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## “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?”

### The quest for spiritual integrity in “Gerontion” and the *Book of Job*

The prevalent mood of suspension between physical reality and a self isolated by its own monologue has caused most critics to interpret “Gerontion” as the rhetorical disintegration of the self trapped by its own egotism.

Eric Sigg, claiming that “there is an express criticism and scepticism in ‘Gerontion’” and that it is “a portrait of religious disillusion and despair,”<sup>1</sup> mainly argues that Gerontion’s discourse at times makes no sense and that it represents the disintegration of his consciousness.<sup>2</sup> The focus of Sigg’s analysis is history that is to be discerned in the poem, and regards certain aspects (“decayed house,” “the goat coughs,” “the woman sneezes,” Gerontion has lost his five senses) as references to World War I.<sup>3</sup> He also adds that the poem “may restate a nineteenth century American history as a historical Fall.”<sup>4</sup>

Ronald Bush draws a parallel between “Gerontion” and Henry Adams’s *Education*, which Eliot reviewed around the time he wrote “Gerontion.” Bush also stresses some features that will be highly relevant to the present analysis, such as the cancelled epigraph taken from Dante’s *Inferno*, the role of winds in “Gerontion,” the isolation of Gerontion “caught in the trap of [his] own

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Sigg, *The American T. S. Eliot, A Study of the Early Writings*. Cambridge, Port Chester, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 171.

<sup>2</sup> Sigg, p. 180.

<sup>3</sup> Sigg, p. 173.

<sup>4</sup> Sigg, p. 176.

rhetoric”<sup>5</sup> and the “unexplained feelings of guilt.”<sup>6</sup> The question of fear and the use of pronouns is also treated, but these elements are mostly held against Gerontion, explaining his behaviour as the individual’s evading the moment of having to face reality.

“The consciousness in ‘Gerontion’ after all is not offered as healthy, sane and wise; who would wish to be he, and what endorsement then is being asked for the thoughts of his dry brain in its dry season?” asks Christopher Ricks,<sup>7</sup> but he also presents a novel interpretation of lines 7–10 (“And the Jew squats on the window sill, the owner, / Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp, / Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London”), namely that the Jew, the owner, is Christ. He also quotes Piers Gray, who describes the poem as “the meditation of a soul contemplating its own disintegration, disintegration both physical and ideal,” and shows that “the structure of the poem’s meditation is intimately but subversively related to the metaphorical structure of Paul’s teaching.”<sup>8</sup>

Ronald Tamplin writes of the characters that they are “lightly sketched but together establish a continuum of which Gerontion himself is the fullest expression.” Tamplin lays special emphasis on the “ruminative and rambling” words, out of which Eliot creates his world, that is, in this case “a claustrophobic void [...] the more vacant because so various...”<sup>9</sup>

Although the features this paper will focus on have been observed by critics, the present approach aims to add a new aspect to the previous interpretations of the poem, in the sense that critics so far have used these features as proof for the disillusionment and the sceptical overtone they find in the poem. Some of these features (and the cancelled epigraph Bush refers to<sup>10</sup>) focus on the “suspended” condition of the individual. Although the title suggests an ironic representation of old age, which the underlying frustrated eroticism throughout the poem emphasises, it also implies man’s insignificant role within a larger system. This sense of meaninglessness of a human life generates Gerontion’s self-enclosure in the void he has fallen into. This ‘Fall’ is not explained at all by his

<sup>5</sup> Ronald Bush. *T. S. Eliot, A Study in Character and Style*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> Bush, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Ricks. *T. S. Eliot & Prejudice*. London, Boston: Faber & Faber, 1994, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Ricks quotes from Piers Gray. *T.S. Eliot’s Intellectual and Poetic Development 1909–1922*, p. 211, in Ricks, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Tamplin. *A Preface to T. S. Eliot*. London & New York: Longman, 1992, p. 129.

<sup>10</sup> Bush, p. 33.

thoughts, just as his thoughts – be they generated by World War I or personal failures – cannot be explained in terms of human logic or rational thinking.

The greatest disillusionment in the poem lies in the fact that Gerontion is looking for answers to universal questions that seem far too complex to be answered in human terms. The invocations “Think now,” “Think at last,” which Bush calls “hysterical” attempts to urge himself do something he is unable to do, and the line “I have not made this show purposelessly” carry an intense volition that is blocked by circumstances for which Gerontion is not responsible.

Sigg seems to contradict himself when he asserts that the “key figures in Eliot’s early poetry are all more ‘aware’ than any other person they come into contact with.” He includes Gerontion in this category and says that their ability to act is diminished, but the ability to see is increased, by which he means gaining deeper insight and knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

Contrary to Christopher Ricks’s claim that “‘Gerontion’ is a poem about sacrifices, pre-eminently the sacrifice made by Christ and the ones offered to him,”<sup>12</sup> I propose that the poem is essentially about the betrayal rooted in the ignorance of man and his desire to justify this ignorance. In this sense, the conflict the individual faces when succumbing into an existential despair of the kind Gerontion experiences can be truly re-experienced through the re-considering of Christ’s Passion and of Job’s chastisement.

