This copy has been supplied by the Library of the University of Otago on the understanding that the following conditions will be observed:

1. To comply with s56 of the Copyright Act 1994 [NZ], this thesis copy must only be used for the purposes of research or private study.

2. The author's permission must be obtained before any material in the thesis is reproduced, unless such reproduction falls within the fair dealing guidelines of the Copyright Act 1994. Due acknowledgement must be made to the author in any citation.

3. No further copies may be made without the permission of the Librarian of the University of Otago.
T.S. Eliot, 'Four Quartets' and the Mediaeval Mind

John Sinclair

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
at the University of Otago, Dunedin,
New Zealand.

July 1987
To Mai
‘A cord of three strands is not easily broken’
Acknowledgments

The completion of this thesis is due in large part to the assistance of a number of people. Dr Chris Ackerley has been ‘il miglior fabbro’, a mentor and friend bringing order out of chaos with his wicked red pen. My parents provided shelter and encouragement for the first year of the project, and latterly my father’s tireless proof-reading of so mystifying a document has been invaluable. Thanks also go to my brother, Duncan, whose help with the bibliography came at just the right time.

My deepest debt, however, is to my wife Mai, whose love makes it all worthwhile.
Abstract

The subject of this study is the tradition which gives meaning to T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Eliot insisted that the significance of a literary work is determined by its relationship with the works which have preceded it. Before it can be said to present a credible vision of its contemporary world, a new work of literature must be defined and shaped by the order formed by the literature of the past. Having submitted to this discipline, the new work can then, in turn, redefine and reshape its governing tradition.

The successful operation of this process, Eliot stressed, demanded of the poet a constant refinement of technique and a constant search for the most instructive literary models. The development of Eliot's own work from the early poems to *Four Quartets* involved just such a search for the tradition within Western literature which best expressed the quintessence of the 'mind' of Europe. A major feature of this development was a growing appreciation, both literary and intellectual, for the mediaeval era, and especially for its premier literary artist, Dante Alighieri.

In *Four Quartets* Eliot attempted to appropriate for his own poetry something of the maturity of Dante's poetic art and of the literary, philosophical, social and theological traditions which informed it. A major characteristic of Eliot's poetry had always been its use of images and allusions to isolate specific traditions of thought and expression and import into a modern setting the connotations and resonances previously associated with them. The allusive texture of the *Quartets* makes frequent reference to Dante and to other mediaeval writings, either directly, by borrowing images and phrases and by adopting or imitating conventions of thought and literary form, or indirectly, by invoking traditions which themselves look to the example of mediaeval Christendom or which, in departing from it, contributed to the decay of the European mind which Eliot saw in the advance of the Renaissance.

Many of these allusions have been noted and discussed in isolation by previous commentators. However, there has been no attempt to collate Eliot's mediaeval sources or to explore this aspect of his work as the conscious evocation of an axis-age in European culture. Eliot's constant recourse to the literature of the Middle Ages in *Four Quartets* will be illustrated by the consideration of his handling of five major themes or conventions which—perhaps not unintentionally—bear a striking resemblance to the major 'topoi' of Dante's *Commedia*. The first to be studied will be Eliot's use of four specific landscapes whose personal associations combine with their innate symbolic resonances to form the matrices for the wider speculations of each of the four poems. What this investigation will show is that Eliot consciously seeks and then locates value in the past. The progression from the landscape of Burnt Norton to that of Little Gidding reveals a development in the poet's mind from a consideration of personal experience to a meditation upon that of a community which sought to live out the mediaeval Christian ideal upon English soil.

The second theme which will be studied is that which is introduced in the opening passage of *Burnt Norton* and to which the *Quartets* return repeatedly: the consideration of the nature of time. My account of this theme will show that, although various conceptions of time are entertained within the sequence, the approach which is finally espoused bears a close affinity to Augustine's attempt—which remained the most influential for more than a millennium—to explain time in its relation both to mankind's temporal experience and to the Christian notion of the eternity of God.
The emotional centre of *Four Quartets*—the poet's account of his experience in the rose-garden at Burnt Norton—will be considered next. The full significance of the rose-garden is to be discerned only in its relationship to the tradition of garden-imagery to which it makes allusion, and especially to Dante’s use of the conventions of courtly love in *La Vita Nuova* and the *Divina Commedia*. By linking the personal core of feelings which were associated with the experience at Burnt Norton to Dante’s account of his own love nostalgia Eliot is invoking not only a rich literary tradition but also the philosophical traditions which enabled Dante to explain and assign meaning to his personal feelings within the context of universal and theological truths. The wider ramifications of this philosophical background will be shown to have an increasing importance for Eliot’s exploration in the remainder of the *Quartets* of the significance of the rose-garden experience.

An important aspect of this expansion of the meaning of the personal core of the *Quartets* is Eliot’s treatment of it as a spiritual and ultimately a theophanic experience. This theme will be taken up next. Eliot’s debt to works of mystical literature in *Four Quartets* is well-known, but has generally been treated in isolation from the larger patterns of imagery and allusion. It will be argued that the mystical sources used in the *Quartets* form an order which evokes the religious sensibility of the Middle Ages. This is immediately apparent in Eliot’s allusions to Dante, St. John of the Cross, and the English mystics of the fourteenth century; but even in his inclusion of mystical sources from other periods and other religious traditions—the *Bhagavad-Gītā* is the obvious example—Eliot is seeking to highlight aspects of religious sensibility which found their fullest expression in Christendom.

The debt to the mediaeval era extends even to the cosmological metaphors which Eliot adopted to describe the physical aspect of the ‘world’ of the *Quartets*. Although not as systematic as Dante’s Ptolemaic system, the universe of Eliot’s sequence of poems is nevertheless described in spatial metaphors which, though ancient in origin, point once more to the all-embracing universal order envisaged by mediaeval philosophy.

This study will be supplemented with a lengthy appendix which notes the other sources and allusions in the *Quartets* and explores their contribution to the larger schemes which determine the order of the poem and point to the tradition which gives it meaning.
Contents

1 Introduction: Order, Atavism, and the Mind of Europe 1

2 Four Landscapes 15
   I 'Burnt Norton' .................................................. 15
   II 'East Coker' ................................................... 18
   III 'The Dry Salvages' ............................................ 21
   IV 'Little Gidding' ............................................... 25

3 On the Nature of Time 28
   I The History of Time—Philosophy .............................. 29
   II Eliot's Early Poems: Bradley, Einstein and Bergson .... 34
   III 'Gerontion' to 'Murder in the Cathedral' ............ 36
   IV 'Burnt Norton' ............................................... 41
   V 'East Coker' .................................................. 48
   VI 'The Dry Salvages' ........................................... 50
   VII 'Little Gidding' ............................................. 56

4 Into The Rose Garden 59
   I The Rose—Garden in Western Thought and Literature ... 59
   II Eliot's Garden Imagery from 'Prufrock' to 'Burnt Norton' . 64
   III Light, Beauty and Love in Mediaeval Philosophy .... 71
   IV 'Burnt Norton's' Rose—Garden ........................... 77
   V The Rose—Garden in 'The Family Reunion' and the other 'Quartets' .......... 88
5 Mystical Theology in 'Four Quartets' 98

I 'A Taste For Mysticism' ........................................ 99
II The Time of Tension ........................................... 102
III The Mystical Tradition of the 'Quartets' .................. 105
IV Attraction ...................................................... 109
V Devotion ......................................................... 117
VI The Way Back Up: Affirmation Reaffirmed ............... 127
VII Elevation: An End and a Beginning ...................... 139

6 The Cosmological Imagery of 'Four Quartets' 153

I Heraclitus ....................................................... 154
II The Circle and The Wheel .................................... 160
III The Axle–tree .................................................. 165
IV The Still Point .................................................. 168
V The Dance ....................................................... 176
VI Music ............................................................ 185

Appendix: Supplementary Notes 198

I 'Burnt Norton' .................................................. 198
II 'East Coker' .................................................... 207
III 'The Dry Salvages' .......................................... 219
IV 'Little Gidding' .............................................. 225

Bibliography of Works Consulted 235

I Works by T.S. Eliot ............................................. 235
II Secondary Sources ............................................ 237
Abbreviations and Standard Editions

Works by Eliot:

UPUC – *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism.*
ASG – *After Strange Gods.*
Notes – *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture.*
OPP – *On Poetry and Poets.*
KE – *Knowledge and Experience in the Work of F.H. Bradley.*

Works by Other Authors:


Standard Editions:

*Holy Bible*, King James Version (1611).
Chapter 1

Introduction: Order, Atavism, and the Mind of Europe

Order is that which, if we keep it in our lives, leads us to God
- St Augustine (*De Ordine* I, 9, 27)

I

Of those central concepts which can be isolated in Eliot’s work, none has so great a claim to primacy as the concept of order. The search for and perception of an established system of relations underlies Eliot’s most important critical and aesthetic tenets—‘tradition’, ‘classicism’, ‘unification of sensibility’, ‘orthodoxy’—as it does the poetic statements in which he attempted to realize them. It is order that the conscious mind seeks in its apprehension of the discrete phenomena of the universe (‘I can connect nothing with nothing’) and order that it seeks to articulate in using and developing its tools of expression (‘The complete consort dancing together’). Moreover, when through art the mind attempts to communicate its most intense experiences—experiences of truth, of beauty, or of suffering—it finds itself concerned with that perfection of order which is the prerequisite of any true meeting of minds, of any union of knower with known.

Looking back on his career in 1951, Eliot wrote (*OPP*, p.87):

> it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order *in* reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation; and then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a region where that guide can avail us no farther.

The order of art is not to be equated with life itself; it remains a guide, a fiction whose imposition is necessary if the disparate elements of experience are to acquire any measure of cohesion and relatedness. It is an artifice created in imitation of the final order which the artist perceives or imagines; it is a fiction which attempts to represent reality, and, in its own complexities, to approximate more and more closely to that most complex of unitary truths. Through the imposition of such an order upon reality the artist creates the sense of a mind approaching an understanding of that truth.
The focus of the present study is Eliot's last sequence of poems, *Four Quartets*, and in particular the culmination within them of his attempt to fix an order upon fragmentary human experience. This order is not to be confused with what may be called the 'orderliness' of the *Quartets*, which has been recognised and discussed by commentators too numerous to permit individual mention. The 'order' of the *Quartets* is more than a matter of pattern, structure, and balance. It is instead a construct of particular ideas and emotions which is defined by the focal images, allusions and themes of the *Quartets*, and which in turn organizes those images, allusions and themes around common points of reference.

That such governing principles are at work within the *Quartets* has been widely acknowledged by critics and commentators. Moreover, it has been noted that although aesthetic, philosophical and literary principles are present, the seminal concepts of the *Quartets* are religious and spiritual. What has received little attention, however, is Eliot's tendency to isolate and assign value to specific traditions within religious thought. *Four Quartets* is not merely a 'Christian' poem, but a poem governed by a religious sensibility with possesses specific parameters, and refers to particular traditions of Christian thought and practice.

Before we can understand the structures of Eliot's mature vision, however, we must consider the process by which it was attained. Eliot's comment on Shakespeare, that 'we must know all of [his] work in order to know any of it' (*SE*, p.193), is perhaps even more true of his own work. Many of the influences which contribute most to *Four Quartets* feature prominently in the process by which the poet of *The Love-song of J. Alfred Prufrock* became the poet of *Burnt Norton*. To appreciate the end of Eliot's poetic work we must understand its beginning.

II

In July of 1914 T.S. Eliot left the United States bound for the European continent and then England. In so doing he was—perhaps not unwittingly—reversing the voyage of his ancestor, Andrew Eliot of East Coker, who, in the late seventeenth century, sailed for 'New England' and the promise of a puritan homeland, a Canaan in which the idea of a Christian society might find its fruition. Two-and-a-half centuries on, a later Eliot was abandoning that promised land, abandoning the Unitarian puritanism of his childhood in St Louis, and the vacuous social posturing of middle-class Boston. Except for brief family visits and lecture tours he would never return. Eliot would seek Canaan in Europe; indeed, he would take steps to dissociate himself from the culture in which he was raised. He would adopt English dress, manners and accent, take British citizenship, marry an Englishwoman, and finally, in joining the Anglo-Catholic communion, would return to the very fold that his forebear had fled.

Upon his arrival in Europe, however, Eliot found an emerging generation of thinkers and artists for whom European culture was stagnant and bankrupt. There could be no escape from this cultural hiatus, these men and women were saying, without a radical discontinuity with the framework of thought and expression which constituted their immediate inheritance. The impulse was towards renunciation, and towards a rediscovery of an order of solid data of fact and feeling from which art and culture could be rejuvenated.

---

1The plays which followed the *Quartets* are more limited in scope, and, moreover, reveal progressively that Eliot considered that he had already achieved his major aesthetic goals, at least to what he felt was the best of his abilities.
A major expression of this tendency in what would later be called Modernist art and literature was atavism, the deliberate attempt to revert to the forms and images of cultures remote in time. Dissatisfied with the Romantic obsession with the ruins of ancient civilizations—the emblems of the destruction of the past—these artists and writers sought in ancient artifacts completed symbols which, now as when they first appeared, could express with integrity the deepest sources of life.

The most radical and striking manifestation of the atavist impulse was primitivism. The angular faces of Pablo Picasso's 'Les Demoiselles d'Avignon' (1907) reflect the painter's rediscovery of ancient Iberian sculpture; and his later work bears witness to his fascination with the mysterious energy of the African masks and figurines with which he decorated his studio at Cannes. Igor Stravinsky's score for the controversial ballet The Rite of Spring (1913) was inspired by the pagan ceremonies of prehistoric Russia—in particular an annual fertility ritual which culminated in a human sacrifice. And it was in West African sculpture and the ancient civilizations of the Etruscans, the Mexican indians and the Australian aborigines, that D.H. Lawrence found a conscious power of blood and genitals which, he felt, offered a future to the human race.

Eliot did not embrace primitive art and culture as enthusiastically as Picasso, Stravinsky and Lawrence, but his early poetry does reveal a strengthening primitivist impulse.2 The urban scenes of the Prufrock volume—most of which were modelled upon St Louis and Boston—give way to the pouncing tigers and clandestine seances of 'Gerontion', and to 'Apeneck Sweeney', the human animal of Poems, 1920. These influences culminated in The Waste Land, Eliot's vision of the dissolution of a modern civilization haunted by its inescapable past. In his notes to the poem, Eliot acknowledged as primary sources Jessie Weston's From Ritual to Romance, which linked the Christianized Grail legends to their prototypes in pagan myth, and Sir James Frazer's The Golden Bough, the seminal work of ethnology which established the continuity between the beliefs and practices of Western Christian culture and the ritual and symbolism of prehistoric paganism.

The allusions to Frazer and Weston which Eliot incorporated into The Waste Land—the title itself, for instance, the figures of the tarot pack, the corpse planted in the garden, the bats with baby faces and the empty chapel—are not merely images of chaos and unnamable fear; nor do they necessarily indicate a serious interest in paganism comparable to Lawrence's. Rather, they represent an order of being which has re-emerged after an aeon of obscurity to usher in the twilight of European civilization. For Eliot, the significance of the primitive was not so much its disquieting effect upon the modern sensibility as its 'revelation of that vanished mind of which our mind is a continuation'.3 Eliot attempted to draw from that vanished primitive mind a mythical system which he could impose upon his perception of the modern world. Joyce's use of the Odysseus myth was a major exemplum of this method, and Eliot's comments on Ulysses (which he had read when it was serialized in The Little Review from 1918 to 1920) seem equally applicable to his own use of Frazer and Weston:4

It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance

---

2 Eliot was greatly impressed by Stravinsky's ballet when he saw it performed in the summer of 1921, and at the end of the performance stood to cheer it (Ackroyd, p.112).


to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. Psychology . . . ethnology, and The Golden Bough have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art.

Eliot had already begun to formulate an aesthetic theory upon notions parallel to this. In several of his early critical essays he had attempted to set out the relationship of the new work of art to the culture of the past. The modern poet, he wrote, can identify value only in perceiving a ‘tradition’ into which his work will fit. ‘I think of [literature] now’, he explained in ‘The Function of Criticism’ (1923), ‘of the literature of the world, of the literature of Europe, of the literature of a single country, not as a collection of the writings of individuals, but as “organic wholes”, as systems in relation to which, and only in relation to which, individual works of literary art, and the works of individual artists, have their significance’ (SE, pp.23–24).

The order which art imposes is thus not merely the product of an individual mind. Rather, it is a fiction which has been refined and extended by the community of minds, reaching across time and space, which constitutes the culture of a society, a nation, a race, or a species. In taking its place in this ‘whole’, the genuinely new work of art will alter the form of the system slightly, for while it will be, as are all previous works of art, a revelation of the larger mind, it will also increase the scope of that mind. It will have been written in the ‘conscious present’, with ‘an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past’s awareness of itself cannot show’ (‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, SE, p.16). The artist, by borrowing, adapting and inventing, creates a new refinement or a further extension of the order of art which will give it a closer likeness to truth.

The fluidity of the tradition, however, and the need for constant change, gives as much scope for degeneration as for advancement. Eliot was acutely aware that ‘the mind of Europe’, the system of myth and significance which linked Shakespeare to ‘the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen’ (SE, p.16) and to any work of art which he himself might produce, was in a state of decay. Initially he identified the source of the disorder (in English letters, at least) in the ‘dissociation of sensibility’ which occurred about the time of the English Civil War. His early essays exalt the Jacobean dramatists and poets as the last generation whose sensibility was unified, whose thought and feeling were so much in harmony as to be a single faculty. Since the Restoration, however, English literature had sustained a split in character, producing the hypertrophied magniloquence of Milton and the excessive ‘wit’ of Dryden, both of which tendencies left the language crippled. This debility became more conspicuous with the Romantics, those priests of undisciplined emotion who, followed by a train of lesser progeny, traversed the nineteenth century like a squadron of headless chickens. Within the scheme of Eliot’s European ‘tradition’ these poets were consigned to Purgatory, if not to Hell itself. They were writers from whom the modern poet should not attempt to learn, for, although their genius was undoubted, their sensibility was flawed and therefore negative. The influence of their ‘minds’ was to be extirpated from the ‘mind of Europe’.

Eliot never chose to identify the causes of the ‘dissociation’ with as much specificity as the critics who adopted it as a catch-phrase—L.C. Knights and Basil Willey, for instance. In ‘Milton ll’ (1947), he attempted to exonerate Milton and Dryden from the blame he had originally laid upon their shoulders (OPP, pp.152–53). Nevertheless, he reaffirmed his belief that something of significance did happen in literature at about that time, that its causes were the causes of the Civil War (and, we might add, contributed to Andrew Eliot’s decision to leave England), and were the result of changes which were taking place throughout Europe as a result of the dissolution of the mediaeval world–view.
In reaction to the dominant forces of the previous two centuries Eliot sought in the legends of the Fisher King and the Quest for the Holy Grail a system of archetypes and correspondences which could give shape to the anarchy of modern civilization. It was not to be a complete or perfect system, however, and at the end of The Waste Land, instead of restoring the land to fertility, the questing knight finds himself amongst his ruins—a situation ironically reminiscent of the Romantic poets—having shored against them a collection of ‘fragments’. Although some measure of order had been imposed upon reality, the fictive task had only just begun: the ruins must now be rebuilt. The ‘order’ of Frazer and Weston looks for its consummation in a greater, more comprehensive account of the European mind.

Eliot’s search was leading him towards a more discriminating kind of atavism. This had already been expressed in his allegiance to the principles of literary ‘classicism’, a term adopted by a group of critics—among whom Eliot became chief—who sought a re-establishment of the ‘unified sensibility’ which had been lost two—and—a-half centuries earlier. Genuine poetry, Eliot argued, the poetry from which a modern poet might learn the craft aright, was impersonal and objective, rather than spontaneous or unconscious. It was the product of an artistic process which included organization and criticism at all stages, and which revealed a creative self under the strict control of a governing tradition. Eliot had described these principles at work in Marvell, Jonson and Shakespeare; but in the poetry and criticism which followed The Waste Land his point of focus gravitated towards the European continent, and towards one poet, Dante Alighieri.

Eliot found in Dante the epitome of the European poet. He devoted three separate essays to the exploration of his greatness, and even before The Waste Land had compared him favourably with Ben Jonson and William Blake (SW, pp.105, 156–58). In the decade which followed, the Florentine poet began to rival and eventually to superecede Shakespeare as Eliot’s measuring-stick for evaluating other poets: he is compared with Donne (1926), Crashaw (1928), Baudelaire (1930), and Shakespeare himself (1927). Similar comparisons were made later with Milton (1936; 1947), Virgil (1951) and Goethe (1956).

Eliot stressed that in many of these comparisons, especially those with Virgil and Shakespeare, he was not attributing Dante’s superiority to a greater genius, but to historical and geographical factors. In his essay on Blake in 1920, he noted (SW, pp.157–58):

What [Blake’s] genius required, and what it sadly lacked, was a framework of accepted and traditional ideas which would have prevented him from indulging in a philosophy of his own . . . . The concentration resulting from a framework of

---

6There were significant anomalies in Eliot’s ‘classical’ aesthetic which admitted notions more commonly associated with romanticism than classicism. This aspect of Eliot’s thought is discussed by C.K. Stead in The New Poetic (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1964), chs 6 and 7; George Bornstein in Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot and Stevens (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), ch.3; and David Spurr in Conflicts in Consciousness: T.S. Eliot’s Poetry and Criticism (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), passim.


mythology and theology and philosophy is one of the reasons why Dante is a classic, and Blake only a poet of genius. The fault is perhaps not with Blake himself, but with the environment which failed to provide what such a poet needed.

He explained further in 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca' (SE, p.136):

The difference between Shakespeare and Dante is that Dante had one coherent system of thought behind him... It happened that at Dante’s time thought was orderly and strong and beautiful, and that it was concentrated in one man of the greatest genius; Dante’s poetry receives a boost which in a sense it does not merit, from the fact that the thought behind it is the thought of a man as great and lovely as Dante himself: St. Thomas. The thought behind Shakespeare is of men far inferior to Shakespeare himself.

Again, in his long essay on Dante in 1929, Eliot noted that, although perhaps a ‘finer instrument’ than the Italian poet, Shakespeare suffered from the fact that his cultural milieu was inferior to Dante’s, and was removed from the centre of Europe (SE, p.242):

Dante’s advantages are not due to greater genius, but to the fact that he wrote when Europe was still more or less one. And even had Chaucer or Villon been exact contemporaries of Dante, they would still have been farther, linguistically as well as geographically, from the centre of Europe than Dante.

Dante was ‘the most universal poet in the modern languages’, Eliot proclaimed, and the poet from whom others could learn the most (SE, pp.238, 252). His language, first of all, was quintessentially European. Derived from mediaeval Latin—the ‘universal language’ of the late Middle Ages—Dante’s Italian vernacular was ‘the perfection of a common language’ (SE, pp.239, 252). He also had at his disposal (and brought to perfection) the mediaeval tradition of allegory, a literary form which ‘was not a local Italian custom, but a universal European method’. This ‘mental habit’ of seeing things in ‘clear visual images’ suffused the poetry, theology and philosophy of his age (SE, pp.242–43). And for theology and philosophy itself he had Thomist Scholasticism, a refined and comprehensive world-view which, among his contemporary Europeans, ‘had undergone a more complete absorption into life’ than any previous or subsequent system of thought and feeling (SW, p.163).

Dante added to all this his own prodigious talents: his extraordinary understanding of both the heights and the depths of human feeling, his simple and lucid style, and his ability to present profound philosophical and theological themes in such a way as to allow even those who did not share his beliefs to appreciate the universal truths which they attempt to express. Nevertheless, 10

---

10Eliot elaborated upon the ramifications of this ‘absorption’ in his Clark Lectures in 1926. The sensibility of the metaphysical poets of the Renaissance was ‘romantic’ and ‘psychological’, he said, compared to that of Dante and Cavalcanti which he described as ‘classical’ and ‘ontological’. The second epithet is especially important, for whereas Donne merely contemplated or ‘entertained’ metaphysical ideas, Dante and Cavalcanti saw their poetry as a serious attempt to identify absolute truths and values. While thought is finally subordinate to feeling in Donne, the mediaeval writers (Eliot specified Richard of St Victor and St Thomas as well as Dante and Cavalcanti) sought ‘the development and subsumption of emotion and feeling through intellect into the vision of God’. Apart from a French translation of one of the lectures (see above, p.5), the series remains unpublished. My quotations are from Ronald Bush’s redaction of the lectures in T.S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp.83–85.
the ascendency of Dante’s influence upon Eliot is due in large part to the latter’s discovery in
mediaeval Europe of an age of unparalleled maturity. The exemplary nature of Dante’s poetry
reflected that of his social, intellectual, political, theological, and artistic background.

