Bradley, Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, Whitman, Bertrand Russell, T.E. Hulme, Yeats, and many others. For Kearns this is perfectly apposite: "Of all the moderns, Eliot had the greatest susceptibility to influence, both conscious and unconscious": a gift for appreciating the music of poetry, the many "nuances of tone and style", was happily joined to wide but systematic reading and to "an ability to meet a work on its own terms... which no other poet of his time could match" (p.177). But with these bold observations, and the rather obvious distinction between "influence" and "imitation", the question of what constitutes "influence" and how it is to be assessed is not so easily resolved. Kearns' work is an illustration of the failure of much of modern literary criticism to provide an adequate theory of "influence"

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 [.]

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 *dukkha*... stemming from the 'deception of all wordly experience'". Similarly engaging is the suggestion, apropos *The Waste Land*, that the voice of the thunder is taken from the *Brihadaranyaka 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 to not stray too far from the subject. What- ever 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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