The *Book of Job* can provide a reading of “Gerontion” that highlights the process of the quest of the individual for personal-spiritual integrity in the context of powers that are beyond the control of man – in Job’s case God’s duel with Satan and, implicitly, with mankind, and in Gerontion’s case the workings of civilisation and History – the reasons of which are not revealed neither to Job nor to Gerontion. Both Job and Gerontion have to suffer for reaching a higher spiritual level where they are able to face themselves honestly, and face whatever the future holds for them. The *Book of Job* is especially relevant to Eliot’s poem, since the values it operates with in depicting the individual’s struggle against both the earthly and the celestial powers is closer to human understanding than the much deeper process Christ is destined to undergo.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Sigg, p. 217.

<sup>12</sup> Ricks, p. 125.

<sup>13</sup> The difference between the two may also lie in the relationship between the two Testaments and also in the possibilities of interpreting them by viewing one through the other. A possible “juxtaposition” may be sought for in the way Blake interprets Job in his *Illustrations to the Book of Job*, where Christ’s figure is perceived as Job’s experiencing the closeness of Divine power. The

Job 7:6: [M]y days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and are spent without hope.

Job 7:7: O remember that my life is wind, mine eyes shall no more see good.<sup>14</sup>

The only direct reference to the *Book of Job* in "Gerontion" in "Vacant shuttles / Weave the wind" (ll. 29–30)<sup>15</sup> clearly exemplifies the role of *wind* in the poem. The wind also suggests the movement of ethereal things, such as thoughts, ghosts, the spiritual world, as is suggested by the epigraph Eliot eventually decided to cancel. The cancelled epigraph comes from Dante's *Inferno XXXIII*: "*Come 'l mio corpo stea / nel mondo su, nulla scienza porto.*"<sup>16</sup> Dante's line suggests the dichotomy of soul and body, of the spiritual self and the physical self. Bush interprets this cancelled epigraph as words that "foreshadow the alienation of Gerontion's mind from his body, and dramatize the isolation of his consciousness from the world of sense."<sup>17</sup> Dante's words also evoke the image of Hell, where the sinners' sight is impeded because of the wind of Satan's wings. As Bush notes, the dominant element in "Gerontion" is "a Dantesque cold wind that blows in the vacuum between self-consciousness and the inner life." Bush also mentions that "another major component to the winds in 'Gerontion' [...] is the movement of empty talk – a speech that has become unmoored from its emotional strings and has degenerated into rhetoric."<sup>18</sup>

In the *Book of Job* the wind is mentioned with a similar meaning. As opposed to other books of the Bible where the wind is used for God's words or voice, in Job the wind is used both by Job and his "friends" as a metaphor for vain talk and meaningless words (Job 6:26, Job 8:12, Job 15:2). The other use of wind is related to God's destructive power and anger (Job 21:18, Job 27:21, Job 30:15, Job 30:22). In "Gerontion" the wind is not only "empty talk" and destruction,<sup>19</sup> but also part of the desiccating elements. Although Bush states that water is not a

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Swedenborgian idea of Job's being a precursor of Christ is also worth mentioning but falls beyond the perspective of the present analysis.

<sup>14</sup> All citations from the Bible are taken from the King James Version.

<sup>15</sup> All parenthesised references are to the respective lines of "Gerontion" as published in the following edition: T. S. Eliot. *Collected Poems 1909–1962*. London: Faber & Faber, 1974 (reprinted 1983), pp. 39–41.

<sup>16</sup> "How my body stands in the world above, I have no knowledge."

<sup>17</sup> Bush, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Bush, p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Gerontion, ll. 67–71: "De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel, whirled/Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear/In fractured atoms. Gull against the wind, in the windy straits/Of Belle Isle, or running on the Horn, / White feathers in the snow..." cf. Job 30:22: "Thou liftest me up to the wind; thou causest me to ride upon it, and dissolvest my substance."

dominant element in "Gerontion," it is present by its virtual absence. In the first lines of the poem Gerontion is described as "an old man in a dry month, / [...] waiting for rain" (ll. 1-2). Rain is a Christian-Judaic symbol of salvation and hope (Job 5:10-11, Psalms 135:7, Job 29:23, Job 38:25-7); we find the same idea in Job 29:23 ("And they waited for me as for the rain; and they opened their mouth wide as for the latter rain") where Job identifies himself with the rain, when describing the way he used to be respected by the other members of his community. Both in "Gerontion" and in the *Book of Job*, past and present are contrasted through the images of the lack and the presence of water. Gerontion's denial of having had a glorious past:

I was neither at the hot gates  
Nor fought in the warm rain  
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,  
Bitten by flies fought...

(ll. 3-6)

by the use of the negative forms becomes the negative image of Job's enviable status within his community. This contrast also indicates the same diminishing process the title alludes to. Gerontion is a Job-like character, altered by the civilisation process, a process through which personality, values and experiences lose their essential meaning and importance. The imaginary "hot rain" and "marsh" refers to the total absence of any possible hopeful and promising future that might have existed in the past.