Eliot’s discriminating atavism had led him to the age of Dante—the age of Christendom,
when the ‘mind of Europe’ was ‘more or less one’, and when Greek, Latin and Hebrew thought
and sensibility were brought to maturity within the unified framework of Christian dogma.
Eliot’s increasing allegiance to this period of European history and culture is evident in his
criticism of the late 1920s and 1930s. The early issues of The Criterion had been the forum
for a controversy between Eliot and Middleton Murry over ‘romanticism’ and ‘classicism’.11
In 1927, however, the terms of the debate altered somewhat, and ‘what had begun as a dispute
over classicism and romanticism became one over mediaevalism and modernism’ (Margolis,

In ‘Towards a Synthesis’,12 Murry lauded the Renaissance as the age in which mankind
was released from the shackles of organized religion and thereby freed to stand alone in the
universe. The forms of thought which had characterized the Middle Ages were now obsolete,
he wrote; the faith which had been enshrined in the Thomist system, although of lasting his­
torical value, was for modern man no longer tenable. Eliot’s reply, ‘Mr. Middleton Murry’s
Synthesis’, was an emphatic defence of the continuing possibility of a belief in a system such
as Thomist philosophy.13 To Murry’s assertion that ‘We cannot return to St. Thomas’, Eliot
responds simply, ‘I do not see why not’.14

Eliot reinforced this view by inviting noted neo-Thomist thinkers and mediaevalists to
contribute to his review. He had already published an article by Henri Massis, entitled ‘De­
fence of the West’, which had warned that the ‘soul of the West’ was in jeopardy because it
had ‘departed from its historical civilising order and its tradition’.15 In the July 1932 issue,
Hermann Broch argued in ‘Disintegration of Values’ that:16

The Middle Ages possessed the ideal centre of values . . . a supreme value to
which all other values were subordinated: the belief in the Christian God. Cos­
mogony was as dependent on that central value . . . as man himself; man with
all his activities formed a part of that world–order which was merely the reflected
image of an ecclesiastical hierarchy, the closed and finite symbol of an eternal and
infinite harmony.

This ‘centre’ had since been lost, Broch went on, so that now the only hope was a counter–
reformation which would restore the mediaeval faith (p.675). The same hope was affirmed


11A full account of this debate can be found in John D. Margolis' T.S. Eliot’s Intellectual Development: 1922–
1939 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp.52–67. Subsequent citations will be included in the
text.
12The Criterion, 5, no.3(July 1927), 294–313. In its seventeen–year history The Criterion underwent several
minor changes of name—The New Criterion, for instance, or The Monthly Criterion. Since these changes did
not affect the numbering of the volumes, the review will simply be referred to as The Criterion. Quotations
are from the collected edition, 18 vols (London: Faber & Faber, 1967).
13Eliot begins the essay with an account of his own recent reading of Aquinas.
16The Criterion, 11, no.45(Sept. 1932), 664–75 (p.665).
in ‘France’s Fight against Americanization’, an essay by Vicomte Léon de Poncins, who reiterated Massis’ earlier eulogy of mediaeval culture, and concluded, ‘it is towards a newer form of [the] spirit of the Middle Ages, that the great minds of the West... are slowly yet resolutely beginning to turn’ (p.354).

Eliot, who claimed for himself no expertise in history or sociology, appeared content to allow the opinions of these experts to define the stance of the review. Nevertheless, he espoused similar—if not identical—views in other contexts. In a radio–talk broadcast in 1932 Eliot lamented the fact that ‘religious faith has altered and weakened since the Middle Ages, until it is no longer the rule and standard of social as well as individual life’. Eliot’s belief that a recovery of mediaeval spirituality was both possible and necessary did not make him a thoroughgoing mediaevalist, however. The high esteem in which he held mediaeval society did not eclipse the merits of other ages, even of his own. In the same talk he noted the advances which Western civilization had made since the Middle Ages, and argued that these should not be forfeited in an attempt to restore mediaeval society in totum.

There were, moreover, other periods of history from which we could learn, and among them a period of English history. In ‘Thinking in Verse: A Survey of Early Seventeenth Century Poetry’, Eliot remarked, ‘In its religious sensibility the seventeenth century seems to me the third most interesting period in the history of Christianity; the others being the early period which saw the development of dogma... and the thirteenth’. Eliot’s admiration for the poets of the seventeenth century was more than apparent from his early criticism and poetry. However, in the late 1920s his attention turned from Donne and Marvell to the divines of their age: Hooker, Bramhall, and, in particular, Lancelot Andrewes.

Andrewes was bishop at Chichester, Ely and Winchester during the years 1605 to 1626. He was the most celebrated preacher of his day, and delivered the Christmas Day Sermon before the King from 1605 to 1624. Eliot, who had begun to read Andrewes as early as 1920, dedicated a volume of criticism to him in 1928, describing him in the opening essay as ‘the first great preacher of the English Catholic Church’ (FLA, p.15; emphasis added). In Andrewes, Eliot claimed, ‘Intellect and sensibility were in harmony’, with the result that his sermons ‘rank with the finest English prose... of any time’ (pp.16, 11). Eliot reserved special admiration for Andrewes’ pithy style and his delight in words which was nevertheless tied to a serious concern with communicating the deep truths of Christianity. ‘Andrewes takes a word and derives the world from it’, Eliot wrote, such that the reader finds ‘his examination of words terminating in the ecstasy of assent’ (p.20).

It becomes obvious in his account of Andrewes’ importance, however, that what Eliot...
valued in the bishop and in the religious sensibility for which he stood was an affinity with mediaeval Christendom. Comparing Andrewes with Donne, he remarked (p.25):

Of the two men, it may be said that Andrewes is the more medieval, because he is the more pure, and because his bond was with the Church, with tradition. His intellect was satisfied by theology and his sensibility by prayer and liturgy. Donne is the more modern . . . [He] is much less the mystic. 24

The greatness of Andrewes, and the greatness which he and those of a similar temper imparted to their age, stemmed from their firm connections with an earlier and wider tradition. 25 The voice of Andrewes, Eliot said, 'is the voice of a man who has a formed visible Church behind him, who speaks with the old authority and the new culture' (FLA, p.15). Eliot described Andrewes and Hooker as 'Europeans' as well as Englishmen; and it was for this reason, he said, that they were able to father a national Church (p.14). The highest praise he could offer to these Englishmen was to compare them with the great minds of European Christendom (FLA, pp.13–14):

The English Church has no literary monument equal to that of Dante, no intellectual monument equal to that of St. Thomas, no devotional monument equal to that of St. John of the Cross, no building so beautiful as the Cathedral of Modena or the basilica of St. Zeno in Verona. But there are those for whom the City churches are as precious as any of the four hundred odd churches in Rome . . . and for whom St. Paul's, in comparison with St. Peter's, is not lacking in decency; and the English devotional verse of the seventeenth century . . . finer than that of any other country or religion at the time.

The intellectual achievement and the prose style of Hooker and Andrewes came to complete the structure of the English Church as the philosophy of the thirteenth century crowns the Catholic Church. To make this statement is not to compare the ‘Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity’ with the ‘Summa’. The seventeenth century was not an age in which the Churches occupied themselves with metaphysics, and none of the writings of the Fathers of the English Church belongs to the category of speculative philosophy. But the achievement of Hooker and Andrewes was to make the English Church more worthy of intellectual assent.

Eliot nowhere spoke at length of what it was that he admired in the second period which he mentioned alongside the Middle Ages, ‘the early period’ of Christianity. He does suggest, however, that it was ‘the development of dogma’ which was the particular task of that age. The great fathers of the early Church, Sts Jerome, Gregory the Great, Ambrose and Augustine, succeeded in establishing orthodox doctrine in the face of numerous heresies and competing philosophies. In the course of several generations these Christian theologians combatted threats from within the Church—Arianism, Gnosticism, Manicheanism, Donatism,

24Eliot’s opinion of Andrewes’ ‘mysticism’ is illustrated in his description of the bishop as one (p.16) che in questo mondo, contemplando, gustò di quella pace (‘who in this world by contemplation tasted of that peace’). The lines are from Dante’s Paradiso XXXI, 110–11, where they are used to describe St Bernard’s intimacy with God.

25In the same year (1926), and again in comparison with Donne, Eliot also described as ‘mediaeval’ Sir John Davies, from whom he later derived some of the imagery of Four Quartets (OPP, p.136).
Pelagianism—and at the same time formulated a distinctively Christian creed and philosophy, borrowing from and adapting other religious and philosophical systems—notably Judaism, Neo-Platonism, and Stoicism—without compromising the centrality and uniqueness of Christian revelation.

They interpreted the world, not in terms of a previous body of doctrine, but in terms of a direct mystical apprehension of God. Their faith was an experiential faith, and their awareness of the Divine transcended and enveloped all other human thought and experience. It was to this unmediated perception of God in the world that Eliot referred in *The Idea of a Christian Society* when he wrote, 'We need to know how to see the world as the Christian Fathers saw it; and the purpose of reascending to origins is that we should be able to return, with greater spiritual knowledge, to our own situation' (*Idea*, p.62).

The theology of the Fathers was only fully enacted with the rise of Christendom. In the hands of the schoolmen Christian dogma was crystallized and reinforced by the creation of a seamless Christian world-view which so took hold of the European mind as to become a modification of it. As seventeenth-century England drew its strength from its mediaeval roots, so 'the early period' looked forward to the era in which its vision would pervade the whole of the known world.

For Eliot, then, the tradition which occupied the centre of European culture was that of the Holy Roman Empire. The greatest of earlier civilizations, the Roman Empire of Virgil, was at best a prefigurement of it; and the finest of subsequent European traditions—among them that of England under the Tudors and Stuarts—could best be measured against that earlier era. Here was a worthy base upon which to rebuild a culture and a literature: an all-embracing order—intellectual, political, theological, philosophical, literary—which (at least in retrospect and mediated through the fictional world of a poet of great genius) could approximate to reality.

### III

Eliot's gradual conversion to Christianity in the late 1920s is inseparable from his growing appreciation of Dante and his realization of the need to appropriate personally and artistically the essence of the order which upheld mediaeval Europe. He was baptized and confirmed into the Church of England in June of 1927, midway between the publication of 'The Hollow Men' and *Ash Wednesday*, poems which, in measuring the progress of Eliot's soul, lean heavily upon Dantean imagery. Instead of ancient myths, Eliot borrowed allegorical landscapes from the *Commedia* to give shape and order to these poems. 'The Hollow Men' takes on the atmosphere of Dante's account of Limbo in *Inferno* III, to which it alludes several times, while the setting of *Ash Wednesday* is strongly reminiscent of the Earthly Paradise, as it is described in the last cantos of the *Purgatorio*.

Eliot had used scenes from Dante's *Inferno* previously in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *The Waste Land*. In these later poems, however, the Dantean parallel is much more obtrusive; the borrowed settings are used as structural metaphors, and the allusion is strengthened with repeated and consistent correspondences. *Ash Wednesday*, moreover, is decidedly mediaeval in its imagery, with its secluded gardens, slotted window, piper and fiddles. Meanwhile, the influence of Frazer, Shakespeare, the metaphysical poets, and the classical

---

26 See 'Virgil and the Christian World' (1951), *OPP*, p.130.
Greek and Roman writers, though still discernable, is very much diminished, and is rivalled by that of other writers and poets whom Eliot found ‘mediaeval’ in outlook—Guido Calvacanti, John Davies, and Lancelot Andrewes. The ‘tradition’ in which Eliot’s poetry was to find its meaning was undergoing further refinement.

The present study is concerned with the ‘tradition’ which is implied by _Four Quartets_, the work in which Eliot’s refined and tempered atavism found its most complete expression. It was here that Eliot attempted to re-establish the best tradition of the ‘mind of Europe’ by imitating those aspects of Dante’s poetry and culture which he admired most and found most salutary. This is not to suggest that Eliot is writing a twentieth-century crib of the _Commedia_. There are other traditions whose significance to the _Quartets_ is undeniable—notably Eastern religion, and the philosophy of Heraclitus. Although I do not wish to over-simplify the role these influences play, it can be argued (and will be in Chapters 5 and 6) that they are included as parallels and foils to the central tradition of Christendom, in the same way that Dante himself included extraneous elements—figures from classical mythology, and features borrowed from Virgil’s account of the underworld—in the _Commedia_.

The age of Dante is at once the most pervasive and the most subtle influence on the _Quartets_. Of major importance for Eliot was Dante’s attitude towards his own governing ‘tradition’—the way in which he made use in his poetry of the philosophical, theological and literary forms of his day. On several occasions Eliot had praised Dante’s ability to integrate personal emotion into the universal scheme of Christian dogma, and to draw from his own private experiences, whether they be mystical, emotional or even erotic, a sense of participation in the order of God’s redemption of humanity. Eliot concluded that it was by linking human emotions to their final causes in God’s plan—a technique which mirrored the teleological method of St Thomas—that Dante’s poetry could offer ‘the most comprehensive, and the most ordered presentation of emotions that has ever been made’ (_SW_, p.168).27

It was this aspect of Dante’s poetry that Eliot hoped to imitate: an artistic form which could express significant personal emotion against the backdrop of a Christian philosophy. In 1930 he wrote in his preface to G. Wilson Knight’s _The Wheel of Fire_, ‘I like [poetry to have] a definite and dogmatic philosophy, preferably a Christian and Catholic one’.28 He was quick to point out, however, that this did not imply the subjection of the poetry to a philosophy or theology. It had long been a tenet of Eliot’s criticism that the genuine work of art creates a separate ‘world’ which is neither the world of quotidian reality nor that of any body of doctrine.29 Indeed, in ‘Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca’ (_SE_, p.138), he argued that Dante, ‘qua poet’:

_did not believe or disbelieve the Thomist cosmology or theory of the soul: he merely made use of it, or a fusion took place between his initial emotional impulses and a theory, for the purpose of making poetry._

Eliot attempted a more precise definition of the relationship between poetry and belief

27 Eliot noted elsewhere that the _Purgatorio_, the most ‘philosophical’ division of the _Commedia_, contained nevertheless the cantos of ‘the greatest personal intensity in the whole poem’ (_SE_, p.263). These cantos, which describe Dante’s penitence, form the backdrop to _Ash Wednesday_.


29 Of Jonson’s plays, he had written in 1919, ‘We cannot call a man’s work superficial when it is the creation of a world; a man cannot be accused of dealing superficially with the world which he himself has created; the superficies is the world. Jonson’s characters conform to the logic of the emotions of their world’ (_SE_, p.156). See also ‘Four Elizabethan Dramatists’ (_SE_, pp.111–12).
in his 1929 essay on Dante. The separate ‘world’ of the poem is constituted in part of the philosophical, theological and literary ideas with which its ‘initial emotional impulses’ fused. Thus, ‘In reading Dante, you must enter the world of thirteenth–century Catholicism’ (SE, p.257). Belief is not necessary to understand Dante, he went on; neither is it necessary to have read the Summa. However, ‘it is necessary to read the philosophical passages of Dante with the humility of a person visiting a new world, who admits that every part is essential to the whole’ (p.259).

The sole advantage that a Catholic may have over an agnostic in understanding the Commedia is the fact that ‘he has been instructed’ in the doctrines which inform this ‘new world’. The ‘humility’ required of the reader involves, not philosophical ‘belief’, but ‘poetic assent’—the adoption of ‘a state of mind in which one sees certain beliefs . . . as possible, so that we suspend our judgement altogether’ (SE, pp.257–59). Although the poetic world is to be distinguished from the belief–system which it uses, it is necessary for the reader, in attempting to understand the emotions which are the personal core of the poem, to understand—although not necessarily to believe—the theories in which those emotions found expression. Once ‘assent’ has been given to those doctrines, the reader may grasp the poem’s ‘entelechy’, the completion of its form as a self–contained artifact.30

For Eliot, Dante’s ability to maintain the delicate balance between dependence upon tradition and separateness from it was central to his greatness. The work of the Italian master came to represent for his twentieth–century pupil the perfection of poetic art, the completion of artifice which simultaneously reified and transcended the greatest theoretical formulations of the mind of Europe. Dante’s achievement would not have been possible, however, had he not had ‘the benefit of a mythology and a theology which had undergone a . . . complete absorption into life’ (SW, p.163). The form of the Commedia was transparent for its first readers because the tripartite universe, the heavenly spheres and the hierarchy of sins enjoyed a virtually complete acceptance in the contemporary European mind. Such a framework made possible the fusion of a comprehensive range of emotions with correlative ideas accessible to the reader.

Dante also benefited from a rich literary heritage. He was heir to a tradition which embraced writers and poets as diverse as Homer, Ovid, Plato, Lucretius, Cicero, Virgil, Augustine of Hippo, Boethius, Francis of Assisi and Bernard of Clairvaux, not to mention Aquinas himself. This tradition supplied him with a wealth of literary conventions and ‘topoi’ which would be immediately recognized by his readers, and which he could use and adapt at will. The world of the Commedia is mediated through a variety of commonplace images, symbols and thematic ideas which form internal orders within the larger framework of the poem. Thus Dante’s vision is expressed in the terms of a mystic pilgrimage, a courtly romance, and a scientific account of the natural universe. Added to this, the poem is a vehicle for philosophical and theological speculation, and a commentary on the moral and socio–political state of thirteenth–century Italy. The intense personal emotions of the poet—his transcendent longings, his sensual desires, his remorse and his anger—are fused with these entirely regular and traditional forms.

Four Quartets is, in several significant respects, an imitation of this poetic model; it is an attempt to continue the tradition, and to adapt it to a later era which had, by and large, abandoned the wellsprings of its culture. The sublety of Dante’s influence upon Four Quartets

30Eliot himself uses this term—disclaiming the precise Aristotelian definition, however—in ‘The Frontiers of Criticism’ (1956), OPP, p.110.
can be seen in Eliot’s use of a structural metaphor of commensurate transparency to Dante’s Thomist ‘mythology’. No single theme or system of metaphors could order a poem as wide in scope as *Four Quartets*, unless, like mediaeval Scholasticism, it enjoyed such wide acceptance that its presence would be in no way obtrusive. The Ptolemaic universe of St Thomas could no longer itself fulfill this role; and neither could the kind of primitive myth which (deprived of its redemptive ending) had given shape and order to *The Waste Land*, nor indeed the allegorical landscapes which had served the same function in the descriptions of isolated states of soul in ‘The Hollow Men’ and *Ash Wednesday*.

The equivalent which Eliot found was music, and specifically sonata–form, a structural principle as devoid of assigned connotative value as was possible. Within this most self-effacing of structures—a structure which did not in itself require of the reader any act of ‘belief’—Eliot was able to construct an autonomous poetic world. Rather than being determined by an external structure, the entelechy of *Four Quartets* is shaped from within by the sense of an ‘orchestrating’ mind which selects words, images, scenes and ideas and creates an imaginative ‘landscape’ out of them.

It is in the details of this ‘landscape’ that the pervasive influence of Dante’s age is to be discerned, and accordingly it is with the examination of these features that this study will be primarily concerned. Like the landscape of the *Commedia*, Eliot’s is presented in a series of parallel vistas spread out before the reader in the form of conventional topoi through which are expressed the complexes of thought and personal feeling which comprise the fictive mind of the poem. Although linked by a variety of internal correspondences, these topoi are held together primarily by the musical artifice of the poem itself.

An examination of the major topoi of *Four Quartets* reveals a striking similarity with those of the *Commedia*. Eliot’s poem too is an account of a mystic quest for meaning, and a quest which incorporates a personal core of remembered sensual feeling which played an important role in the poet’s earlier work. Like Dante, Eliot uses his verse as a medium for philosophical thought—in his case, it is primarily the philosophical nature of time that is discussed. Moreover, the world of the *Quartets* possesses a physical aspect which, though it lacks the precise and regular form of Dante’s physical universe, nevertheless highlights cosmological metaphors which closely resemble those of the *Commedia*.

Furthermore, Eliot adds specificity to this physical aspect by grounding his sequence of poems in his own personal landscapes and within his own society and culture. Each *Quartet* is associated with a particular place, a geographical ‘topos’: Burnt Norton, a secluded manor in the Cotswolds; East Coker, a small village in Somerset; the Dry Salvages, a group of rocks off the Massachusetts coast; and Little Gidding, a chapel and community–house in Huntingdonshire. Each of these in some way evokes the past—Eliot’s own past and that of his family,


32 Eliot admitted this in ‘The Frontiers of Criticism’ (*OPP*, p.106): ‘We cannot, of course, go back to the universe of Aristotle or of St. Thomas Aquinas’.

33 It was not completely devoid of meaning, however. The sonata–form upon which the *Quartets* are based is discussed in Chapter 6, p.191.
but also that of England, Europe and ultimately of the whole world. These four locations form the basis for an examination of personal and social values, to which the other topoi of the poem will add wider significance.

Within the *Quartets* the initial emotions associated with these locations are fused through the patterns of allusion and imagery with a poetic world defined by age-old traditions. Although Eliot's world is not that of 'thirteenth-century Catholicism', it looks for its point of reference again and again to Dante and mediaeval Europe—at least, to what Dante and mediaeval Europe stood for in Eliot's mind. The writers and philosophers and schools of thought to which Eliot alludes are representatives predominantly of the religious, philosophical and literary traditions which paralleled, culminated in, or modelled themselves retrospectively upon the axis age of Dante. Together, these influences constitute the major tradition in relation to which the *Quartets* find their meaning.34

Here we shall find the Greek philosophers—Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus—and the apologists of the Judaeo-Christian world—the writer of Ecclesiastes, the apostle John, Boethius, St Augustine and St Thomas. Here we shall also find the greatest traditions of Eastern thought. The *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhagavad-Gītā* will find a place alongside (although somewhat in the shadow of) the writings of those Christians who sought a mystical outworking of the Incarnation of Christ in their own lives: both those of the mediaeval era, Dame Juliana of Norwich, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and John of the Cross, and the later 'mediaevals', Lancelot Andrewes, Sir John Davies and Nicholas Ferrar. And above all we shall find Dante—poet, philosopher, lover of human and Divine beauty—guiding Eliot as he himself had been guided by Virgil, the exemplary poet of an earlier age.

---

34 This is not to dispute the presence and importance of other influences—Mallarmé, Shakespeare, Donne, Chapman, Sir Thomas Elyot, James Frazer, W.B. Yeats, D.H. Lawrence and others. The significance of these, I would argue, is limited to the details and incidentals of Eliot's vision. Within the text itself, and especially in the four sections of the lengthy appendix I have sought to collate those minor allusions and explain the significance of each to the larger schemes of the *Quartets*. 
Chapter 2

Four Landscapes

The geographical topoi of the Quartets secure the poems to their own time-frame. Nevertheless, in these locations—three of them English, and one of them North American—Eliot finds associations which point back to the experience and sensibility of former eras. The progression from the intimate garden-setting of Burnt Norton to the physically hostile but spiritually auspicious setting of Little Gidding indicates the poet's search for values, first of all in personal history, then in the history of a family, of a race, and finally in a religious and spiritual history which transcends time itself.

I  'Burnt Norton'

Burnt Norton is a manor house with an enclosed garden which is situated at the top of a steep wooded slope overlooking the vale of Evesham from the edge of the Cotswold escarpment. Its name commemorates an incident in the eighteenth century when Sir William Keyte, the owner of the original mansion, ended a life of notorious profligacy by razing the house and burning himself to death after he had been abandoned by the last in a succession of mistresses (Gardner, p.36). Eliot, however, was quite unaware of the chequered past of Burnt Norton when he visited it in the summer of 1934. For him, it was 'merely a deserted house and garden wandered into without knowing anything whatsoever about the history of the house' (Gardner, p.37). Eliot's poetic account of Burnt Norton is therefore based upon the initial impressions created by his serendipitous visit, and upon the circumstances which surrounded it, rather than the historical associations of the place itself.

Dame Helen Gardner, who attempted to retrace Eliot's steps, found the house—with some difficulty—at the end of a long private road. Before entering the garden, she notes (p.37), one must pass through 'a place where nothing can be heard but bird-song'. She continues (p.38):

Near the house, overlooking the garden, is a huge tree with 'figured leaves' on which, as Eliot did, one can watch the light at play. Passing through the rose-garden, down some steps, one comes upon a clipped hedge surrounding a large expanse of grass. Coming out of this, through a gap in the hedge, one finds oneself standing above a grassy bank and looking down on a big rectangular drained pool, 'dry concrete, brown-edged'.

The atmosphere of the garden in summer, she suggests, must have acted as a catalyst for the
poet's mind. 'The garden, in its stillness and beauty and strange remoteness from the world, stirred in Eliot profound memories and brought together disparate experiences and literary echoes' (p.38).