Lack of water in most cases implies death (Job 14:10-11) and deprivation: the situation in which Job and Gerontion find themselves (Job 30:3). Snow, another form of water, is mentioned in a similar sense in "Gerontion:" "White feathers in the snow" (l. 71). This image suggests coldness, death, betrayal (cf. Job 6:15-6), and humility and purity (cf. Job 9:30-31).

In this wind both characters are in a desperate situation. Their physical existence is shattered:

I an old man,  
A dull head among windy spaces.  
[...]  
I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:  
How should I use them for your closer contact?

(ll. 15-6; 59-60)

Since he has lost all five senses, Gerontion's ability to experience reality is very limited. He appeals to his ability to think and re-evaluate his experiences. By the line "I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch," he is alienated from his own body and physical existence; this is also a reference to civilisation by echoing Henry Adams's statement that society "has no right to feel it as a moral reproach to be told that it has reached an age when it can no longer depend, as in childhood, on its taste, or smell, or sight, or hearing, or memory."<sup>20</sup> Memory is mentioned earlier, in "I have no ghosts" (l. 30), with "ghosts" referring to memories of the past, people and events recalled. In this sense, Gerontion is entirely dissociated from both past, present and future, thus implying a sense of eternity encapsulated in the moment described. Still, this moment the reader is tempted to perceive as a "present moment," cannot be referred either to past, or to future.

Job 17:13: If I wait, the grave is mine house: I have made my bed in the darkness.

The shattered physical situation of Gerontion is also described through the metaphor of the house. The body is frequently referred to in the Bible as a house, as in John 2:2<sup>21</sup> or in Luke 11:24.<sup>22</sup> In the *Book of Job*, *house* refers primarily to the grave (Job 7:13, Job 30:23) or to personal well-being, including physical health (Job 20:28, Job 21:9). A closer reference to one's physical existence is in Job 7:10.<sup>23</sup>

Not only is the *house* in "Gerontion" of crucial importance because it describes the setting, but it also belongs part and parcel to the general atmosphere conjured up in the poem. Thus, "My house is a decayed house" could refer to Gerontion's decayed body, or "draughty house" – in relation to "windy knob" and "ghosts" – would refer to the meaninglessness of human physical existence, especially if we consider that *house* could also mean the grave, as Job 17:13 shows:

I have no ghosts,  
An old man in a draughty house

<sup>20</sup> Henry Adams. "Mont Saint Michel and Chartres." *Novels, Mont Saint Michel, The Education*. New York: The Library of America publ. by Literary Classics of the United States, 1983, p. 468.

<sup>21</sup> John 2:2: "But he spake of the temple of his body."

<sup>22</sup> Luke 11:24: "When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry laces, seeking rest; and finding none, he saith, I will return unto my house whence I came out."

<sup>23</sup> Job 7:10: "He shall return no more to his house, neither shall his place know him any more [after death]."

Under a windy knob.

[...]

We have not reached conclusion, when I  
Stiffen in a rented house.

(ll. 30-32; 49-50)

The "rented house" implies the relationship of a *tenant* and an *owner* within the house. The idea of the house standing for the body would project the tenant-owner relationship onto the personality, representing the two sides of the human spirit: the essentially human and the divine. The *tenant* is Gerontion himself, his very human essence, together with its faulty and frail side, whereas the *owner* described in "The Jew squats on the window sill, the owner," followed by lines 9-10 in sermon-like rhetoric that resembles the Creed of the Apostles, seem to prove Ricks's statement that this "owner" is Christ himself.<sup>24</sup>

My house is a decayed house,  
And the Jew squats on the window sill, the owner,  
Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,  
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.

(ll. 7-10)

Not only is this Christ, but it is also a reference to God within the framework of a Judeo-Christian myth of passion and human suffering. The sermon-like diction, or prayer-like rhythm in Gerontion also stresses this universal aspect of the human experience, since the prayer - the Creed in this case - foregrounds the shared ritual of a community whose cohesive force rests in the power of a God thought to be listening to the verbal act of a prayer, he himself not bothering to answer in plain words, although he is the Word himself (John 1:1). He communicates with "signs," that tend to lose their meaning through constantly being interpreted and re-interpreted.

Job 33:14: For God speaketh once, yea twice, yet man perceiveth it not.

Job 33:15: In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon men, in slumberings upon the bed...

The issue of signs coming from God and the direct manifestation of the Divine is crucial both in Job and Gerontion. As Elihu lectures Job (Job 33:14-15), God does not speak face to face with man, so Job cannot expect anything

<sup>24</sup> Ricks, p. 29.

of this kind in order to gain justice from God himself, since God is above the human world, far too much beyond our perception to tackle the problems of such insignificant beings as “anyone born of woman.” Indeed, in the Old Testament God cannot be seen face to face, but only heard, as Moses is told not to go too close to the blazing bush (Exodus 3:2–5), “And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God” (Exodus 3:6). Later it is only Moses who is allowed to be close to God (Exodus 24:2); God talked “out of the midst of the fire, of the cloud, and of the thick darkness” (Deuteronomy 5:22); Balaam is warned by an angel when his donkey turned off the road three times (Numbers 22:22–36); Joshua is spoken to through the “commander of the army of the LORD” (Joshua 5:13–15), and Samuel is entrusted with a message for Eli in a dream (1Samuel 1–21).