Many of those memories would have been tinged with sadness, for the early 1930s were years of intense turmoil for Eliot. As well as the strains of his work and of his vocation as a literary editor, critic and poet, life with his first wife, Vivien, had taken an immense toll of his physical and emotional reserves. They had married on impulse in 1915, after a brief courtship, and without informing either set of parents. Within a few months, however, Eliot had begun to appreciate the seriousness of his wife's nervous condition, and the weight of responsibility which now lay upon his shoulders. Vivien's condition—no doubt exacerbated by the personal neuroses which contributed to Eliot's own nervous breakdown—grew progressively worse. Throughout the 1920s she underwent extensive courses of treatment and made frequent sojourns to sanitoria, but with little, if any, lasting effect.

By 1931 the strain upon Eliot was becoming intolerable. At the end of an essay on Heywood he quoted, with a 'twinge of personal feeling' (SE, p.181):

O God! O God! that it were possible
To undo things done; to call back yesterday.

In September 1932 Eliot left England to take up the Charles Eliot Norton professorship at Harvard, and while there he filed an official deed of separation from Vivien. He returned at the end of June 1933 to the life of a virtual recluse. For the following eighteen months he avoided London (and Vivien) as much as possible. He spent much of his time at a number of 'retreats' in the country, endeavouring to come to terms with the remorse and sense of failure which was to hound him for years to come.

In the summer of 1934 he was staying at the house of some American friends, Dr and Mrs Carroll Perkins, at Chipping Campden in the Cotswolds. It was from here that he set out towards Burnt Norton; and it is almost certain that he was not alone. This circumstance—more than any other—appears to have shaped Eliot's experience at Burnt Norton and the account he gives of it in the eponymous poem; for his companion in many of his walks was Emily Hale, niece to the Perkins, and a close friend of Eliot's from his student days. There is strong evidence to suggest that Miss Hale had been the object of an infatuation which befell the young Eliot at Harvard and inspired the 'hyacinth girl' episode of The Waste Land.

'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
'They called me the hyacinth girl.'
—Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not

1 She was finally committed to a mental hospital in 1938, and died there in 1947.

2 Various accounts of this time in Eliot's life have been published; the most complete is found in Chapters 9–12 of Peter Ackroyd's unofficial biography of Eliot.

3 Some of the details of Burnt Norton correspond to the Perkin's own garden. This is especially true of the scene described in Part IV (Gardner, p.36).

Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

The passage describes a brief moment of ecstasy when the poet is given an opportunity for an intense communion—romantic, certainly, but also spiritual—with the hyacinth girl. The incident is preserved only in the poet’s memory, and is juxtaposed in his mind with his present situation, imprisoned in a London flat with a neurotic and paranoid wife (the model for whom was undoubtedly Vivien herself). The incident in the hyacinth garden is thus a mocking reminder of a time when the opportunity for genuine human contact was lost.

In 1934 that opportunity—or one strongly reminiscent of it—was offering itself to Eliot once more. He had met Emily Hale again during his time in the United States in 1932–33—she may, indeed, have accompanied him on a short holiday in New Hampshire before his return to England in 1933 (Gardner, p.36, n.20)—and now she had come to stay with the Perkins over the summer months of 1934. So close did they seem during this period, in fact, that they were often introduced as ‘a couple’. (Peter Ackroyd notes that Miss Hale herself considered the friendship as virtually an engagement.) Now that Eliot had extricated himself from a burdensome marriage, the temptation to try to rekindle a failed adolescent relationship and thereby return to the past, as it were, and make a different choice, must have preyed upon his mind. The concealed children and the shadowy adult figures of Burnt Norton—images of ‘what might have been’—betray the intense longing for a reversion to a former state.

The emotional core of Burnt Norton was formed from the complex of feelings and impulses which were aroused as this lost opportunity was retendered. The poet himself suggests this by deliberately grafting the later experience onto that described in The Waste Land. The crucial phrase, ‘heart of light’, is repeated at a point more or less parallel to that in which it appeared in the earlier poem, and later the ‘moment in the rose-garden’ is placed alongside ‘the moment in the arbour where the rain beat’. This—added to the imitation of the five-part structure of The Waste Land—indicates that Burnt Norton was, at least to some extent, a conscious attempt to retrieve and to recast the experience at the centre of The Waste Land.

The spiritual aspect of the experience is attested in the epigraph to ‘La Figlia Che Piange’, a poem published in Prufrock and Other Observations (1917) which appears to be an earlier poetic rendering of the ‘hyacinth girl experience’ (the poem is quoted in Chapter 4, p.65). Eliot prefaces the poem with a quotation from the first book of the Aeneid where Aeneas meets Venus, his mother, disguised as a young girl. Sensing an air of divinity about the maiden and suspecting that she may be a goddess, Aeneas asks: ‘O quam te memorem virgo’—‘What shall I call you, maiden?’ Eliot borrows Aeneas’ question to introduce his own account of the sudden realization of a more than human passion.

The connection with the earlier incident is more explicit in earlier drafts of the poem, where the husband replies to his wife’s question, ‘Do you remember/ Nothing?’ (ll.122–23) with the words ‘I remember/ The hyacinth garden. Those are pearls that were his eyes, yes!’ (Facs, p.19).

Gardner notes the strong link between Eliot’s poem ‘New Hampshire’ and Burnt Norton, and says that Eliot himself acknowledged the earlier poem as a source for the first Quartet (pp.36n., 39).

Eliot’s allegiance to the Anglican Church, which at that time frowned upon divorce, was, of course, at stake.

Lyndall Gordon notes that an early manuscript poem describes a figure reminiscent of Emily Hale, and features, like Burnt Norton, a bird and a lotus (Gordon, p.56). Numerous allusions and parallels link the later Quartets to The Waste Land; the most obvious of these are the wounded god, the river and the sea, death by water, fishermen, the meeting with a ghost, blindness, the secluded chapel, the broken king and purgation by fire.
Burnt Norton was not Eliot's first attempt to describe his experience in the rose-garden, however. The genesis of the first movement of the poem consisted of lines which were originally included in one of the temptation-scenes of Murder in the Cathedral,\(^{11}\) where Thomas Becket faces the temptation—remarkably similar to Eliot's own—to try to return in time by reversing an earlier decision. Becket realizes that such a response is insufficient; we cannot 'regain' the past by succumbing to nostalgic longing, but—as the remainder of the play illustrates—by devoted action we can incorporate it into God's eternal plan and thus alter its meaning.

The focus of Burnt Norton is the poet's attempt to come to similar terms with his own past. The question posed in the garden at Burnt Norton is whether he should seek the immediate consolations offered by nostalgia, or attempt to transcend the physical and personal circumstances of both 'the moment in the rose-garden' and 'the moment in the arbour when the rain beat', in order to pursue their spiritual cause. The course of action which Eliot himself was to choose did not become apparent for several years. The liaison with Emily Hale was resumed at the Perkins' house every summer for the next four years (excepting 1936 when Eliot visited her in the United States), and the 'couple' maintained a steady correspondence (eventually totalling some two thousand letters) which abated only after Eliot's remarriage in 1957 (Gordon, p.55; Ackroyd, pp.229, 320).

In the poem, however, the decision to seek a spiritual consummation is made with less equivocation. Eliot fuses his 'initial emotion' with traditions of thought and expression which elevate it far beyond a purely personal significance, and in so doing creates out of the landscape of a secluded country garden a complex and multilayered symbol of that universal meaning which comprehends human communion.

II 'East Coker'

The village of East Coker is situated in Somerset, not far from the town of Yeovil, and is the ancestral home of the Eliot family. The poet visited it in August 1937 and again in the late summer of 1939. He took a few photographs, and surveyed the ancient dancing-circle, the thirteenth-century church of St Michael, and the graveyard where his ancestors are buried, though the inscriptions on many of the graves are indecipherable.\(^{12}\) The description Eliot gives—the deep lane, the sultry heat, and the dancing circle—is confirmed as accurate by several commentators,\(^{13}\) although the imagery of the poem is drawn from a number of sources. Eliot wrote to Professor H.W. Häusermann, 'I think that the imagery of the first section (though taken from the village itself) may have been influenced by recollections of 'Germelshausen', which I have not read for many years'.\(^{14}\) Eliot refers to a short story written in 1862 by Friedrich Gerstäcker, which concerns a traveller who encounters by chance the revelry of the long dead

---

\(^{11}\)See Chapter 3, p.41.

\(^{12}\)The information is contained in Sir Rupert Hart-Davis' speech at Eliot's memorial service in 1965, and is quoted (from a pamphlet available at St Michael's Church, East Coker) by Nancy Duvall Hargrove in Landscape as Symbol in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1978), p.148. Subsequent references will be included in the text.

\(^{13}\)The most complete account of the setting is Hargrove's (pp.147–49).

inhabitants of a village cursed by the Pope to arise from the mire for one day every century.\textsuperscript{15} The dance-scene of \textit{East Coker}, with its insistent images of earth and the cycle of the seasons, seems also reminiscent of those described in Thomas Hardy's Wessex novels.

The impetus for writing \textit{East Coker}, however, was given, not by the poet's visit, nor by these literary echoes, but by the onset of the Second World War. Eliot recounts:\textsuperscript{16}

Even \textit{Burnt Norton} might have remained by itself if it hadn't been for the war, because I had become very much absorbed in the problems of writing for the stage . . . . The war destroyed that interest for a time: you remember how the conditions of our lives changed, how much we were thrown in on ourselves in the early days? \textit{East Coker} was the result.

The 'early days' to which Eliot referred were the months which became known as 'the phoney war', the period between the German invasion of Poland in September of 1939 and the invasion of the Low Countries in May 1940.

Eliot's mood in the months leading up to the declaration of war is indicated by his note in the final edition of \textit{The Criterion} in January 1939. He attributed the closure of the review to 'a depression of spirits so different from any other experience of fifty years as to be a new emotion'.\textsuperscript{17} In the following March, he elaborated upon this 'emotion' in \textit{The Idea of a Christian Society} (p.64):

The feeling which was new and unexpected was a feeling of humiliation, which seemed to demand an act of personal contrition, of humility, repentance and amendment; what had happened was something in which one was deeply implicated and responsible. It was not, I repeat, a criticism of the government, but a doubt of the validity of a civilisation.

The emotions associated with that doubt appear to have turned Eliot's thoughts to \textit{East Coker}, and from there to two of his ancestors whose graves he would not have found in its churchyard.

Sir Thomas Elyot, although the grandson of one Simon Elyot or Eliot of East Coker, died and was buried in Cambridgeshire in 1546. He was a baronet, ardent monarchist, advisor to Henry VIII, and member of the circle of humanists influenced by Erasmus and Pico della Mirandola, who counted Thomas More as chief among their worthies. He was tireless in his endeavours to augment the English language as a medium for learned discourse, which in his day was normally written in Latin,\textsuperscript{18} but he is best remembered for \textit{The Boke Named the Governour}, an educational treatise on the nurturing of 'gentlemen', from which the description of the rustic dance in \textit{East Coker} I is adapted.

\textsuperscript{15}Eliot may have come across the story when he learnt German as a youth. Frederick W.C. Lieder of Harvard University includes it in a volume of stories which, he says, have 'for more than half a century . . . consistently appealed to teacher and pupil' (\textit{Popular German Stories} (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1934), p.v).


\textsuperscript{17}\textit{The Criterion}, 18, no.71(Jan. 1939), p.274.

What Elyot represented for his distant descendant, however, was the ambiguity of humanistic ‘wisdom’. The Renaissance had, on the one hand, restored the appreciation of the best traditions of human thought and endeavour—the great literature and philosophy of the Greeks and Romans. It had done this, however, by highlighting the achievements of humanity to the extent that perfection seemed within its grasp. It was at this point, Eliot thought, that the humanism of the Renaissance caused Western civilization to take a wrong turn.

In ‘Second Thoughts about Humanism’ (1929) Eliot declared himself in agreement with the philosopher-poet, T.E. Hulme, who arraigned the early humanists for their abandonment of one of the foundational doctrines of the mediaeval Christian world: Original Sin. In refusing to ‘believe any longer in the radical imperfection of . . . Man’, humanism—even religious humanism—ultimately excluded the Divine (SE, p.490). This crucial break with the mediaeval world-view was to lead eventually to the breakdown in English society which brought about the Civil War, and the subsequent establishment, and failure, of the Puritan Commonwealth. It was after this failure that Andrew Eliot set out from East Coker for the Massachusetts Bay Colony, filled with the same ‘doubt of the validity of a civilisation’ which would afflict a later Eliot. That great experiment would also fail, although Andrew Eliot would not live to see the New England which his descendant would forsake.

On several occasions Eliot spoke disparagingly of the Puritan ethic which had been the basis of the society in which he was raised. It was, no less than the humanism of the Renaissance, a displacement of Original Sin. Even as unholy a man as Baudelaire, Eliot wrote, perceived the reality of ‘moral Good and Evil which are not natural Good and Bad or Puritan Right and Wrong’ (SE, p.429). ‘All that concerned my family’, Eliot confided to a friend, ‘was ‘right and wrong,’ what was ‘done and not done’. ‘Puritanism does not believe in sin’, he claimed, ‘it merely believes that certain things must not be done’.20

In choosing East Coker as the landscape for the second of the Quartets Eliot was examining critically both his personal roots and the roots of his culture. The doubt which he was entertaining with regards to civilization seemed to demand of him ‘an act of personal contrition, of humility, repentance and amendment; what had happened was something in which one was deeply implicated and responsible’ (Idea, p.64). It seemed to demand that he scrutinize the origins of the malaise, as a prelude to the attempt, by renunciation, to restore the tradition from which he, his ancestors and his society had departed. Eliot’s ashes now lie in the church of St Michael in East Coker, under a memorial plaque which reads:21

‘in my beginning is my end’

Of your charity
Pray for the repose
Of the soul of
Thomas Stearns Eliot
Poet
‘in my end is my beginning’.

20The statement is made in a note now held in the Bodleian Library, and is quoted in Gordon, p.126.
21A photograph of the commemorative stone is published between pages 170 and 171 of Hargrove’s book.
III  ‘The Dry Salvages’

The landscape of *The Dry Salvages* differs in several important respects from those which inspired the previous two *Quartets*. Unlike *Burnt Norton* and *East Coker*, the scene described in *The Dry Salvages* is remote both from the place and from the time of its composition. It is the landscape of Eliot’s childhood—an American landscape, cut off both physically and culturally from Europe and its millenia of recorded history, and closer to the ‘gods’ who were mankind’s first objects of worship.22

It is a scene comprised of two separate localities, urban St Louis and coastal New England, dominated by the Mississippi and the Atlantic respectively. These two settings formed the backdrop to the first twenty-three years of Eliot’s life, and had a profound effect upon his earliest sense of identity. The reticence which, in later years, characterized his attitude towards the disclosure of biographical details seemed to have been suspended when it came to recounting his earliest (and happiest) experiences. Indeed, Eliot regarded these memories as of continuing importance to the development of his character. ‘I find that as one gets on in middle-life’, he wrote in 1930, ‘the strength of early associations and the intensity of early impressions become more evident; and many little things, long forgotten, recur’.23

No images feature so prominently as do the river and the sea in the accounts which Eliot gave of his most enduring childhood memories. ‘My personal landscape is a composite’, Eliot explained in later life:24

For nine months of the year my scenery was almost exclusively urban, and a good deal of it seedily, drably urban at that. My urban imagery was that of St. Louis, upon which that of Paris and London have been superimposed. It was also, however, the Mississippi, as it passes between St. Louis and East St. Louis in Illinois: the Mississippi was the most powerful feature of Nature in that environment. My country landscape, on the other hand, is that of New England, of coastal New England, and New England from June to October.

*The Dry Salvages* opens with an account of the Mississippi river:

> I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river
> Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable,
> Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier;
> Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyer of commerce;
> Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.
> The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten
> By the dwellers in cities—ever, however, implacable.

---

22 Eliot had visited the locations described in the poem several times since he had emigrated to England; the most recent occasion had been in 1936. However, the poem is deliberately set in the late nineteenth-century—the era of ‘the winter gaslight’, and (for Eliot) of ‘the nursery bedroom’. One possible exception is the detail of the bell-buoy, one of which was moored half a mile to the northeast of the Dry Salvages in 1935; see Samuel Eliot Morison *The Dry Salvages and the Thacher Shipwreck*, *American Neptune*, 25(Oct. 1965), 233–47 (p.234).


24 ‘The Influence of Landscape upon the Poet’, *Dædalus* 89, no.2(Spring 1960), 420–22 (pp.421-22).
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder
Of what men choose to forget.

'I feel that there is something in having passed one's childhood beside the big river, which is incommunicable to those who have not', Eliot wrote in 1930; 'Of course my people were Northerners and New Englanders, and of course I have spent many years out of America altogether; but Missouri and the Mississippi have made a deeper impression on me than any other part of the world'.

The depth of that impression is illustrated in Eliot's description of the Mississippi in his introduction to Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, which is equally as illuminating for his own poem as it is for Twain's novel (pp.xii-xiii):

A river, a very big and powerful river, is the only natural force that can wholly determine the course of human peregrination . . . the river with its strong, swift current is the dictator to the raft or to the steamboat. It is a treacherous and capricious dictator. At one season, it may move sluggishly in a channel so narrow that, encountering it for the first time at that point, one can hardly believe that it has travelled already for hundreds of miles, and has yet many hundreds of miles to go; at another season it may obliterate the low Illinois shore to a horizon of water, while in its bed it runs with a speed such that no man or beast can survive in it. At such times, it carries down human bodies, cattle and houses. At least twice at St. Louis, the western and eastern shores have been separated by the fall of bridges, until the designer of the great Eads bridge devised a structure which could resist the floods. In my own childhood, it was not unusual for the spring freshet to interrupt railway travel . . . . The river is never wholly chartable; it changes its pace, it shifts its channel, unaccountably.

For Eliot the river represents the indomitable power of the natural environment. Throughout Twain's novel, he continues (p.xv):

we are continually reminded of the power and terror of Nature, and the isolation and feebleness of Man . . . . Mark Twain is a native, and the River God is his God. It is as a native that he accepts the River God, and it is the subjection of Man that gives to Man his dignity. For without some kind of God, Man is not even very interesting.

The description of the river in *The Dry Salvages* is characterized by the same sense of religious awe. Mankind is in 'subjection' to the inhuman forces of his landscape, not only because of their 'seasons and rages', but also because it is only in relation to them that he has any sense of personal 'dignity' or integrity. 'The river is within us', the poet affirms; it is the anthropomorphic god which is the source both of the identity and of the insecurity of those who live beside it.

The river may have been the young Eliot's earliest 'god'; but his final homage (like the river's) was due to the sea. The river may be 'within us', but the sea 'is all about us'; it represents that force which encloses and surpasses Nature, the imponderable ultimacy of 'time not

---

25 *St. Post Dispatch; ‘The Eliot Family and St. Louis’, p.29.*
our time' which constantly gives, and takes away, the moments in which the natural world exists. As a boy, Eliot spent several months every year at his parents' summer-house in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Many of his formative experiences were associated with the New England coastline, the fishing-port of Gloucester and the waters off Cape Ann where he and his brother Henry were taught to sail by a local fisherman.26

Eliot was deeply impressed by the life of the Gloucester fishermen, whose lot of constant toil and danger he adopts as an image of the whole of mankind in The Dry Salvages. In his preface to James Connolly's Fishermen of the Banks he wrote:27

All year round, and on every day of the week except Friday and Sunday, which are unlucky, schooners are setting out for their cruises of several weeks. There is no harder life, no more uncertain livelihood, and few more dangerous occupations. Since the introduction of the 'Knockabout rig'—the schooner with a long bow and no bowsprit—there are fewer losses at sea; but Gloucester has many widows, and no trip is without anxiety for those at home.

'The Dry Salvages', which, as the prefatory note to the poem explains, is 'a small group of rocks, with a beacon, off the N.E. coast of Cape Ann, Massachusetts',28 is a contributing factor to the anxiety of the Gloucester residents. These rocks, along with two adjacent groups—the Little Salvages and Flat Ground—are a constant hazard to shipping. Eliot's cousin, Rear-Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison, notes that 'when an easterly gale is raging the entire group... becomes a seething mass of foam, as heavy swells from the Atlantic break and roar over it; and at all times it is a menace to navigators attempting to round Cape Ann'.29 For the youth who had steered his craft respectfully around these rocks, they were the perfect image of the ambivalence of the sea:

On a halcyon day it is merely a monument,
In navigable weather it is always a seamark
To lay a course by: but in the sombre season
Or the sudden fury, is what it always was.

This was not the first time that Eliot had attempted to render his memory of the group of rocks in verse. The manuscript version of Part IV of The Waste Land includes a long narrative

26 Eliot attested to the importance of these impressions in an obviously autobiographical passage in The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (pp.78–79): 'There might be the experience of a child of ten, a small boy peering through sea-water in a rock-pool, and finding a sea-anemone for the first time: the simple experience (not so simple, for an exceptional child, as it looks) might lie dormant in his mind for twenty years, and reappear transformed in some verse-context charged with great imaginative pressure'. The verse context was to be The Dry Salvages: 'The pools where it offers to our curiosity/ The more delicate algae and the sea anemone'.

27 London: Faber & Gwyer, 1928, pp.vii–viii; quoted in Gardner, p.50. Eliot praises the veracity of Connolly's account of Gloucester life above Kipling's Captains Courageous, which, though set in Gloucester, was written from an outsider's view of the town and its people.

28 Eliot appended the note at the insistence of his friend John Hayward, who was confused by the title, assuming it to refer to undamaged material salvaged from a ship-wreck (Gardner, pp.120–21). Hayward's assumption should not to be discounted, however, for Eliot was without doubt aware of the punning on the word 'salvage' (the poem speaks, for instance, of flotsam deposited on a beach) and of the etymological connection between it and the word 'salvation'. For a more elaborate account of the associations of the title, see Eleanor Cook, 'The Senses of Eliot's Salvages', Essays in Criticism, 34, no.4 (Oct. 1984), 309–318.

29 Morison, pp.233–34. Morison gives a very full account of the Dry Salvages and of the geographical and historical details to which the poem alludes.
account of a doomed sea-voyage which begins at the Dry Salvages (Facs, pp.55–69). The passage—which is echoed repeatedly in The Dry Salvages—begins in a mood of optimism (p.55):

Kingfisher weather, with a light fair breeze,
Full canvas, and the eight sails drawing well.
We beat round the cape and laid our course
From the Dry Salvages to the eastern banks.
A porpoise snored upon the phosphorescent swell,
A triton rang the final warning bell
Astern, and the sea rolled, asleep.

Soon, however, the sea turns against the ship:

So the crew moaned, the sea with many voices
Moaned all about us, under a rainy moon,
While the suspended winter heaved and tugged,
Stirring foul weather under the Hyades.30

The narrative culminates in the destruction of both vessel and crew, and concludes with the account of the drowning and decomposition of ‘Phlebas the Phoenician’ which eventually comprised ‘Death by Water’.

The theme of these final lines is taken up again in The Dry Salvages where Eliot speaks of the unending destruction wreaked upon humanity by the sea:

It tosses up our losses, the torn seine,
The shattered lobsterpot, the broken oar
And the gear of foreign dead men.

Like the river, the image of sea in The Dry Salvages is deeply etched into the poet’s sense of identity, but also calls that identity into question and threatens it with dissolution.

The intense irony of these images is allayed, however, by a personal and historical significance in the landscape of The Dry Salvages, for Eliot believed (erroneously) that his ancestor Andrew Eliot had been a passenger aboard a ship which had struck the rocks off Cape Ann and grounded upon a nearby island.31 Eliot told John Hayward that the Dry Salvages happened to have ‘just the right denotation and association for my purpose’ (Gardner, p.120), and this link with the setting of the previous Quartet was obviously part of that purpose. East Coker had concluded with the elder Eliot’s search for:

a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise.

30 Eliot is here adapting Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’ (II.55–56): ‘the deep/ Moans round with many voices’. There is a more general debt to Dante’s account of Ulysses’ last voyage in Inferno XXVI, which Eliot praised above Tennyson’s in his 1929 essay on Dante (SE, pp.247–51).

31 Morison, pp.234, 246. Eliot also recounted in a letter to Rear-Admiral Morison that he had himself been stranded on an island off Cape Ann for a couple of days (p.247).
Now *The Dry Salvages* was enacting the voyage which the poet was taking, back across the waters in search of 'significant soil'. Before reading the third *Quartet* to a New England audience in 1960, Eliot commented:32

You will notice, however, that this poem begins where I began, with the Mississippi, and that it ends, where I and my wife expect to end, at the parish church of a tiny village in Somerset.

IV ‘Little Gidding’

Little Gidding is the name of a tiny village in Huntingdonshire, the site of a community founded in 1626 by Nicholas Ferrar (1592–1637). It is set in remote countryside, and is comprised of a farmhouse, a small number of cottages, and a chapel. Ferrar’s raised tomb is situated before the door of the chapel, and above the lintle of the door an inscription reads, ‘This is none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven’ (Hargrove, p.186). After showing great promise in his early career as a scholar and *homme d’affaires*, Ferrar abandoned public life and gathered about him a group of about thirty relatives and friends at Little Gidding for the purposes of forming a household which would seek to embody the Christian faith in a life of communal discipline, devotion and service. Chief among the community’s many ideals was the abolition of the distinction between the sacred and the secular; all life belonged to God, and no aspect of human existence was so mean as to be irrelevant to the practice of Christianity. Ferrar himself persistently refused to proceed from the diaconate to the priesthood, and opposed the separation of Christians into clergy and laity.

Among the earliest accounts of the community’s ‘constant and methodical service of God’ is that found in Izaak Walton’s *Life of George Herbert* (1670). Herbert was a lifelong friend of Ferrar’s (it was to him that Herbert entrusted *The Temple* shortly before his death) and a regular visitor to Little Gidding. As well as the daily prayers at six, ten and four, the Ferrar household maintained a constant ‘watch’ of prayers and hymns through the night, and ‘did most of them keep Lent and all ember weeks strictly, both in fasting and using all those mortifications and prayers that the Church hath appointed to be then used’. Moreover, the community practised strict frugality in its lifestyle and was noted for its relief of the poor of the locality.33

Although no Anglican Arcadia (Ferrar’s sister-in-law, Bathsheba, lived in constant rebellion against the disciplined life imposed upon her), the community at Little Gidding reintroduced the monastic traditions of simplicity and austerity into the English Church. As well as George Herbert, several other noted figures were drawn to the Ferrar household—Richard Crashaw, for instance, gives an account of the community in ‘A Description of a Religious House’. No guest was as renowned as Charles I, however, who visited the community in 1633 in peacetime and again ‘at nightfall’ in 1642 when he was fleeing from the Roundheads after the battle of Naseby. For this, and other reasons, Little Gidding was a scandal to the Puritans; the chapel with its candles and liturgical ornaments—among them a shining bronze eagle-lectern—seemed an enclave of the worst kind of Popery. Finally, in 1646, the community was dispersed by the Puritan soldiery, and the chapel sacked.

32 ‘The Influence of Landscape upon the Poet’, p.422.
For the next two centuries it appeared that the memory of Nicholas Ferrar's 'experiment' had been all but erased. Interest in the community was rekindled, however, with the publication of J.H. Shorthouse's historical novel *John Inglesant* (1881), which gave an account of the Ferrar household and of the king's visit. The novel was immensely popular, and sold steadily throughout the last decades of the nineteenth century, and it is unlikely that such a well-known work on a religious subject did not penetrate the Eliot household in St Louis. *John Inglesant* was republished in 1927, the tercentenary of the founding of the Little Gidding community, and was quickly joined by two new historical novels, Tresidder Sheppard's *Queen Dick* (1929), and Rose Macaulay's *They Were Defeated* (1932), which gave account of Little Gidding.

The inspiration for Eliot's first visit to Little Gidding—in May 1936, on 'the only really lovely day' of the spring (*Gardner*, p.35)—was probably given by another fictional rendering of these events. Eliot's friend George Every had sent him the drafts of a verse-play he had written entitled *Stalemate—The King at Little Gidding*. Helen Gardner gives a short account of Every's play, and suggests that it influenced Eliot in its linking of fire with Little Gidding and in its treatment of the notion of victory and defeat which Eliot takes up in *Little Gidding* III. In the play, Crashaw suggests that the king's sole option is to leave behind 'the conflagration of the forest fire' and flee to France. Ferrar takes up Crashaw's metaphor, asking, 'Would you walk away or walk through the fire?' Suffering must be endured, he continues, 'to find the meaning that God intends in it . . . For God has a meaning in defeat' (*Gardner*, p.63).

Part of the appeal to Eliot of this period of English history was its discovery of significance even in the defeat of a good cause. In 'The Minor Metaphysicals: from Cowley to Dryden', Eliot commented:

> The Jacobean—Caroline period has a more civilised grace, and a background of religious belief which casts seriousness and dignity over their lightest lines. It is not insignificant that the monarch who gives his name to the age is dignified with the style of Martyr. On all sides, it was an age of lost causes, and unpopular names, and forsaken beliefs, and impossible loyalties . . . . When I speak of the particular seriousness of the pre—Restoration I am not thinking of one side rather than another: I include Milton, and Bunyan and Baxter as of that age, as men who knew the beauty of life and the possibility of martyrdom and sacrifice for a cause.

Eliot had pursued the same theme in his essay on Bradley in 1927 (*SE*, p.449):

> If we take the widest and wisest view of a Cause, there is no such thing as a Lost Cause because there is no such thing as a Gained Cause. We fight for lost causes because we know that our defeat and dismay may be the preface to our successors' victory, though that victory itself will be temporary; we fight rather to keep something alive than in expectation that anything will triumph.

Eliot's interest in Little Gidding seems also to have stemmed from the precise nature of the values which its inhabitants fought 'to keep alive'. In the October 1932 edition of *The Criterion* Eliot published 'Nicholas Ferrar and George Herbert', an article by T.O. Beachcroft.

---

34 Eliot had this edition in his library (*Gardner*, p.61).
36 *The Listener*, 3, no.65(9 April, 1930), 641–42 (p.641).
which noted a clear debt to Lancelot Andrewes in the round of services practised at Little Gidding. Ferrar would have heard many of Andrewes' sermons at the chapel in Whitehall, and, according to Beachcroft, he was to become the 'channel' for 'Bishop Andrewes's influence on the reconstruction of English religious life, both in public and private' (p.27). Thus, in choosing Little Gidding as the landscape for the final Quartet, Eliot was invoking the spiritual legacy of two men who spoke 'with the old authority and the new culture' (FLA, p.15).

Eliot was also seeking to transcend the personal 'emotion' which had been the starting-point for the previous Quartets. The remote chapel was a place without any connections to his own past life or that of his family. It was 'an escape from personality' and its private symbols and significances, and a deliberate association with a public symbol of the survival of the mediæval Christian spirit. Towards the end of his life, Eliot praised Ferrar as an 'exemplar of High Churchmanship' and described his domestic life at Little Gidding as one which 'approached that of a religious community'. The poem itself speaks of it as an 'intersection of the timeless with time', a place of communion between the human and the divine, 'where prayer has been valid'. For Eliot, the community at Little Gidding represented—even, and perhaps especially, in its dissolution—that perfection of order 'which, if we keep it in our lives, leads us to God'. Ferrar died in December 1637 and is remembered by the Anglican Church as 'Nicholas Ferrar, Deacon' on December 1. It is certainly no coincidence that Little Gidding was first published separately on December 1, 1942, and that its opening passage describes a scene which in midwinter has been transformed into spring by the 'blossom' of snow.

---

37 The Criterion, 12, no.46(Oct. 1932), 24–42. Beachcroft also notes that Ferrar was influenced by the Spanish mystics (p.27). The last two issues of The Criterion printed positive reviews of two books about Nicholas Ferrar: A.L. Maycock's Nicholas Ferrar of Little Gidding (18, no.70(Oct. 1938), 154–57), and Bernard Blackstone's edition of The Ferrar Papers (18, no.71(Jan. 1939), 366–71).

38 George Herbert, British Writers and their Work (London: Longmans Green & Co., 1962), p.10. Eliot describes a similar Christian community, Port-Royal des Champs—a 'devout, ascetic, thoroughgoing society, striving heroically in the midst of a relaxed and easy-going Christianity'—in his Introduction to Pascal's Pensées (SE, p.414). It too was destroyed by the force of its enemies; it was extirpated by the Jesuits in 1709 and its buildings razed the following year. See Chapter 5, p.126.
Chapter 3

On the Nature of Time

The opening lines of *Burnt Norton* introduce the first thematic 'topos' of the *Quartets*: the significance of life in time. This was not in any sense new ground for Eliot, whose previous poetry had been characterized by a preoccupation—which, at times, seemed almost an obsession—with temporality.1 As Nancy K. Gish comments in *Time in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot: A Study in Structure and Theme*, 'In all of Eliot's work no ideas are so consistently used, considered and later overtly discussed than ideas about time and the need to transcend it'.2

The approach to the question in the *Quartets* is more systematic than in the earlier poetry, but while various philosophers and schools of thought (chief among them Heraclitus, Plotinus and Bergson) have been isolated as sources for Eliot's mature time-vision, there has been some disagreement as to what, if any, conclusion with regards to time is finally affirmed. Graham Hough has argued that although 'several different conceptions of the nature of time are successively or repeatedly entertained', none is finally asserted or rejected.3 Others, however, have rightly taken issue with the imputation of equivocacy and have attempted to highlight a progression of ideas throughout the *Quartets*. Gish, in particular, has successfully refuted many of Hough's arguments—as well as those which place too great an emphasis upon one school of time-philosophy—and has delineated a general affirmation of the Christian view of time in *Four Quartets* (Gish, pp.91–120).

It is the intention of this chapter to show that Eliot's treatment of the theme of time in *Four Quartets* is neither equivocal nor univocal. Rather, it takes the form of a dialectic in which various time-philosophies are juxtaposed, each qualifying or repudiating the others, some eventually being discarded, while others survive as a hoped-for consummation. Although the *Quartets* endorse no single formulation as final and complete, their approach to the question bears a strong affinity with the methodology employed by St Augustine in his influential attempt to define a Christian view of time in the *Confessions*. Like Augustine, Eliot begins his exploration with logical speculation, and, after examining the various conflicting views of time, turns, through a theological faith which still admits profound philosophical

---

1Eliot had thought of epigraphing the sequence with a quotation from Mr Roker of *Pickwick Papers*: 'What a rum thing time is, ain't it, Neddy?' (Gardner, p.28).


scepticism, to find satisfaction in the voluntary affirmation of Christian dogma. Neither the saint nor the poet claims that his account is definitive; instead, both remain conscious that the ‘Christian’ conclusions they have reached depend upon prior faith, and are less a synthesis reached through the dialectical process than an ‘order’ imposed upon reality.

I The History of Time-Philosophy

The opening movement of each Quartet introduces one or more concepts of time by invoking the traditions of thought and imagery normally associated with them. These concepts are representative of the major schools of time-philosophy whose roots stretch back to pre-Socratic and early Eastern philosophy. The nature of time was a major consideration in early theories of physics and psychology, and Greek thought especially sustained a continuous tradition of speculation upon time, much of it, unfortunately, obscured by the mixing of mythology with metaphysics.

The fundamental question of early time-philosophy was: to what extent is time an illusion? Parmenides and his disciple Zeno—among the first to consider the question—expounded a static world-view which held that time and change were merely psychological phenomena and therefore had little or no ontological status. The whole of reality was, for them, unitary and motionless, and notions of ‘time’, ‘change’ and ‘movement’ could easily be dispelled by the application of logic.

In terms of human significance the Parmenidean view tended towards determinism; for it was as absurd to think of ‘changing’ the future as of ‘changing’ the past, when both were held merely to be manifestations of ‘what is’.

The school of Parmenides and Zeno was opposed by thinkers who held to a cyclical view of time which depicted it as an alternating rhythm whose ‘wave-length’ is determined by the interplay of opposing forces or principles. Some maintained this as a binary process (for example, Empedocles’ alternation of Love and Strife, a notion not dissimilar to the Taoist principles of Yin and Yang), while others took a more complex mechanistic approach which saw the flow of time as the central metaphysical fact. Chief among the latter was Heraclitus, whose formulation is of particular relevance to Four Quartets. He envisaged time as an endlessly repeated mutation of all matter in a cycle of the four elements, from fire through air and water to earth, and back again to water, air and fire. The whole of reality is as an ever-flowing river, he argued; nothing ever is, but rather, all things remain in a state of becoming. In this system, the ontological status of time was secure, since the substance of the universe was held to be in a state of constant cyclical change.

The cyclic view of time did not, however, solve the problem of determinism, for time could only be measured in terms of the periodic and momentary return of matter to a former state. Although change and progress were now admitted, they were confined within an unchanging framework. The Platonic and classical Eastern traditions offered a metaphysical duality as a solution. Both posited a timeless realm, a realm of perfect forms or of Brahmanic unity.

Several commentators have previously suggested Augustine as Eliot’s primary mentor. I am indebted especially to C.A. Patrides’ ‘T.S. Eliot and the Pattern of Time’ (Aspects of Time, C.A. Patrides, ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press; Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1976), pp.159–71) and to Vincent Miller’s ‘Eliot’s Submission to Time’ (Sewanee Review, 84, no.3(Autumn 1976), 448–64), although my account attempts to go further than either.

The philosophy of Heraclitus will be examined more fully in Chapter 6, section I.
which alone could be said to be real. Time as it was experienced was held to be illusory. Plato mitigated this somewhat in the creation-myths of the *Timaeus* (27e–39d), where he associated time with the orderly rotation of the heavenly spheres, which mimicked the unity of the Soul in their movements. Time was therefore an inferior shadow of timelessness, 'a movable image of Eternity', while Eternity itself 'abides in unity' (37–38). Plato's particular metaphysical commitments acknowledged no need for a more precise formulation, however.⁶

Eastern philosophy, however, invested the illusory time of the created world with a sense of evil. In early Indian thought, time, or *kāla*, was the power which was held to limit the manifestation of the eternal Brahman in matter. Accordingly, *kāla* became an integral part of the negative principles of both Hinduism—*māyā*, the illusion which obstructs our quest for true knowledge—and of Buddhism—*anicca*, the impermanence which is held to be the root of all desires, all wrongdoing, and therefore of all suffering. *Kāla* was often depicted as a demon holding in his grip the cycle of transmigration upon which all of mankind is bound.⁷

One of the major consequences of this dualist metaphysic was a profound pessimism with regards to temporal life. The status and worth of the individual was viewed in the context of the vast cycle of reincarnation in which each soul was constantly reborn into new bodies, its circumstances in one life being determined by its conduct (*karma*) in the previous. Release from this cycle was possible only through a life of devoted asceticism for which one might hope to be translated to a super-personal existence beyond time (or, in Plato's terms, to the world of ideal forms of which the time-space universe is a shadow). For the many who could not attain such release, there remained only the prospect of endless and purposeless rebirth. Both the Eastern and the Western traditions of metempsychosis envisaged a Great Year, a longer period of human history culminating in the destruction of the time-space world in a universal conflagration or similar catastrophe, after which the whole temporal process would begin again—presumably to be repeated to infinity.⁸

The strongest voice of dissent towards this conception of time was Aristotle's. In *Physics* IV (10–14) he exposes what he sees as the flaws in the arguments of his predecessors, which are based, not on empirical observation, but upon metaphysical presuppositions. However, the understanding of time which he substitutes is also limited and in places contradictory. Aristotle begins tentatively by recounting uncritically various arguments which suggest that time does not even exist. He then attempts a scientific definition of time, which he insists can best be thought of in mathematical terms as the infinite movement of an indivisible point proceeding at a constant rate, throughout the universe. From this point of view time is infinite and absolute.

He undercuts his argument in two ways, however. In trying to account for time as it is experienced he admits that although time is not illusory, it is contingent to some extent upon

---


⁷Rajendra Verma notes that *kāla* was associated with death itself in ancient Indian cosmogony; see *Time and Poetry in Eliot's 'Four Quartets'* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979), p.7.

⁸In Indian philosophy the Great Year, or *Kalpa*, consisted of four aeons, or *yugas*, ranging in length from 432000 to 4320000 years. See Benjamin Walker, *The Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism*, 2 vols (London: Allen & Unwin, 1968), I, pp.6–8. In the West, the notion was put forward by Heraclitus, Plato, and in particular by the Stoics, who claimed that, in each such Year, every human life and the whole course of history would be repeated without alteration. See John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, fourth edition (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1930), p.158; *Timaeus* 39d; Rau, p.521. (Eliot took copious notes from an earlier edition of Burnet's book (1892) while studying at Harvard; see Gordon, Appendix I, p.141.)
the existence of a soul to perceive it. And after attributing to the progress of time a circular motion—the only kind of movement which can be infinite—he finds himself entertaining the notion 'that human affairs form a circle', and notes that 'even time itself is thought to be a circle' (IV, 14, 223b, 24–30).

In the West, the rise of Christian philosophy brought a re-appraisal of the concept of time, although much of the Greek framework remained. The notion of reincarnation was eschewed, and the cyclical model was modified by the idea of Dispensations, eras in which the purposes of God were progressively worked out on earth, and which together made up the one Great Year of created Time. The emphasis, however, lay upon the vectorial nature of time: time was teleological, it was moving towards a specific goal. This emphasis was encouraged by the infusion of Hebrew thought into the Christian view. Generally, the Hebrew scriptures advocated a positive attitude towards time and history. Yahweh was a God who was remembered and worshipped for salvific deeds which had been achieved in time. The Jews looked back to the crossing of the Reed Sea as proof of Yahweh's love, and looked forward to the coming of the Messiah as the consummation of the temporal order.

The first major Christian approach to the philosophy of time was that of St Augustine, for whom the mystery of time was inseparable from that of creation itself. If creation were to have any meaning, he realized, time, as one of its components, could be neither illusory nor meaningless. His attempts to define time were influenced heavily by the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus, who held that there is a single primal Reality from which everything is derived. From this Source—which Plotinus called the One or, sometimes, the Good—all other reality emanates in a series of levels, known as 'hypostases', each similar in substance to that above it, but lesser in degree. From the One is derived Intellect, and from Intellect, Soul, of which individual souls are different manifestations. Soul is divided into two parts; one which is directed upwards to Intellect and another which is directed downwards towards the (ultimately unreal) world of sense. Time, according to Plotinus, exists only in the lower province of Soul, the world of ordinary human consciousness. It has no pre-existence in Intellect or in the One itself, but rather is a by-product formed from the energy emitted by the Soul as it manifests the multitudinous forms of the Intellect (Enneads III, 7, 12).

Although many early Christian thinkers—the most influential of whom was the Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite—accepted much of Neo-Platonic thought, Augustine was more selective. He received with enthusiasm the Neo-Platonic notion that the world was made along with, and not in, time, and that before God created the universe, time did not exist. He also derived from Plotinus the theory that the eternal is in some sense present, or immanent, in human consciousness, just as, to use a favourite Plotinian image, a luminous light source


10An element of determinism was retained in the doctrine of Original Sin which held that every human being is born with a predisposition for wrong-doing. Escape was available through faith in Christ's redemptive achievement, but such faith was often held to require an asceticism as rigorous as its counterpart in Eastern religion.

11In the interstices between such Divine intrusions, however, there developed a counter-tradition of pessimistic wisdom literature which stressed the vanity of worldly ambition, even the ambition to establish justice. Eliot will quote from the central text of this tradition, the book of Ecclesiastes, in East Coker.

12Hereafter referred to as Dionysius.

13City of God XI, ch.6; Confessions XI, ch.30.
is present implicitly in the rays it emits (Enneads V, 1, 6). Augustine’s understanding of immanence differed significantly from the Neo-Platonist conception, however, for what his Christian theology could not admit was the continuity between God and man which Plotinus implied. Neo-Platonism urged its followers to flee the world of time by retreating to the upper levels of Soul, from whence they might return to their original state of union with the One. Although this appealed to Augustine’s natural impulse towards transcendence, he could not reconcile it with the fundamental tenets of Christian theology which held God and man to be distinct and separate entities, rather than higher and lower forms of the same substance. This dichotomy was not the result of the Fall, as Christian Neo-Platonism tried to argue, but was part of the original scheme of creation. The Fall may have bound human kind to the vicissitudes of time, but Christ’s salvific reversal of the Fall did not involve the abolition of time.

Indeed the opposite was the case, for in the Incarnation of Christ God and man were united in time, and not in eternity. Although orthodox Christian theology did admit the concept of the union of the individual soul with God, it was held to be strictly eschatological; it would only take place once the Divine purposes for the created order had been fulfilled. In the Incarnation, God located the Divine union within creation itself, and subsequently the individual’s approach towards God would consist of aspiring to the perfect humanity of Christ, the prefigurement and guarantee of the eschatological ‘marriage’ of God and human kind.

Thus Augustine’s disagreement with Neo-Platonism centred upon the affirmation of time, space and matter implied in Christ’s willed entry into the created order. In Confessions VII (ch.9, 13–14), Augustine affirmed the Neo-Platonic notion of a Divine Eternal Word or Logos, and the belief that ‘the soul of man . . . “bears witness to the light”, yet itself “is not the light . . .”’, but added, ‘that “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us”—I found this nowhere there . . . that “he emptied himself and took upon himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men . . .”—this those books have not’. Christ redeemed time along with the rest of creation, and Augustine could not denigrate the temporal dimension in which meaning had become incarnate. Although time was not to be considered meaningful in itself, it gained vital importance when viewed from the Divine perspective. In The City of God Augustine rejected the notion that history is an endless cycle, and proposed a progressive revelation of God’s purposes through time. For him, time became vectorial and organic, a single, irreversible movement, beginning with Creation, bisected by the unique and non-recurrent Incarnation of Christ, and to be consummated in the Last Judgement (City of God XII, chs 14–18; XX, passim).

Immanence for Augustine did not imply a need to escape from time, but a need to perceive it from God’s perspective and to influence it in accordance with his plan. Time as we know it may indeed cease after the Last Judgement, but for now it is to be fulfilled rather than abandoned. The problem for Augustine was to discover the precise connection between the permanent and the transitory. In Confessions XI he interrupts an exposition of the creation-story of Genesis 1 with a digression in which he attempts to derive his theological understanding of time and eternity from a philosophical analysis of empirical experience. He argues first that

---

14It is true that many Christian mystics used the concept of union to describe exalted states of prayer. In most cases, however, they stressed the metaphorical nature of the concept, or claimed—as Eliot will in The Dry Salvages V—that such experiences were lesser forms of the one Incarnation (see Chapter 5, p.136). Some less orthodox writers, of course, found no quarrel with Neo-Platonism at all.

the division of time into three dimensions is at best a partial truth (XI, ch.20; p.259):

But even now it is manifest and clear that there are neither times future nor times past. Thus it is not properly said that there are three times, past, present and future. Perhaps it might be said rightly that there are three times: a time present of things past; a time present of things present; and a time present of things future. For these three do co-exist somehow in the soul, for otherwise I could not see them. The time present of things past is memory; the time present of things present is direct experience; the time present of things future is expectation.

Time is thus a mode of thought in which the present is the only dimension which can be said to be 'real'. It is also the only dimension which is in any sense commensurable with the eternity in which God dwells, for to God, the whole of time is 'simultaneously present', and temporal 'process' has no meaning whatsoever (XI, 11).16 Time has significance, Augustine concludes, when it is related to the eternal present of God. It is at this point that Augustine's speculations return to the realm of metaphysics and theology; for only by a (literally) superhuman effort may we understand the relation of created time to creative eternity (XI, 11). In order to understand time, he says, he must 'be gathered up from [his] old way of life to follow that One and to forget that which is behind, no longer stretched out but now pulled together again—stretching forth not to what shall be and shall pass away but to those things that are before me' (XI, 29; p.267). He must withdraw his thoughts from the flux of successive moments which constitutes past and future, and aspire through his experience of the present to perceive the pattern in which all time is integrated, the pattern which God surveys from his eternal present.17 In doing so, he hopes that he may be empowered to co-operate in God's plan, and reconcile the created order, through Christ's example, to its Divine Origin.

Despite its limitations, Augustine's account of the nature of time was seminal for later Christian thinkers like Boethius and Aquinas, whose contributions were primarily a codification of Augustinian thought.18 Within Christendom, life in time was held to derive its meaning from God's eternal purposes, and temporal deeds performed in obedience to God could, it was said, partake of eternity.19

In the thirteenth century, Dante was able to describe in the Divina Commedia a temporal plane established by fixed and well-defined relations as part of the Divine Order. Although

---

16 See also City of God XI, 21: 'All events in time, events that will be and are not yet, and those that are now, being present, and those that have passed and are no more, all of them are apprehended by him in a motionless and everlasting present moment' (The Loeb Classical Library, tr. D.S. Wisen (London: William Heinemann, 1968), p.505).

17 Although Augustine did not define the precise relationship between God's present and ours, his concept of it may be inferred from the general presuppositions of his thought. Herman Hausheer suggests that Augustine may have defined the relation thus: 'There exists a similarity as well as a difference between God's eternal present and man's consciousness of the present. They are both real. While there are infinitely many things timelessly together in God's eternal present, there are only minute segments of eternity in man's limited consciousness of the present... Augustine may give an intimation of all this in his expression "we pass through God's today"' ('St Augustine's Conception of Time', Philosophical Review, 46(1937), 503–12; quoted in Patrides, p.36).