The people did not question the Lord’s authority to convey his messages into signs. From this point of view it is essential that in the *Book of Job* we find man’s questioning God’s ways. In the three comforters we find the traditional human attitude towards the Divine teachings, and accordingly, they preach total piety and humility in order to escape the afflictions that were sent upon Job. On the other hand, Job asserts that his faith is not like theirs, and that he knows well that even the righteous are punished and the sinful very often escape God’s chastisement. At the same time, he does not give up his faith: he maintains that he is righteous without acknowledging sin he did not commit. Since he is not understood by his comforters, he expects God to clear him of the accusations of his friends, which He eventually does. God speaks out of the whirlwind, and finally Job sees Him face to face: “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee” (Job 42:5).

Commentators debate over this appearance of God. Rob Sheldon, for instance, builds his theory around the argument between Job and Elihu, and says that the argument is basically about the chain between Heaven and Earth, God and Man, being broken. Job states that the chain of communication does not work properly, whereas Elihu, claiming that he is defending God’s position, says that man cannot even expect this chain to work properly because man is necessarily exposed to God’s will. Therefore, man cannot expect a face-to-face communication with God, since it would “swallow up” man, in this case, Job. God’s interrupting the argument by speaking from the whirlwind proves just the opposite, and not only does He speak, but in the end He also appears. Sheldon



argues that the appearance was made only for Job, as a proof of the Lord's choosing Job as his prophet, as He did with Moses or Samuel:

So we see that it was typical for God to speak through an intermediary, a prophet, though perhaps it was not typical for the final recipient to be present with the prophet. This identification of Job with the office of prophet is confirmed in the last chapter where God commands Job to pray for his friends. Thus God's speech to Job could be construed as a prophecy to be passed to his friends.<sup>25</sup>

The other controversy about God's appearance is that the friends may not have seen the Lord, only heard Him, and that the true message for Job was the appearance itself:

Job apparently does not credit the *words* in God's rebuke, but the *appearance* of God himself. Thus I interpret this as evidence that the words were directed toward the others, but the vision was the message for Job.<sup>26</sup>

Job is clearly a person chosen by God to mediate His Truth to mankind. In this respect, it is essential for the reader to witness the celestial trial situation presented at the beginning, and also God's appearance at the end, however vehemently modern and post-modern commentators discard these parts as probably not authentic.<sup>27</sup> In the beginning, Satan voices the opinion and doubts of those humans who need a proof of God's existence in order to believe in Him. Job is posited by God as an example, so that Satan and mankind could see the Truth about His existence. Job is therefore torn between the Truth as interpreted by man and the Truth as resting with God. In a sense, Job is suspended between the realm of Heaven and Earth. His previous lamentations on hoping that he would eventually see God after his death (Job 19:25-7)<sup>28</sup> may show that the

<sup>25</sup> Rob Sheldon. "The Book of Job: A multiperspectival approach to the problem of evil, the suffering of the righteous, and the justice of God. A theodicy." Rob Sheldon, MA Religion, Westminster Seminary, 1999, <http://cspar181.uah.edu/RbS/JOB/j24.html> (Job as Man on Trial) (12/26/1999).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Cf. René Girard. "The God of Victims." *The Postmodern God: a Theological Reader*. Ed. Graham Ward. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997, pp. 105-115.

<sup>28</sup> Job 19:25-27: "For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me."

experience is a vision of death. Job's vision of God is therefore a vision of his own longed-for death, the desire to come close to God's Truth and to break with the one represented by human society.

A similar desire is present in Gerontion, too. After having experienced all the so-called truths under the pretext of which man committed the vices that have led to wars and inequities throughout the world, there is no point in looking for rational explanations behind the happenings directed by History or Fate or God. All events are the result of man's arbitrary interpretations of the "signs" coming from a realm that falls beyond his control, that is beyond human comprehension. God, as a concept that clearly fulfils this criterion, is misinterpreted, either deliberately or out of sheer ignorance. The human desire to be able to control one's fate generates the craving for "a sign," which, in turn, is inevitably misinterpreted because of the mere fact that if sought in the realm of the incomprehensible, signs fall beyond human comprehension. This incomprehensibility, on the other hand, can be resolved only if one understands that the sign has to be sought for inside, within one's personality. The essence of this could be best illustrated with Levinas's argument about the *infinite*, as not only meaning non-finite, but also in-finite.<sup>29</sup>

Mankind's inability to understand the deep meanings of signs coming from God is expressed in the following lines in "Gerontion:"

Signs are taken for wonders. 'We would see a sign!'  
The word within a word unable to speak a word,  
Swaddled with darkness. In the juvenescence of the year  
Came Christ the tiger...