18 For instance, Boethius' comments on time in De Trinitate IV (which include his much–quoted distinction between the nunc currens, the fluid 'now' of human experience, and the nunc permanens, the stationary Now of God) were largely derived from City of God XI, 6 and XII, 16.

19 This was especially so of the administration of the sacraments of the Church.
his narrative is strictly linear in progression, Dante incorporates into the *Commedia* symbolic patterns of days and hours which reflect the order into which the universe will ultimately be resolved. Moreover, as he enters Paradise itself, the distinction between time and eternity begins to blur. He learns that the souls who appear to him do not in reality inhabit the spheres, but appear to do so because he can only see things in their sequence, and not in their eternal essence (*Paradiso* IV, 28–63).\(^{20}\) As he approaches the end of his journey, he sees the symbolic patterns of time culminate in God’s eternity, which, though ‘an eternity beyond time, beyond every other bound’, is nevertheless co-existent with all time; it is ‘the point whereto all times are present’, ‘where every *where* and every *when* [‘ogni *ubi* ed ogni *quando*’] is focussed’ (*Paradiso* XVII, 1.17; XXIX, 1.12).\(^{21}\)

II  Eliot’s Early Poems: Bradley, Einstein and Bergson

Eliot’s conscious debt in the *Quartets* to ancient and mediaeval time-philosophy is attested by his direct quotation from Heraclitus and Ecclesiastes, and the more subtle allusions to Dante’s *Commedia* and Augustine’s *Confessions*. Nevertheless, the importance of more recent speculation on time should not be underestimated. Eliot lived through an age in which time had again become a major topic of philosophical debate and scientific study. During his lifetime thinkers such as Bradley, Bergson, James, Freud, Einstein, Spengler, Wyndham Lewis, Dunne, Whitehead and Heidegger debated the nature of time;\(^{22}\) and in the arts, Eliot’s age witnessed Joyce’s and Woolf’s experiments with human consciousness, Lawrence’s worship of intense moments, and Proust’s attempts to regain ‘temps perdu’.

At the turn of the century, Sir Isaac Newton’s concept of time still held the field in time-philosophy. His distinction between relative time, which we measure by means of the motions of bodies, and ‘absolute, true, and mathematical time’, which ‘of itself, and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything external’\(^{23}\) remained relatively unshaken despite the influence of Nietzsche and Darwin whose theories of time as the creative life-force were popularized by the Romantic movement.

Later Idealist philosophers, among them F.H. Bradley, whose work was the subject of Eliot’s doctoral study, were also casting doubt on the finality of ‘absolute’ time. In his major work, *Appearance and Reality* (1893), Bradley expounded the notion of an Absolute which alone can be said to have real existence. Concepts such as space, time, causality, and the human self prove ultimately to be unreal for Bradley, and are merely ‘appearances’, by which the consciousness makes its experience intelligible. Time is thus an ‘adjective’ which partially

---

\(^{20}\) The atemporal status of the souls is confirmed when several of them describe to Dante events which are yet to take place.

\(^{21}\) All quotations will be from the Temple Classics edition of *The Divine Comedy* (see p.viii). Eliot himself is known to have used this edition. See John J. Soldo, ‘Eliot’s Dantean Vision and his Markings in his Copy of the *Divina Commedia*, *Yeats Eliot Review*, 7, nos 1–2 (June 1982), 11–18 (pp.17–18).

\(^{22}\) F.H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality* (1893); Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (1907); William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890); Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West* (1918–22); Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (1927); J.W. Dunne, *An Experiment with Time* (1927); A.N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (1933); and Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927).

describes the Absolute but should never be taken as an unqualified datum. It is a relation, a succession of 'nows' which cannot be treated as isolated 'atoms', but must be understood as part of the indivisible Absolute to which all experience points. Eliot's thesis focussed upon Bradley's concept of 'immediate experience', in which the individual experiences all time as present—though without appreciating that fact.

Einstein, however, undermined the scientific grounds of the Newtonian time-system and in doing so radically altered the epistemological basis of scientific thought. He disputed the notion that time operated simultaneously upon all space. Instead, he argued that time and space are relative to one another and cannot be treated separately. As Charles Mauron explained in his essay 'On Reading Einstein' which Eliot translated for The Criterion, the theory of relativity reduced scientific knowledge to the status of intuitional knowledge. All now depended on the state of the observer; for two observers of the same event would perceive it at different moments. Thus 'time—in—itself' was a fiction. No longer could it be said that there is one unique time in which all the phenomena of the universe take place; rather the universe was composed of an infinity of separate time-systems.

Nevertheless, in the early decades of the century, Einstein's theory of time took second place to that of the crusading French philosopher Henri Bergson, whose lectures at the Sorbonne attracted the best young minds of Europe. Among them, in 1911, was Eliot, whose initial response was enthusiastic. 'My only conversion, by the deliberate influence of any individual', he wrote later, 'was a temporary conversion to Bergsonism'. Reality, for Bergson, was 'durée réelle', or psychic time, a notion not dissimilar to the Heraclitean flux. 'Durée' was not composed of a series of indivisible present moments, a set of separate things or objects, but was a constant becoming. It could not be known through analysis, since it was a process, and never stationary. Bergson stressed that knowledge of 'durée'—indeed all genuine knowledge—was intuitive; it was the experience of developing psychic states by the ego.

The 'conversion' undergone by Eliot was short-lived, however, and within a few months Eliot was criticizing Bergson's 'durée réelle' as 'simply not final'. However, this disavowal did not diminish the profound effect that Bergson was to have upon Eliot's early poetry. The dominant concepts of time which appear in those poems were derived from the philosophical debate in which Bergson remained the chief protagonist.

---

24 Appearance and Reality, second edition (London: Swann Sonnenschein, 1908), chs 4, 18. See also p.207: 'By its inconsistency time directs us beyond itself. It points to something higher in which it is included and transcended'.

25 Bradley attacked scientific method for making this assumption (Appearance and Reality, p.208).


27 Ole Bay—Petersen notes that Einstein's theories made tenable the notion of a static space-time, in which past, present and future exist 'en bloc', although each of us experiences them as a succession. A theological concept, such as an eternal God, could thus be admitted into the scientist's world-view, although Einstein himself remained non-committal on this point. See T.S. Eliot and Einstein: The Fourth Dimension in the Four Quartets, English Studies, 2(1985), 143–55 (pp.152–53).


29 The comment was made in an unpublished essay and is quoted by F.O. Matthiessen, The Achievement of T.S. Eliot, p.183.

30 Eliot had rejected only Bergson's conclusions, and still took seriously many aspects of his thought. Philip LeBrun places alongside Eliot's criticisms of Bergson passages which place his ideas in a positive light and
Bergsonism, he could not escape the mood or concerns of an era which had turned with such enthusiasm to the French philosopher. The increasing rapidity of social and economic change was destroying forever the security of a fundamentally static society and the pre-defined ‘self’ which had been the legacy of previous generations. The universe had, in A.A. Mendilow’s words, ‘proliferated into a multiverse’.

Eliot’s early poems, with their predominantly urban settings, capture the sense of disorientation which stalked his generation. The dichotomy which Bergson described between the inner self, which perceived time as a psychological sense of duration, and the outer self, locked into the world of endless flux and change, afflicts many of the characters of Eliot’s first volume of poetry. They appear as passive ‘consciousnesses’, and their narratives are—as the title of the volume suggests—disengaged ‘observations’. The persona of ‘Preludes’, for instance, watches as the morning ‘comes to consciousness’ and describes the events of the day as ‘masquerades/ That time resumes’. J. Alfred Prufrock, Eliot’s most memorable victim of disintegrated time, is caught in the futile repetition of meaningless actions and gestures, able to perceive an unbearable reality, but unable to change it. His outward optimism regarding the possibility of change (‘There will be time’) is mocked by his inner realization that he has neither the courage to ask the ‘overwhelming question’ which will initiate change, nor the ability to express it in such a way that it will have the desired effect.

In ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’ Eliot makes use of the Bergsonian concept of memory. For Bergson, the memory was the one faculty which could unify the discrete impressions of consciousness through creating the sense of a continuing personality. The difficulty, however, was that the memory could not exert a controlling influence upon the flux of time; the patterns it discerned were partial and perhaps even illusory, and did not reflect a coherence in the external world. Eliot’s poem describes the dissolution of the ‘floors of memory/ And all its clear relations,/ Its divisions and precisions’. Time, for the persona of the poem, becomes merely ‘a crowd of twisted things’ thrown up from the sea of experience by the memory: a prostitute, a greedy child, a crab, the smells of cigarettes and cocktails. There is no pattern to relieve the sordidness of each discrete moment; memory can only pile them together in the mind. Nevertheless, as the last lines of the poem affirm, ‘Memory/ You have the key’.

III ‘Gerontion’ to ‘Murder in the Cathedral’

The function of the memory is also central to the monologue delivered by the old man in ‘Gerontion’, whose consciousness ranges endlessly over his empty past and the deceptions of time. He has no future to look forward to, and his attempt to discern a pattern in the ‘cunning passages’ and ‘contrived corridors’ of history is thwarted by that limitation of the mind which allows us to understand only those aspects of life in time which we can no longer influence, while we continue to stumble blindly in our search for order. What is needed to release him

32LeBrun notes a direct debt to Bergson in Eliot’s phrase (p.157).
33Eliot’s response to the dilemma of time is quite different from that of Proust, a more dedicated follower of Bergson. Proust’s notion of ‘privileged moments’ of recollection which provide unwilled intuitions of a unified self implies a kind of ‘religion’ of memory. What Eliot describes in his early poems, however, is the conscious
from this enslavement to the enigma of the past is 'a sign'—a single event which will illuminate the divine pattern of history.

Eliot alludes here to Lancelot Andrewes, who, in 'Sermon 12 On the Nativity: Christmas, 1618', discusses the coming of Christ as a 'sign', but one deliberately hidden and cryptic. The key to the meaning of life in time, the incarnate Word, is indeed present, but is 'unable to speak a word': 'Verbum infans, the Word without a word; the aeternall Word not hable to speake a word'. Andrewes points out, 'A Signe it is, but, not a Signe at large, indefinitely... limited to some; Not to all' (p.86). Such a sign is of no use to Gerontion; if meaning is not immediate in time and place it is not meaning at all. Indeed the 'Word' which appears to him turns out to be no more than a travesty of the Christian Logos.

The inhabitants of The Waste Land also await a sign which will release them from bondage to the past. However, the rebirth which accompanies spring is to be dreaded rather than welcomed, for it reopens old wounds and rekindles an agony unmitigated by any intuition of pattern or significance. 'Time', as Eliot will recall in The Dry Salvages, 'is no healer'. The memory is a curse, preserving our past failures in all their grievous intensity, and denying us the power to forget the 'withered stumps of time', the scenes of violation and despair which must forever decorate our consciousness. Even our desperate attempts to salvage some sense of purpose are hampered by the insistent reminder of our impending end: 'Hurry up, please, it's time'. In 'The Fire Sermon', Tiresias, the seer who experienced both male and female sexuality, witnesses the endless round of sordid acts, and has 'foresuffered all', for each event has countless precedents in previous ages, and will be repeated endlessly, like the rape of Philomela displayed upon the wall in 'A Game of Chess'.

Although it does not offer any sure means of escape from the time-ridden world of disparate experience, the final movement of The Waste Land gives a more positive intimation of the sign which Gerontion sought in vain. The opening passages allude very clearly to the crucifixion of Christ, and the remainder of the poem is set imaginatively in the period immediately following this event. It is a period of uncertainty, the period between the recognition of a portent and a fulfillment which, as far as the poet knows, may never come. Nevertheless it is a time when instruction, the voice of the thunder, can be received, and when fragments of order can be shored against a disintegrated psyche in preparation for what revelation (if any) may follow.

The poems written after The Waste Land—and especially in those which post-date Eliot's formal espousal of Christianity—begin to explore in more depth the symbolic importance of certain moments in time when escape from the flux is a possibility. 'The Hollow Men' contemplates such a moment—the instant of choice at the time of death which, in Roman Catholic theology, determines to which realm of the after-life the soul is taken. The hollow men themselves have failed to make any choice at all, and have been consigned to an eternal limbo without hope and without even the dignity of positive damnation. In the first two 'Ariel' poems, The Journey of the Magi and A Song for Simeon, Eliot goes


34 Lancelot Andrewes: Sermons, ed. G.M. Story, p.85. Subsequent references will be included in the text.

35 See Eliot's comment upon the 'significance' which damnation gives to life in his essay on Baudelaire (SE, p.427).
on to dramatize the period of transition between the birth of Christ and his death and resurrection. Simeon and the Magi perceive in the Nativity the beginnings of a new dispensation. The vision will not be fulfilled in their own lifetime, however, and they can only hope that the new dispensation will vindicate retrospectively the one in which they will soon die. Time has, in a sense, cheated them; they are born too soon to see how the course of time will be reshaped by the Incarnation, but too late to be able to die with the final comforts of a religion which they now know to be obsolete.

A similar period of transition and reshaping is dramatized in Ash Wednesday. It is a personal reshaping, in which the poet gives an account of his attempt to renounce the world of time and space in order to prepare himself for the revelation of the timeless Word of God. In the opening section, the poet declares:

I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place

Neither time nor place has any meaning in itself, he sees, except as something to be renounced.

As his penitence proceeds this negative impulse towards time is modified by the possibility that a way might be found to 'redeem' the waste time which was previously thought to be fit only for renunciation. In Part IV the poet encounters 'One who moves in the time between sleep and waking, wearing/ White light folded'. The figure (who bears a strong resemblance to Matilda and Beatrice, the women who initiate Dante's penitence at the summit of Purgatory) is seen to be 'restoring/Through a bright cloud of tears, the years', and urges the poet to:

Redeem
The time. Redeem
The unread vision in the higher dream . . .

But the fountain sprang up and the bird sang down
Redeem the time, redeem the dream
The token of the word unheard, unspoken.

The word 'redeem' refers to the retrieval through dedicated action of something that was present in a former time, but has since been lost. The phrase 'redeem the time' is Biblical in origin; in Ephesians 5. 15–16, Paul advises: 'See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil'; and again in Colossians 4. 5, 'Walk in wisdom towards them that are without, redeeming the time'. The literal sense is 'to buy up the opportunity' and the apostle is exhorting his fellow-Christians not to waste the time given to them in insignificant activity.36

In Ash Wednesday, Eliot seems also to refer to the Christian doctrine of Redemption, which is founded upon Christ's purchase of humanity from enslavement to sin and death at the price of

36 In his conclusion to 'Thoughts After Lambeth' (1931), Eliot applied this sentiment to the need to preserve the Christian tradition: 'The World is trying the experiment of attempting to form a civilized but non-Christian mentality. The experiment will fail; but we must be very patient in awaiting its collapse; meanwhile redeeming the time: so that the Faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us; to renew and rebuild civilization, and save the World from suicide' (SE, p.387).
his self-sacrifice. This act of redemption was a deed performed in the present which ransomed and atoned for the past, releasing that image of God in humanity which has been suppressed by Original Sin. Although the historical past itself was not changed, its meaning was altered by an action which transcended time, and thereby transformed the pattern of which the past forms a part.

Eliot need not have had any extra-Biblical source for his notion of 'redeeming time', but a passage from Max Scheler's *Vom Ewigen im Mensch en* (1920) seems particularly close both in thought and phrasing to Eliot's rendering of the concept here in *Ash Wednesday* and later in *Burnt Norton*. In a chapter entitled 'Repentance and Rebirth', Scheler writes:

> Time contains within itself its three extensions: the experienced past, the present being experienced and the future, whose ingredients are constituted by awareness, immediate memory and immediate expectation. It is by virtue of this wonderful fact that . . . the *sense* and *worth* of the whole of our life still come, at every moment of our life, within the scope of our *freedom* of action. We are not the disposers merely of our future; there is also no part of our past life which . . . might not be genuinely altered in its *meaning* and *worth*, through entering our life's total significance as a constituent of the self-revision which is always possible.

Since . . . the total efficacy of an event is, in the texture of life, bound up with its *full* significance and *final* value, every event of our past remains *indeterminate* in significance and *incomplete* in value until it has yielded *all* its potential effects . . . . Before our life comes to an end the whole of the past, at least with respect to its significance, never ceases to present us with the problem of what we are going to make of it . . . . 'Historical reality' is *incomplete* and, so to speak, *redeemable*.

Scheler's debt to Augustine is immediately apparent in his division of time into three functions of the mind, and in his assertion that, to the mind which understands it aright, all of time is available simultaneously.

The idea of redemption was present in Eliot's thinking from an earlier stage, however. Before Scheler's book was printed, Eliot had established in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919) the notion of a 'historical sense' which involves an understanding of the 'presence' of the past, and which allows the modern artist to produce a work which changes ever so slightly the meaning of everything that has preceded it. Eliot concluded: 'Whoever has approved this idea of order, . . . will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is dictated by the past' (*SE*, p.15).

In *Ash Wednesday*, the redemption of time is made available only through 'the high dream',

---

37 Scheler was among the European authors whom Eliot invited to contribute to *The Criterion*. An article of his was published in the February 1928 edition, and Eliot later noted in an obituary that, ‘When more of Dr. Scheler's work is translated into English, his importance will be more apparent' ('A Commentary', *The Criterion*, 8, no.30(Sept. 1928), p.6).


39 Eliot's apparent faith in this essay in the existence of the 'truly new' work of art perhaps paved the way for his acceptance of the doctrine of the Incarnation through which a 'truly new' human being (Christ, the God–Man) entered and redeemed history. See his essay on Pascal, *SE*, p.408.
a term which Eliot used in his contemporaneous essay on Dante to describe the ordered symbolism through which divine truth is communicated (SE, p.262). In Part V, the poet attempts to relate the redemptive dream-vision to the waking world of time, but finds again that the Word is 'unspoken' and 'unheard'. He concludes that:

For those who walk in darkness
  Both in the day time and in the night time
  The right time and the right place are not here.

In the final part of Ash Wednesday, the poet finds himself beyond the world of temporal flux and (metaphorically, at least) at the moment of death, when an eternal choice can be made. He describes himself as:

Wavering between the profit and the loss
  In this brief transit where the dreams cross
  The dreamcrossed twilight between birth and dying.

This is 'the time of tension between dying and birth'—the period in which the soul, having 'died' to the world through repentance, awaits the birth which only God can grant. It is, as it were, the vestibule of the redemptive dream-world, which we may enter once we have suitably prepared our will.

The hope to which the poet clings in Ash Wednesday is given a more concrete expression in Murder in the Cathedral, where Eliot explores the possibility of action which affirms eternal value within the temporal flux. The protagonist, Thomas Becket, is consistently realistic concerning the limitations placed upon us by time (CPP, p.247):

We do not know very much of the future
  Except that from generation to generation
  The same things happen again and again.
  Men learn little from others' experience.
  But in the life of one man, never
  The same time returns. Sever
  The cord, shed the scale. Only
  The fool, fixed in his folly, may think
  He can turn the wheel on which he turns.

Yet his act of martyrdom is made perfect, and transcends time, through his conquest of temptations which will submit his decision to temporal goals and considerations. He declares immediately prior to his death (CPP, p.274):

It is not in time that my death shall be known;
  It is out of time that my decision is taken
  If you call that decision
  To which my whole being gives entire consent.

The non–temporal character of moral decisions is arguably the central theme of the play. Thus the Chorus (CPP, p.276) describes Becket’s murder:
But this, this is out of life, this is out of time,  
An instant eternity of evil and wrong.  

IV ‘Burnt Norton’

(i) The Timeless Moment

Another experience of ‘instant eternity’ is the focus of *Burnt Norton*, a poem which owes its inception to *Murder in the Cathedral*. The meditation upon time which opens *Burnt Norton* grew out of a passage deleted from the script of the earlier play:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future  
And time future contained in time past.  
*If all time is eternally present*  
*All time is unredeemable.*  
What might have been is an abstraction  
Remaining a perpetual possibility  
Only in a world of speculation.  
*What might have been and what has been*  
*Point to one end, which is always present.*  
Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
*Towards the door we never opened*  
Into the rose-garden.

Originally, these lines (the emphasized portions were not then included) were given to the second priest after the exit of the second tempter who had tempted Becket to entertain the vain hope of returning in time to the moment he resigned the Chancellorship for the Archbishopric and of reversing his earlier choice. In response, the priest puts forward the deterministic point of view. Time is a closed system in which every event is determined by those events in the past which have caused it. Since no action can be carried out in any sphere other than a predetermined present, no action is possible which might alter the course of events already mapped out. In order to affect the future, we must alter the past, and that is impossible. No wrong may truly be righted and no missed opportunity regained. The priest’s argument is ‘sensible’, but it implies a fatalism which constitutes yet another temptation for Becket. In *Burnt Norton* it will become the temptation to believe that the ‘redemption’ of time effected

---

40 In *The Family Reunion*, Harry will locate the ‘murder’ of his wife in a similar timeless moment, ‘a momentary rest on the burning wheel’ (*CPP*, p.294).

41 *Gardner*, pp.39, 82. There were other minor differences in wording: ‘abstraction’ was originally ‘conjecture’, and ‘perpetual’ was ‘permanent’.

42 Eliot put a crude articulation of the idea into the mouth of one of the workmen in *The Rock: A Pageant Play* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934), Part I, pp.15–16: ‘There’s some new notion about time, what says that the past—what’s be’ind you—is goin’ to ’appen in the future, bein’ as the future ’as already ’appened. I ’aven’t ’ad time to get the ’ang of it yet’. 
in the rose-garden is in fact a ‘deception’.  

The revised form of the argument in *Burnt Norton* accentuates its ambiguities. The passage renders the impression of a mind attempting to engage in philosophical inquiry, but as a piece of discourse it soon falls prey to the ‘imprecision’ which Eliot will lament in Part V of the poem. In tone as in expression it resembles Augustine’s attempt to explain the empirical phenomenon of time in *Confessions* XI. Augustine’s observations led him to conclude that the three ‘dimensions’ of time were unreal. Past and future evaporate into a present moment which, when defined, disappears into infinitessimality. What Augustine does conclude, however, is that all of time is ‘present’ inasmuch as it is ‘present’—that is, ‘immediate’—to the mind. It is the mind, rather than the flow of events, that measures time; and all of time is available to the consciousness through its faculties. This understanding is potentially liberating, for it is in this present awareness of all time that we are susceptible to revelations of the eternal pattern of God’s ‘ever-present eternity’. Past events can take on meanings other than we first ascribed to them.  

The ambiguity in the idea of ‘presence’ is again at work in *Burnt Norton*. In its narrow context, a phrase like ‘eternally present’ does indeed affirm the ‘unredeemable’ nature of time; but in retrospect its reference to an eternal dimension could be seen as undermining this affirmation. This is even more apparent in the lines:

> What might have been and what has been
> Point to one end, which is always present.

This statement will reappear at the end of *Burnt Norton* I charged with quite a different meaning; what it denies here—the possibility of altering the past—it will there affirm.

The link with Augustine is made more explicit in the image of the footsteps with which Eliot concludes the opening stanza of *Burnt Norton*:

> Footfalls echo in the memory
> Down the passage which we did not take
> Towards the door we never opened
> Into the rose-garden.

In *Confessions* XI, ch.18 (p.257), Augustine describes the mnemonic process:

> Although we tell of past things as true, they are drawn out of the memory—not the things themselves, which have already passed, but words constructed from the images of the perceptions which were formed in the mind, like footprints [*vestigia*] in their passage through the senses.  

The memory was, for Augustine, the ‘storehouse’ of the mind, a vast treasury of images upon which the mind can draw and from which all of our perception of meaning and ultimately our

---

43 Eliot returned to this theme in *The Family Reunion*, where Harry considers the use of recalling his childhood days (CPP, p.308): “The instinct to return to the point of departure/ And start again as if nothing had happened./ Isn’t that all folly?”

44 This concept will be explored more fully in Chapter 4, section III.

45 Latin interpolation added.
knowledge of God is derived (X, chs 7–21). Not only did the memory discern order in past events—it also had a selective and creative function.

Eliot expands this notion—perhaps under the influence of Scheler—to consider the possibility that a memory of 'what might have been' may somehow gain equal status with 'what has been'. Eliot had discussed the role of the imagination in memory in 1932, in his essay 'Wordsworth and Coleridge' (UPUC, p.79). There he argued that—for the artist especially—the experience of memory cannot be separated from the tendency of the mind to select certain past events (Eliot cites a childhood experience as an example) which then 're-appear transformed in some verse-context charged with great imaginative pressure'. Memory and imagination are, he concludes, inextricably linked. Thus, 'what might have been' merges in the memory with 'what has been'; as the psychologist Reilly in The Cocktail Party notes (pp.402–03):

your memories of childhood—
I mean, in your present state of mind—
Would be largely fictitious.

Eliot refers to this kind of imaginative transformation in the next lines of Burnt Norton:

My words echo
Thus in your mind.46

In terms of the deterministic argument with which the poem began, the echoes are, without doubt, 'deceptions'. They can be granted validity, however, through an intimation of the transformation of meaning which past events undergo as they are 'redeemed' and brought into line with the Divine pattern. And after the opening meditation on time has collapsed under the weight of its own ambiguity, an intimation of this very kind is granted in the imaginative reverie of the rose-garden which 'might have been'.

The precise meaning of the poet's experience in the garden will be explored in later chapters; what can be noted at this stage is that it is a theophanic experience which cannot be placed in time, and which offers to transcend and thereby to redeem the whole of the temporal experience of the poet.47 The vision should be compared with the one which St Augustine describes in Confessions VII, ch.18, an experience which, like Eliot's, grew out of the discovery of elements within the saint's memory which could not be explained in terms of what he knew he had experienced.48

It is, however, a transient vision, a momentary release from time whose reality is called into question as soon as it passes. Nevertheless, its immediate effect can be seen in the lines repeated from the opening meditation which conclude Burnt Norton I:

46 There is a faint 'echo' of Augustine in these lines. In Confessions XII, ch.31 (p.296), Augustine considers the undesirability of confining the meaning of a statement to that strictly intended by an author: 'I would prefer to write it so that . . . my words should re-echo in the several minds rather than that they should set down one true opinion so clearly . . . that I should exclude the rest'.

47 Eliot's rose-garden vision, in its fortuitousness and intensity, seems similar to Proust's 'privileged moments'. The analogy, if accepted, is qualified in the rest of the Quartets; for while Proust sought to develop his creative memory as an end in itself, Eliot stresses the need for an intense personal search for meaning, through 'prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action', to complement the visionary experience.

48 Further parallels between Augustine's vision and the one described in the rose-garden of Burnt Norton will be explored in Chapter 4 (p.76).
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

Formerly, these lines subsumed 'what might have been' to 'what has been'. Since then, however, the moment in the rose-garden has emphasized 'what might have been' as a factor which offers as positive a contribution to the present moment as what did in fact happen. The experience—although still confined to a world of 'speculation'—has introduced the possibility of redemption.49

The rest of Burnt Norton, and indeed the rest of Four Quartets, contemplates the significance of the rose-garden experience. Whether its importance is affirmed, denied or qualified, the timeless moment remains as an experiential touchstone in the memory of the poet. In Burnt Norton II, the poet attempts an exposition of the opening movement based upon the image of a spinning wheel. The lyric section depicts the cycle of predetermined time, an endless repetition of seasons and natural processes which pervades and controls the entire universe. The timeless rose-garden experience, however, is the 'still point' at the centre of the turning periodic world. The image will be studied in more detail in Chapter 6; but this particular application of it parallels Aquinas' description of God in Summa Contra Gentiles I, ch.66, as an ever-abiding simultaneous whole who, in his eternity, 'synchronizes with every time or instant of time'. He continues:50

Somewhat of an example of this may be seen in the circle: for a given point in the circumference, although indivisible, does not coincide in its position with any other point, since the order of position results in the continuity of the circumference; while the centre which is outside the circumference is directly opposite any given point in the circumference.

The mystical experience of 'timelessness' in the same way co-exists with the cycle of time. It is the point at which 'past and future are gathered'; it is present, but since it contains the whole pattern of time, its presence is no limitation. Instead of submitting to time, it leaves an imprint upon the temporal world which offers to break the cycle of determinism by offering a detached and therefore valid perspective upon life in time:

Time past and time future
Allow but a little consciousness.
To be conscious is not to be in time.

Eliot's dissertation is helpful in elucidating these lines (KE, p.109):

Knowledge of a universal . . . would be knowledge of an object which is not in time, and the knowledge consequently would be out of time. For we attend to something and if our attention is a temporal process the object can hardly fail to

49 In The Family Reunion, Harry's progress towards maturity is marked by a similar change of emphasis. His 'rose-garden experience' rescues him from a state of mind 'In which all past is present, all degradation/ Is unredeemable' (CPP, p.294; see also p.315), and impels him towards faith in a realm where 'what did not happen is as true as what did happen' (p.335). See also Agatha's comments upon the redemption of time (p.288).

exist in time. But on the other hand, if existent objects are wholly in time, the very persistence of our attention upon them will involve the holding together of various moments of sensation by a common meaning, and that meaning will not be within the time to which it refers.

The concept of ‘conscousness’ described here is closely related to that of the ‘reality’ which ‘human kind cannot bear’ in Part I of the poem; it is an awareness which is ‘outside of time’, and allows a synopsis which is available to the majority of people very rarely, if at all. Although consciousness can only be attained once time has been transcended, such experiences are nevertheless firmly established in the warp and woof of the temporal plane:

But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
Be remembered; involved with past and future.
Only through time time is conquered.

Eliot here implies a link between the rose-garden episode of Part I, and two key episodes in *The Waste Land*: the hyacinth girl passage in ‘The Burial of the Dead’ and the arrival at the Perilous Chapel, in ‘What the Thunder Said’. Each of these ‘moments’ is ‘outside of time’ but can be retained in the memory in terms of the effect it has had upon the poet, an effect whose end is the infusion of eternal significance into life in time.

(ii) ‘The Waste Sad Time’

From the point of view of the timeless moment, all time seems to have been redeemed. However, this could not appear further from the truth from the viewpoint of ordinary moments in time, the period before and after the experience of timelessness. The moment after the experience, it becomes a part of the past, and to cling to it is to cling to the unreal dimension of past and future, and to lose our consciousness of the present:

Yet the enchainment of past and future
Woven in the weakness of the changing body,
Protects mankind from heaven and damnation
Which flesh cannot endure.
Time past and time future
Allow but a little consciousness.

The opposition between the present dimension—which has some affinity with eternity—and the dimension of past and future—which, separated from the present, is an illusion—is fundamental to the theme of time in *Four Quartets*. Each of the various approaches to the question of time will be characterized by an orientation towards one of these two dimensions. The distinction is, of course, Augustinian, and Eliot’s use of it reiterates his predisposition towards Augustine’s conception of temporal experience (as opposed, say, to Plotinus’ total separation of time from eternity, or Bergson’s denial of presentiality).

In Part III of *Burnt Norton*, the poet returns to the dimension of past and future, and sets out upon the struggle, which will occupy him through the following two *Quartets*, to come
to terms with this dimension, and to wrest from it an awareness of the present moment which allows contact with eternity. Eliot’s ‘place of disaffection’ in Burnt Norton III exists in a time whose redemption seems impossible. It is a time which knows no present:

Time before and time after
In a dim light . . .
Only a flicker
Over the strained time-ridden faces
Distracted from distraction by distraction . . .
Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind
That blows before and after time,
Wind in and out of unwholesome lungs
Time before and time after.

Trapped in this aspect of time:

the world moves
In appetency, on its metalled ways
Of time past and time future.

The images Eliot uses come directly from ‘The Burial of the Dead’—with its lost souls driven by the wind about London, and apathetic commuters submissive to the ‘dead sound on the final stroke of nine’—and, ultimately, from the major source of that earlier passage, Dante’s description of Limbo in Inferno III. The only way to approach the still point from this unredeemed peripheral world is through the renunciation of the physical and mental world, a renunciation through which the individual strives to transcend the vicissitudes of time through forsaking the world of ‘appearance’ and ‘duration’ in a ‘descent’ to the Divine centre.

In the lyric section of Burnt Norton, unredeemed time appears in one of its archetypal manifestations, as the harbinger of mortality:

Time and the bell have buried the day
The black cloud carries the sun away.

This again is a theme carried over from The Waste Land. In ‘The Fire Sermon’, Eliot alluded to Marvell’s ‘To his Coy Mistress’: ‘But at my back I always hear/ Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near’. The bell is presumably the evening Angelus, the ‘Ave Maria’ which marks the end of the day’s toil, as it did in Gray’s elegy (‘The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day’),

51 Eliot’s ‘distracted’ men, whose minds are ‘empty of meaning’ and lacking ‘concentration’ parallel Dante’s souls ‘who have lost the good of intellect’ (1.18); and the commuters who are ‘whirled by the cold wind’ along with ‘bits of paper’ suggest the souls confined to the vestibule of Hell who are driven in circles as if by a whirlwind (1.30). Eliot’s notion of ‘distraction’ may owe something to Pascal’s criticism of the manifold ‘distractions’ by which men seek to avoid confrontation with the ‘reality’ of their state. See Penseés, nos 139–43.

52 The two approaches to the still centre correspond to the two traditional schools of Christian mysticism: the ‘cataphatic’ or affirmative approach, which stresses the importance of perceiving and rejoicing in the presence of the divine in all things, and the ‘apophatic’ or negative approach, which recommends flight from all created things to communion with the ‘unknowable’ creator. These will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.
whose sombre tone is echoed in Eliot's lyric. The questioning tone of the lyric expresses the human need for assurance with regards to life beyond the grave, or—in the terms of the earlier sections of the poem—assurance that the meaning we perceived at the 'still point' will remain after the moment passes. Engulfed in the world of shadows, we need to know that the light still exists, even if it is hidden.

_Burnt Norton_ V stresses again the need to redeem not only moments of vision but also the time-frame within which they are vouchsafed to us. The movement opens with a consideration of the notion of form and pattern, and its bearing upon art. Poetry and music, being art-forms which can exist only in durational time, must create the sense of a non-temporal, spatial pattern if they are to have any coherence. The end and the beginning must seem to co-exist, such that the whole of the work appears to have escaped the frame of time and to exist in the mind as one immediate experience:

> Only by the form, the pattern,  
> Can words or music reach  
> The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
> Moves perpetually in its stillness.  
> Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,  
> Not that only, but the co-existence,  
> Or say that the end precedes the beginning,  
> And the end and the beginning were always there  
> Before the beginning and after the end.  
> And all is always now.

'Music', Eliot would later write in his introduction to Valéry's _Art of Poetry_, 'may be conceived as striving towards an unattainable timelessness . . . Ideally, I should like to be able to hold the whole of a great symphony in my mind at once'.

This timeless pattern must be formed from temporal elements, however, from words and notes which suffer mutation in the processes of time. This is equally as true for timeless realities such as Divinity or Love as it is for poetry and music. Eliot continues:

> Love is itself unmoving,  
> Only the cause and end of movement,  
> Timeless and undesiring  
> Except in the aspect of time.

Love, the unmoving mover, the still centre, must descend into the world of time and flux and be manifest as a pattern of desire. It will be perceived for what it really is only in moments of redeeming insight when the multiplicity of substance and accident is seen from without as a coherent pattern.

The final lines of the poem lament the paucity of such moments:

> Ridiculous the waste sad time  
> Stretching before and after.

---

53 Eliot (following Gray) appears to have in mind the announcement of the death of a parishioner by the ringing of the Church bell. The ringing of the angelus will become a central metaphor in _The Dry Salvages_.

In practice—outside of philosophical and theological syllogism—time does not appear to be redeemed. What the allusion to The Waste Land in these lines illustrates is that the material with which Eliot is working in Burnt Norton is essentially the same as in the earlier poem; if it were not for the experience in the rose-garden, the horror of modern life would remain unrelieved. As it is, the redemption of time in that moment does not appear to mitigate the futility which is experienced from day to day.

V ‘East Coker’

The vision of time in East Coker remains dark. It is obsessed with the concatenation of beginnings and endings, with the passage of the future into the past. Human life within this scheme has no more significance than that of the plants and animals which also return to the soil:

In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.
Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth
Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf.

Several sources could be suggested for the ideas expressed here: Heraclitus’ endless progression of historical cycles, for instance, or Bergson’s notion of the present as merely the transition from future to past. In the following lines, however, Eliot alludes specifically to the philosopher of Ecclesiastes, and his account of the continual round of existence:

Houses live and die: there is a time for building
And a time for living and for generation
And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane.

The source passage (Ecclesiastes 3. 1–8, 15) reads:

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to cast away; a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace. . . . That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been.

Within such a scheme, the philosopher goes on (18–20), ‘the sons of men’:
see that they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.

This perspective on time permeates the rest of the poem. Beginnings and endings are interchangeable; permanence is an illusion. Part II mocks our illusions of progress. The natural world becomes more random every day, and the only ‘end’ that such phenomena may augur is the chaos of another ice-age. Nor may we put our trust in our own experience or that of others. The ‘wisdom’ of our elders is revealed as an unwitting deceit. It is:

the knowledge of dead secrets
Useless in the darkness into which they peered
Or from which they turned their eyes. There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
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.

Such knowledge ‘imposes a pattern’, but one which ‘falsifies’, for ‘the pattern is new in every moment’. Eliot was frequently critical of the purely empirical approach to life. In ‘Religion and Literature’ (SE, p.397) he wrote:

‘Let everything be tried’, they say, ‘and if it is a mistake, then we shall learn by experience.’ This argument might have some value, if we were always the same generation upon earth; or if, as we know to be not the case, people ever learned much from the experience of their elders.

Experience will teach us nothing, since ‘every moment is a new and shocking/ Valuation of all we have been’. Eliot’s argument is analogous to Bergson’s general critique of the idea of empirical knowledge. Human reason can operate only upon a past which no longer has existence outside of our memory. As a result, its perceptions are partial and its conclusions unreliable. Thus, Eliot concludes:

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility.

Such humility, Eliot goes on to suggest in East Coker III and IV, will lead us to sever our attachment to the temporal world in the hope that, by distancing ourselves from it, we may understand the eternal pattern of time. This task is, of course, extremely difficult—indeed, as Augustine discovered, it is impossible without Divine assistance.

In the final movement of the poem, the poet locates himself ‘in the middle way’, attempting to detach himself from the dimension of past and future in which East Coker has thus far

55See LeBrun, p.154.
operated. At this stage he can speak only of his failure to discern the principles upon which
the cycles of time operate, and affirm the need to continue the quest for the timeless pattern,
even though it seems merely to become more and more elusive. The memory of the timeless
moment will not suffice; nor will the patterns perceived in many years of experience:

Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered. 56

We must go on; but to seek the pattern in the unfolding temporal order brings interminable
complication as the object of our quest recedes into the past beyond the grasp of human knowl­
dge. Even the final transposition of the opening line, ‘In my end is my beginning’, does not
necessarily imply any progress. It merely encourages us to begin again the cycle which has
brought us to our present end without the promised fulfillment. There is indeed no lesson to
be learned but humility.

VI  ‘The Dry Salvages’

The opening movements of The Dry Salvages are a further exploration of the wastage of unre­
deeded time. Eliot employs the image of the river as Heraclitus did, to represent the endless
flux which gives the appearance of direction but in fact has no purpose save destruction. ‘You
cannot step twice into the same river’, Heraclitus said, 57 since neither the river nor we our­selves will be the same again. ‘The river is within us’, Eliot says; we are part of the flow of
becoming, functioning, as it were, as the river’s consciousness, but remaining powerless to
influence its course.

As real as the river of time may seem, however, it is, like Bergson’s ‘dureé’, not final. 58
The river of consciousness, of psychological time, flows into the sea, the boundless time of
nature, which ‘is all about us’. It is a vast, unconscious and imponderable unity from which all
perceived time and movement proceeds and to which all returns. This inscrutable repository
behaves (as it did earlier in ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’) like a primaeval demiurge throw­
ing up onto its shores mysterious suggestions of other eras, other orders of being, as well as
the clutter of humanity’s own past. The sea represents a temporal order which scorns to be
measured by human memory or skill. It is marked by the tolling bell-buoy, which:

56 Cf. The Family Reunion (CPP, p.332):

There are hours when there seems to be no past or future,
Only a present moment of pointed light
When you want to burn.

57 Fragment 91; see Chapter 6, p.159.

58 Bergson’s image of the flux, of change as the ultimate reality, is a parallel source for Eliot’s river. However,
as the poem progresses it will become apparent that it is a specifically Heraclitean view that is being affirmed;
for Heraclitus differs from Bergson in positing within that constant change an eternal law, the Logos, which
determines the course of the flux. Eliot will explore this principle of order, and capitalize upon the Biblical use
of the word Logos as a title for Christ, as a way of redeeming the endless flux of time. See Chapter 6, section
I, part i.
Measures time not our time, rung by the unhurried
Ground swell, a time
Older than the time of chronometers, older
Than time counted by anxious worried women
Lying awake, calculating the future,
Trying to unweave, unwind, unravel
And piece together the past and the future,
Between midnight and dawn, when the past is all deception,
The future futureless, before the morning watch
When time stops and time is never ending.

*The Dry Salvages* II poses the only question possible in the face of the inalterable progression of time and decay: 'Where is there an end of it'? The answer returns:

There is no end, but addition: the trailing
Consequence of further days and hours.

As in the early sections of *The Waste Land*, time proceeds towards no recognizable goal, but merely enshrines the sufferings of the past in each successive moment:

We cannot think of a time that is oceanless
Or of an ocean not littered with wastage
Of a future that is not liable
Like the past, to have no destination . . . .

There is no end of it, the voiceless wailing,
No end to the withering of withered flowers,
To the movement of pain that is painless and motionless,
To the drift of the sea and the drifting wreckage.

A belief in 'development', Eliot says, is thus:

a partial fallacy
Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution,
Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning the past.

Eliot is here criticizing the philosophy of thinkers, who, like Bergson in works such as *Creative Evolution* (1911), stressed the overriding importance of the flux of time, and asserted the worth of 'development' over that of preservation. In 'Literature and the Modern World' Eliot attacked the idea of human evolution (as expressed by H.G. Wells) as 'a naif faith . . . combined with a denial of any sharp dividing line between the human and animal: that is, a denial of the human soul'.

Nevertheless, the attempt to discern a meaning in past events is only marginally less futile, since, 'approach to the meaning restores the experience/ In a different form'. In 'The Modern Mind' Eliot described the 'slippage' of meaning which occurs in the attempt to record an intense experience (*UPUC*, p.138): 'By the time it has settled down into a poem it may be so different from the original experience as to be hardly recognisable'. But while meaning cannot be preserved in time, suffering can:

---

Now, we come to discover that the moments of agony . . .
are likewise permanent
With such permanence as time has . . .
Time the destroyer is time the preserver.

Without the redemptive power of timeless moments, the horror at rebirth—as experienced in ‘The Burial of the Dead’—remains unmitigated. The notion of universal suffering and of time as a negative force is derived, of course, from Eastern religion. Eliot appears to have had in mind the divine trinity of Hindu mythology, in which the Brahman (the supreme being) is personified as the creator god, Brahma, and placed in a triad of divine personalities along with Vishnu the preserver, and Siva the destroyer. A more immediate Eastern source, and one which looks forward to Part III of the poem, is found in Chapter 11 of the Bhagavad-Gita where Krishna reveals himself in his divine forms to Arjuna. As well as Creator and Sustainer of all Creation, he is manifested as the all-devouring God of time and change. Arjuna sees the hosts of warrior-princes disappearing into the terrible jaws of Krishna, like rivers in flood which ‘rush headlong into the one great sea’. Terrified, Arjuna asks who Krishna is, to which the Lord replies (Ch.11, 32, p.297):

Time I am, wrecker of the world’s destruction,
Matured,—grimly resolved . . . here to swallow up the worlds.

Time is deified, and expresses the notion, central to the Eastern doctrine of samsāra and to The Dry Salvages III, that all things obtain their being through time and are subsequently destroyed by it.

In the third part of The Dry Salvages Eliot enlarges upon the Eastern view of life in time. Krishna, he says, taught:

That the future is a faded song, a Royal Rose or a lavender spray
Of wistful regret for those who are not yet here to regret,
Pressed between yellow leaves of a book that has never been opened.

The future and the past are so intertwined as to be inseparable. The wheel of existence, turning the same elements, produces the same combinations of events again and again. Thus ‘time is no healer’; the progression of time into the future will not repair the suffering of the past.

However, healing is available to us if we can appreciate why it is that time cannot heal. It is because ‘the patient is no longer here’, and thus an injury sustained in the past cannot be treated in the present; the past is ‘unredeemable’. This fact can be interpreted in two ways, however. According to the doctrine of karma, suffering is the result of the influence of the inertia of past events. But we can escape from karma if we are prepared to relinquish our sense of ourselves as separate and substantial entities. Then suffering will have no more of a continuing existence in time than we do ourselves.  

---

60 Walker, I, p.395.
62 Eliot may have had in mind Pascal’s notion of how healing is achieved: ‘Time heals griefs and quarrels, for we change and are no longer the same persons. Neither the offender nor the offended are any more themselves’ (Penseés, no.122: tr. W.F. Trotter (London: Dent & Sons, 1931), p.37).
Eliot, following Krishna, suggests that we are not substantial entities and, moreover, that we can at certain moments stand back from the flux of our personalities and observe our experience ‘with an equal mind’. We should think of ourselves instead as ‘travellers’, an understanding from which we may gain a perspective which releases us from bondage to the dimension of past and future:

You are not the same people who left that station  
Or who will arrive at any terminus . . .  
You are not those who saw the harbour  
Receding, or those who will disembark.  
Here between the hither and the farther shore  
While time is withdrawn, consider the future  
And the past with an equal mind.

The beginnings of an escape from time are to be found in the realization that we are bound to the temporal dimension only inasmuch as we accept the convention of an abiding ego. Through relinquishing this convention the soul is enabled to live consciously in every new moment, to free itself from the cycle of habit, and by cultivating ‘right action’ to begin to orient itself beyond time, towards eternity. Once this reorientation is begun, Eliot continues, the soul gains access to the ‘time of death’ while still in life. The period described in ‘The Hollow Men’ and Ash Wednesday during which a readjustment and redemption of our lives is placed within our grasp is now seen to be implicit in ‘every moment’.

With this insight the poem returns to the Christian framework, and, specifically, to the doctrine which, Eliot thought, offers the power to effect that redemption of time. The lyric section of The Dry Salvages is in the form of a prayer to the Virgin, asking her to protect those who are upon the sea, to comfort those who have lost sons and husbands and to intercede for those who have been swallowed by the ‘dark throat’ of the ocean. With regards to life in time, the prayer is asking Mary, the vehicle through whom the timeless Deity entered the temporal world, to grant a similar manifestation of grace to those at the mercy of the unconsciously malign sea of unredeemed time. The hope to which the supplicant clings is that, even if their sufferings cannot be averted, time’s victims may hear the ‘Perpetual angelus’.

The angelus, the bell which ‘buried the day’ in the Burnt Norton lyric, is rung thrice daily, at the beginning of the day’s work, at midday and at the end of the working day. Its purpose is not merely to mark the passage of time, however, but to assert the eternal significance of one particular moment; for the Roman Catholic office which accompanies the angelus is a call to commemorate the Incarnation. The prayer which ends the angelus is as follows:

63 The former notion is, of course, shared by Heraclitus and Bergson; however, both would have expressed doubt as to the latter possibility.

64 In The Cocktail Party the Unidentified Guest reminds Edward (CPP, pp.384–85):

Ah, but we die to each other daily.  
What we know of other people  
is only our memory of the moments  
During which we knew them. And they have changed since then.  
To pretend that they and we are the same  
is a useful and convenient social convention.

65 Quoted from the Roman Missal. The angelus devotion consists of three Ave Marias with versicles and a collect.
Pour forth, we beseech thee, O Lord, thy grace into our hearts; that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ, thy Son, was made known by the message of an angel, may by his Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of his resurrection, through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

Furthermore, the angelus bell is often associated with the Eucharist, being rung at the moment of Consecration, the Elevation of the Host, when the elements are declared to have been transubstantiated from common bread and wine into the incarnate flesh and blood of Christ.

The prayer for the Incarnation to be reified in present time is answered in the final part of the poem. Eliot begins by ridiculing the various ways in which men and women have attempted to conquer time: spiritism, horoscopes, pseudo-sciences. These, he concludes, are ‘Pastimes and drugs’ which serve to ‘pass’ time rather than to ‘occupy’ it, as the efforts of the saint do. They focus the mind upon the past and the future, and ‘cling to that dimension’ rather than to the present moment of eternity.\(^6^6\) Eliot wrote in ‘Literature and the Modern World’ (p.132):

> We must affirm that there is no more value in the future than there is in the present. That is to say, we must affirm the eternal against the transient; the eternal which has been realized in the past, can be realized in the present; and it is our business to try to bring about a future in which the obstacles to this realization will be less, for the mass of humanity, than they are to-day.