(ll. 17-20)

The reference to the sign (God's answer) is to Luke 2:12-14 and to Luke 2:34. The image of Christ as the infant Jesus implies the duality of Christ, as a being both human and divine. Its divine essence, though, is dependent on the Almighty Father, as human will is also shaped by His will. Thus, "The word within a word unable to speak a word" is directly connected to the Father, a reference to God known from the Old Testament. The Word (i.e. God) is not able to speak a word, only to give a sign through Jesus, leaving thus mankind (and Jesus and Job, for

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<sup>29</sup> Emmanuel Levinas. "God and Philosophy." *The Postmodern God: a Theological Reader*. Ed. Graham Ward. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997, pp. 58-59.

that matter) in an ambiguous state of understanding or misunderstanding at their own choice.

The duality of the human and the divine in Christ is also present in the reference to Revelations 5:5 in "Christ the tiger" coming at the time of the ceremony of the lamb.<sup>30</sup> The image in lines 21-23 evokes the ritual of the sacrament of communion (cf. Luke 22:19-20); by using the verbs in the passive the sense of betrayal and passivity of the victimised Christ is emphasised and so is the failure of Christ's sacrifice and mankind's inability to understand the spiritual benefit of sacrifice and of love as prophesied by Jesus:

In the juvenescence of the year  
Came Christ the tiger

In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas,  
To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk  
Among whispers...

(ll. 19-23)

On the other hand, this image is also the anticipation of "reconsidered passion" in line 41. Reconsidered and re-evaluated by man, the ceremony itself becomes "adulterated," distorted, thus mankind is unable to take advantage of Christ's sacrifice. The atmosphere of betrayal is created by the shadow-like images of Mr. Silvero, Hakagawa, Madame de Tornquist and Fraulein von Kulp:

To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk  
Among whispers; by Mr. Silvero  
With caressing hands, at Limoges  
Who walked all night in the next room;  
By Hakagawa, bowing among the Titians;  
By Madame de Tornquist, in the dark room  
Shifting the candles; Fraulein von Kulp  
Who turned in the hall, one hand on the door.

(ll. 22-29)

This may be regarded as a distorted image of the apostles pondering over the person of the treacherous disciple: "And they began to enquire among themselves, which of them it was that should do this thing" (Luke 22:23). The listing of these

<sup>30</sup> Christ himself is identified with the Lamb, as in John 1:29.

characters is often considered the series of dream-like images of guilt and the "representations of unconscious anxiety."<sup>31</sup> The essence of guilt can be more easily understood by relating these lines to Christ's betrayal, an element to which the poem directly alludes by the expression "flowering judas" in line 21.<sup>32</sup> In the pattern of the betrayal-motif in the Gospels, Judas was foreordained to perform this role: Judas took the blame for all those who would have betrayed Jesus consciously or unconsciously. In this sense, Judas is also made a scapegoat, not by the community, but by the divine power. In Job the betrayal is performed by Elihu, who, in the name of God, accuses Job of sinfulness. By not having a clearly defined person to take this blame, in "Gerontion" the betrayal is dissipated onto the whole mankind. By using the symbolic names, Eliot creates an atmosphere of suspense, where the question of who is to be blamed for the betrayal of values is never answered.

Job 21:22: Shall any teach God knowledge?

Job 42:3: Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? Therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not.

The concepts of knowledge and forgiveness can be interpreted both in human terms and according to Christian criteria. In the *Book of Job* the comforters lecture Job on the grounds that they speak on behalf of traditional knowledge, according to which God is a just God and would not afflict Job if he were righteous. In this sense, Job has to acknowledge his sin, or else, God is not a just God. Since Job persists in stating his innocence, the comforters find Job guilty of blasphemy, since Job must think that God is being unjust when punishing him. On the other hand, Job is the only one who readily accepts that God is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent, a being Who is free to do as He pleases, and a being Whose value order does not permit Him to be just or unjust, Whose existence is not limited by the boundaries of such finite beings as humans are. Opposed to the knowledge represented by the comforters is the knowledge represented by God, knowledge that falls beyond human comprehension. The infinity of God's knowledge is described in God's speech out of the whirlwind, a speech that does not answer Job's or his friends' speeches and arguments in any

<sup>31</sup> Bush, p. 40.

<sup>32</sup> This startling image of the "flowering judas" and the "irony of Judas" is dealt with in Gertrude Patterson. *T. S. Eliot, Poems in the Making*. New York: Manchester University Press, Barnes and Noble Books, 1971, p. 129.

way. God, by His mere reaction and appearance proves to Job that He is present. In Job's vision God becomes a reality he never ceased to believe in. The comforters, on the other hand, get what they deserve, the "reward" they expected from the God they imagined for themselves: they encounter a God who is punishing them for not speaking the right words.