What is important, the poet says, is that we, ‘apprehend|The point of intersection of the timeless/ With time’. This is properly ‘an occupation for the saint’—a saint, we might add, such as Augustine, who devoted himself tirelessly to that end; but all of us at times experience ‘the unattended|Moment, the moment in and out of time’. These moments constitute an entry of the eternal into the quotidian world.\(^6^7\) They partake of the nature of the Incarnation of the Word of God, the Logos, Christ. Thus our personal intimations of meaning form part of the same pattern as the timeless event which bisects history.\(^6^8\)

For Eliot, the Incarnation was the foundational doctrine of Christianity; it was the apprehension which initiated conversion (SE, p.408) and was the dogma in which ‘the fullness of Christian revelation resides’.\(^6^9\) He had previously treated the notion poetically in Chorus VII of *The Rock* (CPP, pp.160–61):

> Then came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in time and of time,
> A moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call

---

A bell is rung three times for each Ave and nine times for the collect. During Paschalide, the period between Easter and Pentecost, the normal prayers are replaced by a devotion beginning with the verse, ‘Regina coeli laetare, alleluia’, which Eliot echoes with his line, ‘Queen of Heaven’. (The epithet is also used of the Virgin in the *Paradiso* XXXI, 1.100.) In this detail, the *Quartets* mimic the Christian calendar, for *The Dry Salvages* comes between *East Coker*, whose associations are with Easter, and *Little Gidding*, which is set at Pentecost.

\(^6^6\) Eliot had criticized such practices before, with his portrait of Mme Sosostris in *The Waste Land* I.

\(^6^7\) In ‘Donne in Our Time’, he went so far as to say that ‘we exist only in particular moments of time’ (Theodore Spencer, ed., *A Garland for John Donne* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1931), p.5).

\(^6^8\) The Christian doctrine of the Logos is distinguished from its Heraclitean and Stoic roots in that it insists that ‘the Word became flesh and lived among us’, a notion which would have been quite foreign to the Greek mind.

history: transecting, bisecting the world of time, a moment in time but not like a moment of time,
A moment in time but time was made through that moment: for without the meaning there is no time, and that moment of time gave the meaning.
Then it seemed as if men must proceed from light to light, in the light of the Word,
Through the Passion and Sacrifice saved in spite of their negative being.  

And also, from the original edition of the play (p.52):

Remember, all you who are numbered for GOD,
In every moment of time you live where two worlds cross,
In every moment you live at a point of intersection,
Remember, living in time, you must live also now in Eternity.

The revelation of the Incarnation is fundamental to the redemption of time in *Four Quartets*. It is the timeless act which allows us to conceive of a present time freed from the parameters of past and future:

Here the impossible union
Of spheres of existence is actual,
Here the past and future
Are conquered, and reconciled.

Moreover, when the Incarnation is affirmed:

right action is freedom
From past and future also.

At this point the parallel with Augustine reasserts itself, for, like his predecessor, Eliot’s natural inclination was to long for the transcendence promised by Neo-Platonism. In *Burnt Norton* I and II the poet had had to remind himself that the experience of ‘reality’ in the rose-garden was both timeless and ‘in time’. Indeed, some commentators have discerned in *Four Quartets* an articulation of the desire to be liberated from time by abandoning it, and to seek union with the Divine in an eternity outside of time and space, notions which owe more to Neo-Platonism than to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. As with Augustine, however, Eliot’s lifelong desire to escape from time altogether could not co-exist with a faith which asserted that meaning had become incarnate in the realm of time and space. As much as he disliked time, Eliot, by placing

---

70 Eliot appears to be exploiting the distinction in New Testament Greek between ‘chronos’, clock-time, and ‘kairos’, an appointed time, a moment which is of special significance in God’s plan. The meaning of ‘kairos’ is illustrated in Romans 5. 6 (‘in due time Christ died for the ungodly’) and in II Corinthians 6. 2 (‘behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation’).

his hope in the Incarnation, had committed himself to fulfilling it according to the pattern he perceived during his experience in the rose-garden. From this point on, the poem will explore time in relation to the order initiated by the Incarnation, and appropriated through faith in the eternal Word. Except for brief backward glances, we have left behind the philosophy of time, and entered the world of theology.

VII ‘Little Gidding’

In its treatment of the theme of time, Little Gidding builds upon the insights of The Dry Sal­vages V. It is set almost entirely in a present dimension, a ‘now’ (the word is repeated several times) with which past and future are harmonized. The opening scene, describing the ‘blos­som’ of hoarfrost upon country hedges, celebrates a conjunction of time and eternity which takes place in, and yet transcends, the natural order:

Midwinter spring is its own season
Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown,
Suspended in time, between pole and tropic.

It is a spring which is ‘not in time’s covenant’, or in ‘the scheme of generation’. It is in time, but not of it. Yet the vision appears to be not so much a sudden release from the natural world—like that in Burnt Norton I—as a union of the natural with the supernatural which in no way qualifies either. It is, to use Eliot’s own terms from Burnt Norton II, a ‘concentration’ of spiritual sensibility without any ‘elimination’ of physical awareness. The illuminative expe­rience does not eclipse the landscape, but intensifies the poet’s experience of it, by revealing inherent within it what, in ‘Marina’, Eliot had termed ‘grace dissolved in place’.

Eliot uses this miraculous union as a metaphor for the community at Little Gidding, which sought to institute a godly life within the temporal world, and not through withdrawal from it, as the monastic orders did. Just as the dazzling midwinter ‘blossom’ inhabits the margins of the physical world, so the historical and spiritual significance of Little Gidding places it where time and eternity meet in an eternal present:

There are other places
Which also are the world’s end, some at the sea jaws,
Or over a dark lake, in a desert or a city—
But this is the nearest, in place and time,
Now and in England . . .

Here, the intersection of the timeless moment

Eliot describes a place and a time redeemed by co-existence with God’s eternal present. Eliot pondered such a community in a ‘Commentary’ in The Criterion:73

72 ‘Time’s covenant’ is perhaps an allusion to God’s covenant with Noah, under which the cycles of the physical world were established: ‘While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease’ (Genesis, 8. 22). The ‘New Covenant’, which Eliot’s vision partakes of, transcends the old, although it does not destroy it. See Chapter 5, p.139.

73 The Criterion, 12, no.46(Oct. 1932), 73–79 (p.75).
The notion that a past age or civilization might be great in itself, precious in the eye of God, because it succeeded in adjusting the delicate relation of the Eternal and the Transient, is completely alien to us.

In 'the Christian conception', he continued, the perfect state is not a static ideal, but 'a state in which each citizen could become perfect. For we cannot banish becoming any more than we can banish being' (p.78). Thus the flux is reconciled with the eternal present; the latter is the pattern described when the former is redeemed by incarnational wisdom.

*Little Gidding* II opens with a lyrical rendering of the Heraclitean cycle of elements. This description of the flux sets the scene for the long narrative passage which follows—the blasted urban landscape of London after an air-raid. However, Eliot immediately qualifies this vision of impermanence with an account of a personal incarnational moment, the colloquy with the 'compound ghost' which occurs in another 'intersection time/ Of meeting nowhere, no before and after'. The 'ghost', a combination of various literary figures, personal acquaintances of Eliot, and perhaps even an alter-ego of Eliot himself, gives an account of life’s transience, and rehearses the meager assortment of ‘gifts’ reserved for old age: increasing debility, anger at the actions of those chained to the wheel of human folly, and the painful recrudescence of one’s own ignoble deeds. This reminds us (as later Part IV will) that time is not redeemed gratuitously in old age; we must be ever purging ourselves of the deterministic tendency to proceed ‘From wrong to wrong’.

*Little Gidding* III elaborates upon the ‘equal mind’ which was recommended in *The Dry Salvages* III for those who wish to escape the bondage of time. There are three responses that each of us can make to the present moment; two of them, attachment and indifference, lead to bondage to the dimension of waste time, the past and the future. We must learn to practice detachment, and to develop a ‘consciousness’ of the kind Eliot described in *Burnt Norton* II, an awareness which is separated from the time of which it is nevertheless a part. When we exist in the present moment and yet are detached from the temporal forces inherent within it, our memory is free to be used for ‘liberation/ From the future as well as the past’. In drawing past events from the memory we can perceive in them the divine pattern which redeems them. Thus, the ‘servitude’ which history once imposed upon us by its false patterns (see *East Coker* II) is superseded by ‘freedom’:

See, now they vanish,
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.

Eliot applies this principle of liberation to the issues surrounding the English Civil War, into which the community at Little Gidding was inadvertently and fatally drawn. It is inappropriate, he declares, either to celebrate the past or to ignore it. Rather, we must detach ourselves from old factions and the principles they stood for and be liberated from past notions of right and wrong. Only then can a pattern be intuited in which the opposing sides will be reconciled. Our meditation can then perceive in them ‘A symbol perfected in death’, which will redeem their actions and make them meaningful to us.

The final redemption of time, when past and future will give way to an everlasting present, is anticipated in *Little Gidding* V. The vocabulary of temporality will then become obsolete:

74The various allusions are listed in the notes to *Little Gidding* (Appendix IV, section II).
What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

The two paths to the still point—the brief ecstatic illumination and the tireless renunciation—will coalesce:

The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew—tree
Are of equal duration.

Because of the yew’s exceptional longevity—in some cases more than a thousand years—75 it has been traditionally associated with immortality. The rose, on the other hand, is the most common emblem of the transience of nature’s beauty.

History will be revealed in its redemptive aspect as a necessary matrix of value in which isolated moments form an eternal pattern:

A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails
On a winter’s afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England.

To live without a sense of the past does not release us from the temporal treadmill, for we merely become ‘enchained’ to the present. But, to live with a perception of the timeless pattern into which the whole of history—including our own past life—fits, enables us to perceive the present moment in its organic relation to the whole.

At this time the pattern is only perceived at certain moments and at certain locations. However, there will come a time, Eliot affirms, when our exploration will cease, when we will complete the cycle and know that it will not have to be repeated, for we will have gained the wisdom we lacked. As Augustine found, however, such a consummation can only be contemplated in religious terms. The resolution depicted in the final lines of the poem involves a return to the garden of Eden, at which point the Divine pattern of personal and historical time will be completed. When we attain this ‘condition of complete simplicity’, we will have fulfilled the original purpose of time and creation—that human kind might, through a synergism of willed devotion and Divine grace, attain union with God. At this point, time itself will, in both senses of the word, have reached its end.

75Eliot knew of one yew—tree which was 1500 years old. It stood in the graveyard of the twelfth–century church of St George’s, in Crowhurst, Surrey, where Eliot spent several holidays in the early 1930s. See Robert Sencourt, T.S. Eliot: A Memoir (London: Garnstone Press, 1971), p.128.
Chapter 4

Into The Rose Garden

Illuminating and suggestive as might be the details of the rose-garden at Burnt Norton and the circumstances surrounding Eliot's visit to it, they cannot in themselves lead us to an adequate understanding of the poem which they inspired. Eliot himself noted in 'The Modern Mind' that the relationship between a poem and the 'experience' which lies behind it is often obscured by the process of artistic creation (UPUC, p.138):

By the time it has settled down into a poem it may be so different from the original experience as to be hardly recognisable. The 'experience' in question may be the result of a fusion of feelings so numerous, and ultimately so obscure in their origins, that even if there be communication of them, the poet may hardly be aware of what he is communicating; and what is there to be communicated was not in existence before the poem was completed.

Eliot chose to communicate the personal significance of the rose-garden experience by fusing it with a multi-faceted literary and philosophical tradition focussed upon the symbolic use of gardens (and especially of rose-gardens) in literature and art, but also embracing the literary and philosophical attitudes towards childhood innocence, and the mediaeval philosophy of beauty and love. It is the tradition which reaches its apex in the work of Dante Alighieri, and an understanding of it is perhaps more salutary to the reader of Burnt Norton and the other Quartets than any account of the poet's aestivations in the Cotswolds.

I The Rose-Garden in Western Thought and Literature

The garden is one of the archetypal images of world literature. In many of the traditional creation myths—the Biblical one being the most influential—the garden is celebrated as the nest of humanity. Indeed, the word 'paradise' is derived from a Persian term for a park or enclosure. Even at its earliest stages, however, the garden was inherently ambiguous: the Garden of Eden was the scene of our first parents' creation in innocence, but the beauty of the natural world (appreciated for itself and without reference to its creator) also played a key role in their deception, temptation and corruption.

1My account of it has been greatly aided by Barbara Seward's The Symbolic Rose (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960). References to this work will be included in the text.
Such ambivalence reflects the dual response to the natural world which has been a constant theme in Western thought and culture. Garden-settings are often associated with the transition from innocence to experience and the clash between good and evil (and especially good and evil sexuality). This can be seen even in non-religious traditions; Circe’s island in the *Odyssey* and the silvan settings in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* are examples with which Eliot would have been thoroughly familiar.

Early Hebrew literature frequently associated the idyllic with the erotic: the *Song of Songs*, for example, uses a garden-setting replete with flower imagery for its description of the meeting of two lovers. The ‘Beloved’ in the poem, frequently taken by Christian interpreters to be a prefiguration of Christ, describes himself as ‘the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys’ (2. 1). The Hebrew word for ‘rose’ appears elsewhere in the canonical Old Testament only once: in the writings of Isaiah where the prophet is foretelling of a time when the (spiritual) desert which is the world will be transformed through the redemptive action of God’s Messiah: ‘The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad thereat; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose’ (35. 1). Thus the association of the rose with Christ as the lover of souls and as the manifestation of divine fruition on earth is firmly established in Judaeo-Christian symbolism.

The historical literature of the New Testament locates several significant incidents in Christ’s life in garden-settings. While it is unlikely that the gospel-writers themselves intended any such symbolism, later Christian writers often extracted allegorical meanings from their accounts. Christ’s anguished night of prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (to which Eliot referred in *The Waste Land* V) is an example which has been used frequently in Christian tradition to represent the conquest of innocence over experience. In taking the weight of Original Sin upon himself—the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden—Christ restores ‘innocence’ through journeying to the very depths of ‘experience’, thus opening the way for the redemption of the garden of the natural world.

Many of the Christian fathers, however, were wary of garden-imagery, and in particular of the symbol of the rose. They banned the weaving of crowns of roses or the use of flower-symbolism in any way similar to that of pagan religion and culture (Seward, p.19). Flowers were commonly associated with the pagan deities: the lily with Astarte the consort of Adonis, the rose with Isis, Horus and Aphrodite (Venus). They were also used in fertility rituals; rose-petals, for instance, were often spread on marriage-beds. For classical poets like Sappho, Anacreon, Martial, and Ovid the rose was primarily a symbol (indeed, it was already a cliché) of the Dionysian aspect of love and beauty.

Nevertheless, as Christianity became established in the Roman Empire, the fear of syncretism dwindled, and the rose was elevated to a central position in the symbolism of the Church. For the religion of love, the rose, the greatest symbol of love, ‘was gradually to acquire a complex of interrelated meanings involved in the basic conception of love as a manifestation of God in the world’ (Seward, p.18). A white rose symbolized Christ, the Rose of Sharon, lover of the Church. A red rose represented his death, and the deaths of the martyrs after him. It was also associated with the Virgin Mary, whom St Bonaventure described as

---

2The significance of the beloved’s identification with the lily will be explored later in this chapter.

3Similar treatment was given to the garden-imagery associated with Christ’s first appearance in to Mary Magdalene in resurrected form, and to some of the natural imagery which appears in his teaching. The analogy in John 15 of Christ with a vine, his followers with its branches and God with the gardener is a familiar example.

4In representations of the crucifixion Christ is often given a crown of rose thorns.
a thornless rose (*rosa sine spina*).\(^5\) Indeed the major devotion in the cult of the Virgin is the rosary, from the Latin, *rosarium*, which means ‘rose–garden’, or ‘garland of roses’. The central image of this sequence of prayers is that of a circle of roses, each of which symbolizes a particular prayer, and whose focus is the *Rosa Mystica*, the apotheosis of human nature in the ideal Woman who rises to become Queen of Heaven.\(^6\)

The late Middle Ages saw a reassertion of the secular tradition in the development of the theme of ‘courtly love’ in poetry. Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*, originally intended as a satirical ‘etiquette’ for lovers, was adopted (with apparent sincerity) by troubadors and minnesingers like Chrétien de Troyes. Their tales of stylized yet passionate wooing were usually set in the enclosed garden (*hortus conclusus*) of a court. In *The Romance of the Rose*, the *locus classicus* of such imagery, the walled garden represents the court which the lover must penetrate to gain access to his lady. The lady herself is symbolized by a rose–bud growing at the centre of the garden surrounded by a protective hedge. The symbolism is sexual—more so as the lover nears his goal—but it gains much of its strength from the religious associations of mythical gardens of perfect bliss.\(^7\)

As C.S. Lewis notes (p.8), the adoration of the woman in courtly love poetry contributed to the growth in popularity of the adoration of Mary. Poets began to interchange conventional epithets for lovers and the lady of courtly romance. It was during this period also that the rosary came to be the most widely–used of devotions. There was a renewed interest among religious poets in the *Song of Songs*. Many of the lyrics of St John of the Cross, for instance, are based upon it (in particular those whose meaning he expounded in his great mystical treatises) and describe the soul’s passionate longing to be with its Divine lover.\(^8\)

Garden–imagery—and the rose especially—was also a favourite image among poets and mystics of the golden age of Sufism, whose work Eliot may have read during his studies at Harvard.\(^9\) Sa’d–uddin Mahmūd Shabistārī’s seventh–century exposition of Sufi mystical philosophy, *The Secret Rose Garden* (*Gulshan i Raz*) contains a complete exposition of the metaphoric vocabulary of Sufism in which the image of the Rose Garden is crucial. Later Sufi poets like Jalāl–uddin Rūmī, and Shaikh Maslah–uddin Sa’di al Shirāzī expressed the divine passion of the soul in terms of a pattern of erotic images in which the female soul longs for the embrace of a male God–bearing image. The Rose Garden was, within this convention, an image of the one–ness of God, and of the consummation of the mystical experience. The focus

\(^5\)The epithet indicates the Virgin’s freedom from the taint of Original Sin. In the fourth century, Sts Basil and Ambrose had claimed that the rose grew without thorns in Paradise before the fall.

\(^6\)See Eithne Wilkins, *The Rose–Garden Game: The Symbolic Background to the European Prayer–Beads* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1969), p.105. Subsequent references will be included in the text. Wilkins notes strong parallels between the Roman Catholic rosary and the devotions of other ‘higher’ religions: the use of beads, for instance, and of circular patterns, which are common to both traditions (pp.26, 43). The Eastern manḍala tradition will be discussed in Chapter 5, p.110.

\(^7\)C.S. Lewis discusses the religious aspects of the courtly love tradition in *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), p.20. Subsequent references will be included in the text.


\(^9\)William James discusses some Sufi writings in his chapter on ‘Mysticism’ in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Eliot’s notes to the chapter are copious (*Gordon, Appendix 1*, p.141).
of Rūmī’s great poem, the *Mathnawi*, is the return of the soul, represented by a nightingale, to the ‘Rose Garden of Union’.*

Of particular note is the *Gulistān* or Rose Garden of Sa’di, which was translated in 1899 by Sir Edwin Arnold, the author of ‘The Light of Asia’, a poem which Eliot admired when a boy. In the introduction Sa’di chides a friend for trying to carry away roses and other flowers (among them hyacinths) from a garden, explaining that while such roses will soon perish, he (Sa’di) can give him an imperishable garden of roses:

Of what use will be a dish of roses to thee?
Take a leaf from my rose garden;
A flower endures but five or six days,
But this Rose-Garden is always delightful.

The rose-leaves which Sa’di’s friend gathers must wither, but such decay is arrested in the eternal rose-garden.

No poet achieved as complete a union of the courtly and the religious traditions of love as Dante did through his masterly use of the symbols of the garden and the rose. The early sonnets of *La Vita Nuova* celebrate his adoration of a lady, Beatrice Portinari, with all the usual courtly conventions and passionate hyperbole. In the *Divina Commedia*, however, he turned his attention to a much wider and more holy theme—the eternal destiny of human kind. Even so, Dante incorporated into this universal scheme his courtly devotion to Beatrice.

It is at Beatrice’s intercession that Dante is rescued from the ‘dark wood’ in which he finds himself at the beginning of the *Inferno*; but it is not until the end of the *Purgatorio*, when Dante reaches the garden of Eden, that he meets again the woman whom he idolized on earth. The Earthly Paradise features all of the familiar appurtenances of the gardens of courtly romance—trees, a stream, birds, and the beloved herself, attended by another woman, in the centre of the garden. What is to occur is not, however, a physical consummation of the love which has inspired Dante’s quest, but a symbolic and spiritual one. His ultimate goal is not Beatrice, but Paradise itself; before he can enter Paradise he must understand the religious implications of his passionate love for Beatrice. His courtly devotion to his lady is revealed as a part of the love which draws all of creation to its fulfillment in the love of God. Thus courtly love is fulfilled and transcended by the divine attraction which is its first cause.

Dante’s description of Paradise itself is replete with garden imagery; saints are pictured as flowers, Paradise as a garden and God as a Gardener. Just as the goal of the lover in the *Roman de la Rose* was the rose symbolic of his beloved, so in climax of the *Paradiso* Dante reaches the Celestial Rose, the vast amphitheatre composed of light which emanates from the Godhead itself, in which sit the assembled saints presided over by the Virgin Mary. It is in the midst of this rose that Dante receives his beatific vision of union with God.

---


11 See Chapter 6, p.161.


13 See *Paradiso* XII, II.12–20; IX, II.22–24; XXII, II.46–57; XXVI, II.64–66; and XXVIII, II.115–17.

14 The rose appears as a symbol of the Virgin in canto XXIII, II.70–4, when Beatrice exhorts Dante to turn from looking at her face to see the beautiful garden which flowers under the rays of Christ, remarking, 'There
As we shall see presently, Dante’s comprehensive poetic vision, with its ‘noble fusion of sexual and religious experience’ (Lewis, p.21), unequalled either by earlier or by later poets, provided the touchstone for Eliot’s attempt to make poetry out of his own experience at Burnt Norton. Those poets who followed Dante could not so serve Eliot because they had inculcated the spirit of the Renaissance; for them the ‘mind’ of Europe was no longer ‘one’. As a result, their use of the imagery of gardens and flowers develops the ambivalence already present in the Roman de la Rose into a profound scepticism.

Boccaccio, Dante’s admirer and biographer, tried without success to include religious truth in poems written in the courtly love tradition. The rather ponderous philosophizing at the end of the Filostrato was the result. The English poets who read Dante experienced similar difficulty. Chaucer tried to imitate him in The House of Fame, parodied him and the whole courtly tradition in The Parliament of Fowls, and settled for a consistently ironical treatment of the genre in his mature works. Spenser exploited the interplay between the erotic and the religious symbolisms of love, beauty and the natural world, but seemed unable to arrive at any final conclusion. In The Fairie Queene, for instance, the natural world appears both as a mask for evil and an image of moral perfection which may lead us to God (or, frequently, to Jove).

In Shakespeare’s time, the garden and its chief symbolic flower, the rose, represented the contradictions and paradoxes of love. It symbolized the transition from chaste, perfect love to dangerous eroticism as often as it did the opposite process of the fullfilment of the love of created things in the love of the Creator. In the same gardens which play host to Rosalind, Orlando, Miranda and Ferdinand, we find Jaques, Antonio and Caliban. These opposing impulses were seldom if ever reconciled in the Jacobean plays, and certainly not in the literature of the next three centuries.

An early obstacle to Eliot’s use of garden imagery was its use and abuse in English letters after the Civil War, the point in history when, according to Eliot, the ‘dissociation of sensibility’ set in. First of all, Milton had consigned the original beauty and purity of Eden to history, and (following Moses) had set an angel at its entrance with a flaming sword. In reaction to this notion of a complete discontinuity between nature and the divine, the Romantics had undertaken an unrestrained adoration of the natural world. The excesses of Wordsworth’s and Shelley’s idealized natural settings obscured for Eliot the true significance of natural symbols in earlier literature. As Barbara Seward explains (p.67), ‘resembling the medieval symbolists in intricacy and indefiniteness, romantic symbolists differed in largely replacing outer traditions with a reliance on inner visions for their values and ideals’.

Eliot’s condemnation of the Romantics was more properly aimed at the lesser poets whom they had produced. At the time Eliot was beginning to write, the garden—tradition in literature was the preserve of the aestheticists. The pre-Raphaelites had revived all things verdant and Arthurian and had turned even Dante into a poet of pure sentiment.15 Roses, in the poetry of Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson, or the paintings of Edward Burne-Jones (his ‘Briar—rose’ series, for instance), were little more than aesthetic counters.

At the same time, W.B. Yeats and his circle were attempting to revive interest in the myths of the Celtic twilight, and in the esoteric philosophy of the Rosicrucian order. According

---

15 Eliot confessed that his appreciation of Beatrice was retarded for many years by Rosetti’s ‘Blessed Damozel’ (SE, p.262).
to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the rose was the supreme alchemical symbol of the divine, and when combined with the Cross, it symbolized the eventual harmonization of contrarities: suffering and beauty, good and evil. For the poet, according to Yeats, the rose was one of the images which float up in the mind out of the Great Memory during trancelike experiences of inspiration, and which function as magic symbols to give access to the spiritual realm. At the core of many of Yeats' early poems, however, was an inexpressible longing which was frequently manifested as a death-wish: the world which could not fulfill the dream of the rose was eventually renounced in favour of the world of the pure imagination.