On an inner level, man is responsible for whatever he creates for himself. God, with his Divine power has enabled man to create his world. As Adam named the animals in the Garden of Eden, humans were enabled to name the elements of the world that surrounds them. Within this world, they created an image of the God they would believe in, whose name could not be pronounced. Nevertheless, man, in his desire to possess the named, gave a name to signify this God, and as a consequence, lost the ability to possess knowledge of its essence. As the desire to control the real world grows, we become less capable to control our inner worlds. This is why the gap between spiritual existence and physical reality has grown to such extent that it is nearly impossible to transcend. Such a transcendental experience is death, so crucial in the New Testament as to become the ultimate proof of Christ's transcendental being.

Apart from the human concept of knowledge, the Old Testament primarily tells us of knowledge coming from God, and maintained and interpreted by man. The concept which the New Testament introduced is forgiveness.<sup>33</sup> Forgiveness is also an ambiguous term, since it is based on the idea that God punishes the sinful and forgives the righteous, and everyone gets what they deserve. This is to be considered an entirely human concept of reward, also reflected in the Apostles' Creed voicing the human desire to have a God that is just. The images we have of God are in this sense different. As Girard states, we ought to distinguish a God of Victims and a God of Persecutors. The God of Victims is the one that is able to forgive, and teaches forgiveness through his prophets (Job, Christ). The God of Persecutors is the God man wants to believe in, like the one conjured up by the comforters in the *Book of Job*, or the one in whose name Christ was nailed to the Tree.<sup>34</sup> Depending on our image of God, we will experience the God we deserve. In this sense, God is an internal visualisation of our beliefs of ourselves.

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<sup>33</sup> There have been attempts to make a distinction between the two Testaments on similar grounds by van Ruler; for a detailed analysis see D. L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible*, 1976 (1991). [Hungarian translation: D. L. Baker. *Két szövetség, egy Biblia*. Budapest: Hermeneutikai kutatóközpont, Harmat Kiadói Alapítvány, 1998, pp. 57–60.]

<sup>34</sup> Girard, pp. 105–115.

What Job experiences, is the infinite dimension of his own personality, the discovery of God within himself. For Gerontion, the apocalyptic vision of himself as a gull being whirled beyond the Arcturus, dissolving in the universe, is also a vision of a desired death, as the only possible solution to man's inability to comprehend the workings of the powers that fall beyond his control. In Job, God's appearance is essentially human, it is perceivable in human terms, and it re-establishes the chain of communication that was previously assumed both by Job and by Elihu as having been long broken. In Gerontion, lines 48–61 may stand for Gerontion's imagined talk to his God, i.e. History seen as a powerful goddess.

The passage on History in "Gerontion" starting with the rhetorical question of "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" (l. 33) has led many critics to interpret the entire poem as a disillusionment with World War I, implying that Eliot's scepticism and religious disillusionment is voiced in these lines. Although the author's life cannot be dissected from his work, the feelings generated by the negative war experiences should be viewed in a more general way. If "Gerontion" is an example of a masterly choice of persona, that is, of a persona that is depersonalising the author, then this persona's reflections on history are also to be depersonalised. History in "Gerontion" is made into a powerful but treacherous goddess, and it can also be given a general aspect that is central to the Judaic tradition. In Judaic thinking God is present in history, and history is God's presence or affirmation in time: this is an undeniably experienced reality in Judaism, even if theologically it is not or cannot be defined as such.<sup>35</sup>

History is thus equalled with Providence, Fate with an omnipresent God, worshipped by man. This image is profaned by the overt sexual imagery throughout the passage, relying on the absurdity of a profane cruel goddess worshipped by a "decayed little old man," as the name 'Gerontion' itself would translate. This passage, however, distinctly reminds one of Job's discontent with God's judgement in the Old Testament. Job alludes to the fact that he knows he is being innocently punished by God, and also adds that not only does God afflict the innocent, but He also lets the sinful get away with their sins unpunished. Job is also discontent with his "comforters," who are trying to talk him into admitting sins that may not even be known to himself. Job may well be right in asking the rhetorical question Gerontion puts forth: "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" However, with the allusion in "These tears are shaken from the

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<sup>35</sup> Fernando Joannes. *A zsidó vallás*. Budapest: Gondolat, 1990, pp. 57–8.

wrath-bearing tree" (line 47) to Blake's *A Poison Tree*, where wrath is brought by a human being onto his foe, to the human's undeniable joy, we also have the interpretation of forgiveness by man. The Christian concept of God's forgiveness in the Apostles' Creed, and the teaching of man's forgiving "those who trespass against us" in the Lord's Prayer also implies God's justly afflicting or rewarding man. This is exactly the dilemma Job encounters in his own situation, and this is what Gerontion reflects on when presenting the History-goddess as an apparently unjust divine power. However, it is the fault of mankind that they cannot seize the opportunities offered by history and/or God, since they have misinterpreted and devalued the values and essence of historical and religious existence. With the human experience as we know it, one is unable to forgive and, at the same time, cannot expect forgiveness from above either.

Job 40:8: Wilt thou also disannul my judgment? wilt thou condemn me, that thou mayest be righteous?

The *Book of Job* provides us with a context that yields to the interpretation of the next passage from "Gerontion" as a dialogue with God. Job longs for a conclusion, for an explanation to his afflictions, but he realises that neither his wife, nor his comforters (that is, no human being) can provide an explanation for his sufferings, it is only God whose explanation Job would readily accept. Similarly, Gerontion also wishes to reach some sort of a conclusion, an explanation to all the vices mankind has to put up with.

The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours. Think at last  
 We have not reached conclusion, when I  
 Stiffen in a rented house. Think at last  
 I have not made this show purposelessly  
 And it is not by any concitation  
 Of the backward devils.  
 I would meet you upon this honestly.  
 I that was near your heart was removed therefrom  
 To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.  
 I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it  
 Since what is kept must be adulterated?  
 I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:  
 How should I use them for your closer contact?

(ll. 48-60)

Gerontion's contemplations on his state resound Job's perseverance in his innocence and his keeping the integrity of his faith. He does believe that God is not afflicting him without a good reason (cf. "I have not made this show purposelessly") and he is also convinced that it is still God from whom the affliction came (cf. "it is not by any concitation / Of the backward devils"),<sup>36</sup> he means to face the charges honestly ("I would meet you upon this honestly") and to receive the answer from God himself. He has lost everything (by "passion" meaning not only physical ability, but also the Passion of Christ) and by having been disrupted from his physical existence, there is no point in any further suffering, for he is too weak to bear it any longer.

Lines 65–73 could be contrasted to the last few chapters of the *Book of Job*:

What will the spider do,  
Suspend its operations, will the weevil  
Delay? De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel, whirled  
Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear  
In fractured atoms. Gull against the wind, in the windy straits  
Of Belle Isle, or running on the Horn.  
White feathers in the snow, the Gulf claims,  
And an old man driven by the Trades  
To a sleepy corner.

(ll. 65–73)

The reference to the spider and the weevil are an ironic counterpoint to God's description of the Behemoth and the Leviathan, representing his utmost power and infinite greatness. At the same time, the spider and the weevil also represent the very same immense power by the sheer impossibility of changing their ways. The spider and the weevil are both engaged in irreversible activities, and however fragile and ephemeral they are, they will not "delay," they are hopelessly bound for the completion of their fates. By enlisting the different elements (individuals by their names, the gull, feathers, an old man) we get the apocalyptic vision of destruction generated by a supernatural power (cf. Job 30:22). The punishment implied in the fate of De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel is nevertheless opposed: trying to object to this sort of punishment, Gerontion identifies himself with the gull "against the wind," that would inevitably lead to the "dissolving of his

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<sup>36</sup> If we consider the initial situation of the inward monologue, these lines may be taken as God's reassuring assertions as imagined by Gerontion.



substance" into "white feathers in the snow." White implies innocence, and so does the image of the bird and of the white feathers. At the same time, snow, as the other form of water, suggests hope, in this case one that has cooled, a long-forgotten desire, or an ultimate solution. The image of the gull against the wind also implies a fight fought on one's own, the feeling of someone completely abandoned. As Job in his vision of God experiences the vision of his own longed-for death, this image in "Gerontion" is also the projection of the desire to break with human existence and transcend into the realm of death.

The sense of betrayal is present throughout the whole poem. Mankind has abandoned the individual personified by Gerontion, the same way as Job and Christ were left on their own and betrayed. Nevertheless, in this experience he encounters God within himself, the divine dimension of the human being. After such knowledge, he will be able to exercise the power of forgiveness, to live together with his thoughts that would no longer generate fear or pain.

The ending of the poem ("Tenants of the house, / Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season") returns to the original idea of an inward monologue, thus explicitly showing that the poem is about a spiritual conflict of the individual. As opposed to the conventional ending in the *Book of Job*,<sup>37</sup> the ending of "Gerontion" is technically an affirmation of the irreconcilable gap between reality and the spiritual world. In reality the conflict has been diminished into mere thoughts, dryness returns. However, the vision was complete, the understanding of human folly and incomprehension and of the sense of betrayal has been reconciled by the power of knowledge and forgiveness.

René Girard's reading of the *Book of Job* provides us with another perspective that reveals further questions of the powers that are at work on the level of human righteousness. Girard interprets Job in the light of the Gospels, by considering the Dialogues the crucial part of the story, and equates it with the persecution of Christ. He says that in both cases it is the community that causes the central characters' death by setting the "scapegoat mechanism" at work. Both Job and Christ are first adored by their respective communities, and suddenly they turn against them, at the root of which there is the "mimetic desire" of the

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<sup>37</sup> The Epilogue is a controversial issue in connection with the *Book of Job*, nevertheless, Wes Morriston sees it as a projection of "inner grace:" "The happy resolution in the Epilogue may also be viewed as an external symbol of an inner grace - of the enlightenment that Job has achieved." <http://cspar181.uah.edu/RbS/JOB/Home.htm> (Wes Morriston on *The Book of Job*) (12/26/1999).

community to obtain the power of their idols. Girard also distinguishes between the logic of the God of victims and the logic of the God of persecutors.<sup>38</sup>

In this distinction, I see the duality of the human and of the divine, since the God of victims is the God in Whose name Job and Christ act and speak, whereas the God of the persecutors is the one in the name of which the persecutors determine Job and Christ's death. There is a deep truth in Girard's statement that the two stories are essentially about the scapegoat mechanism that is the foundation of all human societies; yet in these two stories the questions of righteousness and martyrdom cannot be solely explained by the scapegoat mechanism and with the triangular mimetic desire. Both in *Job* and in Christ's Passion the central issue is the clash of the God of victims, God as He is, and the God of persecutors, God as interpreted by man. Power in this context can be defined by the counters any divine value order operates with, that is, by righteousness and forgiveness. In both cases, the conflict is mapped as a trial, where God's power is at stake as opposed to Satan's. Satan, the Accuser, voices the disbelief of all those humans who doubt the benefits of righteousness, whereas God provides his best advocates to prove that they are wrong. In both cases, the setting of this trial is placed into the world of man, and the solution is utterly left to the workings of the human society. Whereas Girard regards everything in Job but the Dialogues as the rest that "conceals the guilt of all men, including our own, in seeking out scapegoats,"<sup>39</sup> the narrative framework is essential because it makes it clear to us that it is not only the human community that produces this very mechanism, but "the satanic principle on which [...] all human communities are based."<sup>40</sup> By calling it "satanic," Girard clearly employs a discourse that alludes to the celestial powers and the conflict between God and Satan.

As Girard also observes, another important similarity between the two stories is the fact that both Job and Christ are perfect victims: both of them are left alone completely, and the community "at least passively, join in society's outburst." One is tempted to believe that it is not desire that is at the heart of the matter, as Girard claims, but rather the way men choose their victims. In both stories the persecution starts when Job and Christ, respectively, are deserted, where there is no possibility of any other choice but death. The other choice of

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<sup>38</sup> Girard, pp. 105–115.

<sup>39</sup> Girard, p. 111.

<sup>40</sup> Girard, p. 111.

both victims would be to consent to the accusations, that is, to act against their beliefs and principles. By choosing to maintain their "integrity" (Job) or "the Logos of the God of Victims" (Christ), they inevitably provoke the community's outrage against themselves. But the persecution is always directed against the weakened and already helpless victim. Victims have to be innocent, and they both have to be aware of it, and this they both have to assert and demonstrate. The powerful persecutors recognise the moral strength behind the weakness as something they virtually lack. The Pharisean community does not turn against the blind man in Matthew's Gospel for the mere fact that he is blind (they thought that it was a punishment for some sin the blind man or his parents had committed), but because his sight was restored by Jesus because of his faith. There is a strong incomprehensibility of the divine that generates the "desire" to destroy the morally strong. On the other hand, righteousness and forgiveness can only be demonstrated against the exact opposites of these values, that is, against untruth and violence.

The essential difference between the *Book of Job* and Christ's Passion is that in Job righteousness is rewarded in this world whereas Christ's reward belongs to the afterworld. Even in Christ's case, this reward is manifested to man through the Resurrection. This is clearly an indication of the intent to make the divine will visible to man. It is not by chance that Jesus' Passion is carried out to the ultimate death of the victim, whereas Job does not literally die. In both cases, it is the moment of revelation that is the reward for the victim. The victim does not need proof of his own innocence, but needs the acknowledgement of the divine power to which he stayed true. The rest is for the human society that again and again proves to be ignorant of what God's Kingdom means. It is also instructive for the human society to learn about the consequences of their own deeds.

Both Job and Christ are on their own in the clash of two different views of religion, the Truth of God and the Truth of Man, the latter being man's interpretations of God and religion. If this clash of different views is stripped of the elements of the story that link the parables or mythologies to the value order in the context of which humans are able to comprehend the message, we may claim that the very same conflict may take place on the level of the individual, as an interiorised dramatic conflict between one's knowledge rooted in traditional wisdom and one's recognition of what the true knowledge consists of. By experiencing such a psychological and moral conflict, one can attain a new

spiritual integrity in which one can rise above the limits human existence imposes on them, and only in the possession of this ability will one be able to understand forgiveness.

In "Gerontion," we find the expression of discontent with values and morals as interpreted by man, and with the impossibility of mankind's moral improvement in its present state. This is expressed by the atmosphere of suspension between the realm of Heaven and Earth, Past and Present, Divine and Human, through the persona of Gerontion, an old man waiting for his longed-for death. In his contemplations, the mythical experience of Job's and Christ's sacrifice ("scapegoating") returns as what the individual experienced in the twentieth century, equally deserted and left on his own in the midst of despair and disillusionment. The quest for spiritual integrity requires that the individual recovers the God within himself, and thus understands the concepts of knowledge and forgiveness, upon which the proper moral stand rests. Gerontion, as a universal character representing the average human mind, shares the fate of both Job and Christ. In this sense, Gerontion's question, "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" clearly marks the boundary where the individual turns upon his past experiences and sets off to experience the Revelation of the truth of forgiveness. His transcendental vision of his own death leads to the final reconciliation with his – and mankind's – past.