What first awoke Eliot from this 'nightmare' was his discovery of the French Symbolist poets, for whom the natural world was a repository of hard, concrete symbols. Natural images, they held, and flowers in particular, could express what was by nature inexpressible, and could thereby give access to the spiritual world behind the physical. Mallarmé, for instance, was intrigued by the conflict between the flower of actuality and the perfect 'idea' of a flower which it invoked. In 'L'Après-midi d'un Faune', the rose is used as 'a symbol of the conflicting attitudes towards the sensual and of his artistic inability to transform actuality into the ideality of his dreams' (Seward, p.69). Jules Laforgue, whose poetry had a significant early influence upon Eliot, used the rose as an image of sensual longing and loss; and for Rémy de Gourmont it symbolized the illusions of ecstasy offered by the Church and by sexual love.

Eliot's early poems show clearly the influence of the Symbolist view of the natural world. In his mature work, however, this influence is gradually superceded by that of Dante. The garden and the rose are made available to Eliot, not merely as images of emotional states, but as part of a system of imagery and thought which includes human emotion and locates it within a wider theological scheme.

II  Eliot's Garden Imagery from 'Prufrock' to 'Burnt Norton'

The rose-garden of Burnt Norton I is in many ways merely the culmination of a major strain of imagery which runs throughout Eliot's earlier poetry. The nexus of imagery which includes flowers, gardens and children appears on various occasions in his earlier work as symbolic of the innocence and purity of an inaccessible world of human fulfillment. Initially, these images are used ironically; the world of the garden forms a contrast to the sordid world of sexuality and degradation which obsessed Eliot in much of his early work. In 'Ode', for instance (from the volume Ara Vos Prec), the contrast is almost violent:

When the bridegroom smoothed his hair  
There was blood upon the bed.  
Morning was already late.  
Children singing in the orchard  
(Io Hymen, Hymenae)

16 This aesthetic can be traced to Neo-Platonism and mediaeval philosophy. Metaphor and symbol were held to be the only means by which those who had had a vision of the Primal Light could describe it; although such images were approximations to and not descriptions of the Divine essence, they had the power actually to lead us to the reality. See the passage quoted below from Dante's Epistle to Can Grande, p.71.
Succuba eviscerate. 17

In other poems the discrepancy between the image and its setting is more subtle but equally as marked. This is especially true of the opening to The Waste Land, whose lilacs—harbingers of spring and reminders of the passions of previous years—are decidedly unwelcome to those who would rather forget past failures. It is another spring flower, however, which features in the central incident of the poem:

'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
'They called me the hyacinth girl.'
—Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

The hyacinth is a symbol both of heavenly aspiration and of vernal sensuality and fertility. The vision associated with it here is simultaneously a vision of innocence and of experience. It is a collocation of the most intense sexual and spiritual emotion, but one which is accompanied by a sense of paralysis. The poet sees his sexual attraction as in fact an aspiration to the spiritual, but he draws back from the pursuit of either. He is caught in the personal and moral dilemma which Eliot discussed in his essay on Baudelaire. What distinguishes human sexuality from that of animals, Eliot wrote, is 'the knowledge of Good and Evil' which accompanies the initiation into sexual awareness (SE, pp.428–29). Sexuality has a moral and spiritual aspect: the longing for communion with another human being is an expression of the longing for communion with God. However, the alienation of humanity from God has perverted sexual desire—a reflection, as it were, of the desire for God—with the possessive impulse. In the hyacinth garden the poet is overwhelmed by his sudden awareness that sexuality is both necessary and evil.

An understanding of the biographical background to the incident is of some help here (although any speculations as to Eliot’s private intentions must remain tentative). The hyacinth girl passage of The Waste Land is a refinement of La Figlia Che Piange, for whom the original was most probably Emily Hale (see Chapter 2, p.16):

Clasp your flowers to you with a pained surprise—
Fling them to the ground and turn
With a fugitive resentment in your eyes: . . .

She turned away, but with the autumn weather
Compelled my imagination many days,
Many days and many hours:
Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers.

However, a passage which Eliot wrote in April 1934 suggests that his memory of Miss Hale may have combined in his imagination with that of another close friend: 18

17 The poem was deleted when Ara Vos Prec was reprinted as Poems, 1920.

I am willing to admit that my own retrospect [of Paris in 1911] is touched by a sentimental sunset, the memory of a friend coming across the Luxembourg Gardens in the late afternoon, waving a branch of lilac, a friend who was later (so far as I could find out) to be mixed with the mud of Gallipoli.

The friend in question was Jean Verdenal, with whom Eliot shared lodgings in Paris in 1910. Their friendship, described by a later acquaintance of Eliot's as an 'affinity of hearts',19 was ended with Verdenal's death (apparently by drowning) in 1915. The dedication to Eliot's first volume of poetry reads:

For Jean Verdenal, 1889–1915
mort aux Dardanelles.20

To maintain, as some have done, that the relationship between the two men was in some way questionable is an unwarranted extrapolation from the known facts.21 Nevertheless, it is apparent from the poem itself that Eliot is not simply remembering the episode described in La Figlia Che Piange. The 'flowers', whose species was not mentioned in the earlier poem, are now identified as hyacinths, the flower named after Hyacinthos, the young man whom Apollo (the God of Poetry) loved, and who was killed accidentally.22 Moreover, the poet's sense of loss is communicated a number of times in the poem by the phrase which Shakespeare uses of a drowned man in The Tempest: "those are pearls that were his eyes" (emphasis added).

What the hyacinth-garden incident records is the memory of two moments of intense personal feeling, one for a woman and one for a man. The feeling was accompanied originally by the paralyzing sense of spiritual alienation, which, in the poet's retrospect, has become linked inextricably with the pervasive degradation to which all human relations are heir. Even the memory of the sublime aspect of that attraction—the purity and innocence of the woman, the warmth and friendship of the man—is marred by the travesty of Mrs Porter and the unsavoury homosexual merchant, Mr Eugenides. Mocked by his memory, the poet is left with his guilt and remorse to face the desolation and emptiness of life alienated from both God and man.

This 'garden-experience' of Eliot's cannot but be compared with Dante's description of his first meeting with Beatrice in La Vita Nuova, which Eliot described as a 'type of sexual experience' (SE, p.273). This intense adolescent passion inspires Dante's devotion, but its...

---


20 Later editions added an epigraph from the Purgatorio:

Or puoi la quantitate
comprender dell'amor ch'a te mi scalda,
quando dismento nostra vanitate,
trattando l'ombre come cosa salda.

('Now canst thou comprehend the measure of the love which warms me towards thee, when I forget our nothingness, and treat shades as a solid thing', XXI, II.133-36.)

21 The suggestion was first made by John Peter in an article in 'A New Interpretation of The Waste Land', Essays in Criticism, 2, no.3 (July 1952), 242–66. Eliot took legal action (unsuccessfully) to have all copies of the article destroyed.

22 The passage from The Criterion specifies lilacs, which appear in the opening lines of The Waste Land as symbols of a painful memory.
consummation is placed beyond his reach by the death of Beatrice. Eliot described Dante's efforts to deal with this remembered passion in his later poetry as 'brave attempts to fabricate something permanent and holy out of his personal animal feelings' (emphasis added), and as the 'struggle—which alone constitutes life for the poet—to transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal' (SE, p.137).23

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot's persona can fabricate nothing out of the personal feeling of the hyacinth-garden;24 instead he is overwhelmed by his sense of loss and guilt, and his impotent disgust with the modern world.25 In 'The Fire Sermon', he is mocked by a reminder of the lost world of holy innocence in 'ces voix d'enfants chantant dans la coupole'. The quotation is from Verlaine's sonnet *Parsifal*. Verlaine describes the grail ceremony which celebrates the victory of *Parsifal*; the moment of elevation, when, as in the mass, the Holy Grail is lifted, is accompanied by a choir of boys in the adjacent dome. In Eliot's poem, however, the children's voices are a mocking reminder of holiness in a disintegrated mental and physical landscape.

This may not be the whole story, however, for Verlaine's own comments on the poem indicate that he intended the choir of boys to represent an unexpected temptation of the most perverse kind, which defeats *Parsifal* moments before his success is to be perfected. This further layer of complexity reiterates the notion of the inseparability of spiritual and sexual ecstasy. At this moment, they cannot coexist without the latter corrupting the former; in *Burnt Norton* I, however, the possibility of a progression from the sensual to the spiritual will become much more real.

Eliot's next major poem, 'The Hollow Men', explores further the desolation of those who have been unable to achieve communion with others or with God. The parallel with Dante is even more germaine here, for the poem is set in Dante's Limbo, to which it alludes several times.26 Like the inhabitants of Limbo, the hollow men know that fulfillment and happiness exist in 'death's other kingdom', but know also that they will never attain it. They are mocked by desires which they cannot fulfill ('lips that would kiss', 'Between the desire/ And the spasm

---

23It is his success at this transmutative struggle, Eliot said in his Clark Lectures in 1926, which sets Dante apart from lesser poets who could not make the same transformation. Of Donne, he remarked: "There is a great deal of the modern "recherche de l'absolu", the disappointed romanticism, the vexation or resignation at finding the world other than one wanted it to be. The literature of disillusionment is the disillusionment of immaturity. It is in this way that I have ventured to affirm that Dante is more a man of the world than is Donne". Eliot went on to criticize another former mentor, Jules Laforgue, who, he said, needed 'a *Vita Nuova* to justify, dignify and integrate his sentiments toward the jeune fille in a system of the universe'. Dante's poetry uses the same material as Laforgue's, Eliot stressed, 'the material of adolescence; but it is handled by a mature man with a philosophy which assigned a place to such experience'. Whereas Laforgue never passed into maturity, Dante discovered 'the method of utilizing, transforming instead of discarding, the emotions of adolescence'. Quotations are from Ronald Bush, *T.S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style*, p.84.

24Eliot includes in *The Waste Land* I several allusions to the plight of the damned in Dante's *Inferno*. See his own notes to ll.63–64.

25That disgust had previously led Eliot to parody Dante's experience. In an early poem, 'Dans le Restaurant', a French waiter insists upon telling a lone diner the details of his first 'sexual' experience, when as a child he gave primroses (a symbol of youth and purity, but also of pertness) to a girl younger than himself and then tickled her. The diner recoils in disgust from the waiter's account of this 'instant de puissance et de délire'.

26The shades whom Dante meets in the third canto of the *Inferno* are consigned to Limbo because they have chosen neither Heaven nor Hell; they are not 'lost/ Violent souls', but individuals who have made no effort to alter the spiritual death into which they were born. Like Eliot's hollow men, the inhabitants of Limbo are 'Gathered on this beach of the tumid river' and mourn for 'death's other kingdom', Purgatory, in which there is some hope of salvation, albeit accompanied by pain.
... Falls the shadow') and mocked by an inaccessible flower—this time not the hyacinth, but the rose, and specifically by Dante’s ‘multifoliate rose’, the symbol of hope which is the goal of all of the redeemed souls in purgatory.

After ‘The Hollow Men’, Eliot’s poetry changes in response to his growing commitment to orthodox Christianity. In Ash Wednesday his use of natural imagery, though still ambiguous, takes on a more expiative, and more Dantine, flavour. The allusions and imagery of the poem—the trees, the flowers, the fountains, and especially the mysterious ‘Lady’—place it imaginatively in the Earthly Paradise at the summit of Mount Purgatory. After the desiccated world of The Waste Land and ‘The Hollow Men’, Ash Wednesday introduces into Eliot’s poetry the notion of the mind (or the soul) as a garden, with its own natural rhythms and creative processes.

The process to be undergone in this instance is penitence: like Dante’s Earthly Paradise, Eliot’s garden is the scene of purgative remorse and renunciation, of the remembrance of past deeds and loves and the forsaking of any aspect of them which does not conform to the one final object of human desire. In Purgatorio XXVIII Dante reaches the summit of Purgatory and finds himself in a perfectly beautiful garden. A young woman (later identified as Matilda) whom he sees picking flowers tells Dante that the garden is Eden, the ‘nest of the human race’ (XXVIII, 1.78). She explains also the two streams of the garden: the Lethe, which washes away the memory of all sin, and the Eunoë, which restores the memory of all righteous deeds. Both, she says, must be tasted before a soul can proceed to heavenly bliss.

As they proceed along opposite banks of the Lethe, a flash of light suddenly illuminates the scene, and a pageant appears of elders and beasts accompanying a chariot. From their midst arises a form which, although concealed by veils and robes, Dante recognizes as that of Beatrice. He senses again ‘the ancient flame’ of his love for her (XXX, 1.48), but immediately Beatrice rebukes him sternly. She proceeds to rehearse to all present his many sins, recounting how, after her death, Dante turned to other earthly beauties instead of pursuing the spiritual beauty and virtue of which she had been a reflection. Dante is reduced to tears and collapses with grief and shame, whereupon Beatrice instructs Matilda to plunge him in the Lethe. He emerges purged of both the memory and the guilt of his sin. Beatrice instructs Dante in various truths concerning the Church, and then leads him to the banks of the Eunoë. Here the memory of good deeds will be restored to him, although it will no longer be painfully associated with his sin. He will remember his sin, but as an external accident which does not now belong to his soul.

In his 1929 essay on Dante—written at the same time as Ash Wednesday—Eliot explained the crucial importance of Dante’s penitence in the Earthly Paradise. Dante’s experience at the summit of Purgatory, he wrote, constitutes ‘the recrudescence of an ancient passion’, the adolescent passion for Beatrice, ‘in a new emotion, in a new situation, which comprehends, enlarges, and gives a meaning to it’ (SE, p.262). Eliot goes on to describe the ‘passionate conflict’ within Dante ‘of the old feelings and the new; the effort and triumph of a new renunciation, greater than the renunciation at the grave, because a renunciation of feelings that persist beyond the grave’. These feelings must be renounced, for now that Beatrice has been transformed into a heavenly being—whose beauty is intensified as it reflects even more faithfully the beauty of God—the physical element of Dante’s passion can no longer have any purpose. Dante must perceive the significance of his initial emotion, not in its personal ‘origins’, but in its completion in a reintegration with its ‘final cause’, which is ‘the attraction towards God’
In *Ash Wednesday* Eliot adopts elements of this Dantian scheme to describe his own penitential process. The poem opens in a mood of hopelessness: the poet has no expectation that he will be able to escape his guilt. He laments that he:

\[
\text{cannot drink}
\]

\[
\text{There, where trees flower, and springs flow.}
\]

In the second part of the poem, however, the poet finds himself 'dissembled', literally torn apart and eaten by 'three white leopards' presided over by a 'Lady'. Eliot does not make any explicit identification of the Lady, but the further echoes of the *Purgatorio* which follow reinforce the analogy with Beatrice. In his dismembered state, the poet can affirm:

\[
\text{As I am forgotten}
\]

\[
\text{And would be forgotten, so I would forget.}
\]

His scattered bones, moreover, can offer a prayer to the 'Lady':

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Lady of silences} \\
\text{Calm and distressed} \\
\text{Torn and most whole} \\
\text{Rose of memory} \\
\text{Rose of forgetfulness . . .} \\
\text{The single Rose} \\
\text{Is now the Garden} \\
\text{Where all loves end.}
\end{align*}
\]

The Lady, the single Rose which is the focus of the garden of courtly, sensual love, becomes the Garden wherein all previous loves end. As in the *Commedia*, the goal of the quest can be achieved only through renunciation of the sublunary aspect of love, which, for Dante (and perhaps for Eliot) involves forsaking the cherished memory of an adolescent passion for a particular woman. This forgetfulness is accompanied, paradoxically, by the memory of the attraction to God which was implicit within the original emotion. Once this is done (or, rather, granted through Divine grace) the sensual imagery of the garden and the central rose can be restored in their spiritual form and meaning. The poet will be able to begin the final part of his journey in which the earthly garden of love will be transformed into the single multifoliate Rose of Heaven.

This consummation is still a distant hope for the poet of *Ash Wednesday*. In the third part of the poem he must resist the 'distraction' of sensual nature, with its 'enchanting' flute, and its blossoms, lilacs and other images of fecundity. All must be renounced for the symbolic

\[
\text{27} \quad \text{Eliot also attributed to Baudelaire an awareness of this need to integrate personal feelings into a higher order. Of Baudelaire's poem \textit{Le Balcon} he wrote 'there is all the romantic idea, but something more: the reaching out towards something which cannot be had in, but which may be had partly through, personal relations. Indeed, in much romantic poetry the sadness is due to the exploitation of the fact that no human relations are adequate to human desires, but also to the disbelief in any further object for human desires than that which, being human, fails to satisfy them. One of the unhappy necessities of human existence is that we have to "find things our for ourselves." If it were not so, the statement of Dante would, at least for poets, have done once for all' (SE, p.428).}
\]
garden of Part IV, the garden which 'bears away' the 'fiddles and the flutes' and 'restores' the lady, who urges the poet to 'redeem the time' which he has squandered. Despite various signs of hope, the penitence is not completed in the course of the poem. The final lines constitute a prayer to the Virgin for the grace to be able to 'sit still'. Significantly, however, Eliot quotes a phrase from the *Paradiso* as part of this prayer: 'Our peace in His will'.

Unlike Dante, Eliot never wholly emerges from what may be called his 'purgatorial' period; indeed, the refining fires will continue to burn to the very end of the *Quartets*. However, his subsequent work includes 'hints and guesses' of that which lies beyond purgation, and his use of the familiar nexus of garden imagery undergoes a significant change. No longer does it appear as a reminder of unattainable happiness, or as a temptation to be renounced. Instead, it provides the first 'hints' of the world beyond purgation. In *Marina* (1930), for instance, the most positive and redemptive of the *Ariel* poems, we catch the scent of pine-trees and hear:

> Whispers and small laughter between leaves and hurrying feet  
> Under sleep, where all the waters meet.

Again, in *New Hampshire* (1934), Eliot describes:

> Children's voices in the orchard  
> Between the blossom- and the fruit-time.

To these may be added the children in the rose-garden of *Burnt Norton* I. It is here that will be found the first intimations of the fruition of the purgative process. What Eliot describes is first of all a 'recrudescence' of the earlier passion of the hyacinth garden; walking through the garden with his companion, he looks once more into the 'heart of light' and recalls 'what might have been'. At the same time, however, there is a definite understanding that the sensuality which was associated with the vision in *The Waste Land* can now be transcended through an awareness of its final cause. The experience of *Burnt Norton* I is an opportunity—albeit an imaginative and 'unreal' one—for the consummation of the sensual in the spiritual, a merging of the former into the latter and a reintegration of the world of experience into the world of innocence. The vision of the 'heart of light' now bears the marks of a genuine, liberating mystical experience, a timeless moment which, although deeply personal, can nevertheless be made into something universal and impersonal which has the capacity to redeem all that has been lost.

In placing his rose-garden experience within the Dantesque model of progression from the sensual to the spiritual, Eliot is seeking to imitate the aspect of Dante's poetic achievement which he admired most: the disciplined integration of a personal love nostalgia into the vast scheme of mediaeval Christian theology and philosophy. He is also invoking thereby those aspects of that framework of thought—in particular, the mediaeval theory of light, beauty and love—which enabled Dante to create a poetic order in which his emotions could be fused with their final cause. Before we examine the rose-garden passage itself, it will therefore be helpful to consider the philosophical scaffolding of Dante's love-vision.

---

28 *Paradiso* III, 1.85. The phrase is spoken by Piccarda dei Donati, who tells Dante that her bliss is unmitigated by her lowly position in Paradise. In his 1929 essay on Dante, Eliot cited the phrase as a perfect fusion of poetry and philosophy (*SE*, p.270).

29 As was noted in Chapter 3, p.42, this understanding is threatened by the subtle temptation in the opening passage of *Burnt Norton* to view time as 'unredeemable' and the rose-garden experience as merely a 'deception'.

III  Light, Beauty and Love in Mediaeval Philosophy

Dante operated within the framework of scholastic philosophy which was based upon the belief in an all-encompassing order which resolved the multiplicity of the universe into a unity of first principles, and finally into the indivisible being of God. This order was held to be implicit in the created universe, and therefore available to the rational operation of human intellect. Everything—every physical ‘accident’, every recognizable group of such accidents, every tendency, every concept of mind and sense—had its proper place within the universal scheme of hierarchies whose culmination was God himself.

(i) Light

Knowledge of this order is, it was thought, innate within the human soul, as it is innate within the souls of angels and of animals. Due to the fall, however, an understanding of the Divine Order is only available to the conscious mind as it is articulated. It is gained through the progressive expression in words and concepts of what the soul knows intuitively. Words and mental constructs fail, however, when it comes to expressing the highest orders of truth. As Dante explained in his letter to Can Grande:

we see many things with the intellect for which there are no verbal signs. This fact Plato makes plain enough by the use he makes of metaphors in his books: for he saw many things by the light of the intellect which he was unable to express in the appropriate words.

At this point the discourses of theology, philosophy and poetry converge upon the metaphorical and the symbolic modes of expression.

In 1929, Eliot discussed the ‘utility’ of Dante’s metaphoric voice for expressing the ineffable in poetry. Dante’s ‘figures’, he wrote (SE, p.267):

are not merely antiquated rhetorical devices, but serious and practical means of making the spiritual visible. An understanding of the rightness of such imagery is a preparation for apprehending the last and greatest canto, the most tenuous and most intense. Nowhere in poetry has experience so remote from ordinary experience been expressed so concretely, by a masterly use of that imagery of light which is the form of certain types of mystical experience.

The perfect metaphor is what it describes, Eliot says, and ‘the form of certain types of mystical experience’ is light.

Eliot appears to have had in mind Dante’s use of the theory of ‘light metaphysics’ which held that since light was ‘predicated of spiritual rather than corporeal substances’, a true

---


31 The latter emphasis is added.

vision of God would consist of pure light. Indeed, for the metaphysicians of light, the entire chain of being—physical phenomena, the human intellect, the soul, celestial beings and God himself—was in fact a scale of forms of light. God, the ‘One’, was the Primal Light, the source, or lux. Perfect, uncreated, immaterial and intellectual, this light was perceptible only to the eye of the perfected soul. The descending hierarchy of being (through angels, humans, animals and inanimate creation) corresponded to a scale of forms of light, which became increasingly sensible and material, although each retained an affinity with its Creator through its measure of lumen, the splendour of radiated light, the ‘image’ of God.

The theory was first attributed to Plato and was continued by the Manicheans, Stoics, Gnostics and Neo-Platonists before being adopted into Christian philosophy by Dionysius, Augustine and Johannes Scotus Erigena. Its leading exponent in Dante’s day was Robert Grosseteste (c.1175–1253), who in his influential work De Luce argued from both a scientific and a theological point of view that light is the first principle of the universe.

Whether or not Dante followed Grosseteste, or, with Aquinas, stopped short of a literal identification of light and the Divine Essence, the allegory of the Commedia certainly reveals a universe constituted of Love and of Beauty in the form of Light. Terms of vision and light are repeated throughout the Commedia, and especially in the Paradiso (although even the Inferno has an ordered hierarchy of light and shadow). The opening lines of the Paradiso, for instance, speak of the glory of God penetrating the universe and glowing in various degrees of brightness through the created order. Later, in canto XIII, 11.54–66, Thomas Aquinas explains Divine emanation to Dante:

for that living Light which so outgoeth from its Source that it departeth not therefrom, nor from the Love that maketh three with them, doth, of its goodness, focus its own raying, as though reflected, in nine existences, eternally abiding one. Thence it descendeth to the remotest potencies, down, from act to act, becoming such as maketh now mere brief contingencies; by which contingencies I mean the generated things which are produced from seed, or seedless, by the moving

---

33 Eliot had himself used the imagery of light to describe God in Choruses IX and X from The Rock (CPP, pp.165–66):

Light
Light
The visible reminder of Invisible Light . . . .
O Light Invisible, we praise Thee!
Too bright for mortal vision.

34 In ‘Virgil and the Christian World’ (OPP, p.131) Eliot cited the word lume (‘radiated light’) as illustrative of the crucial difference between the Aeneid and the Divine Comedy. The word, ‘as used by Dante, has a meaning which belongs only to explicit Christianity, fused with a meaning which belongs to mystical experience’.

35 In the Republic 507a–509d, Plato compares the illuminative function of light with that of the ‘Idea of the Good’ which mediates between the Truth and the Intellect. (Plato may not have intended the literal identification attributed to him by the Neo-Platonists and Augustine.)

36 See, for instance, Augustine’s Confessions VII, ch.10; or his commentary on the book of Genesis, De Genesi ad Litteram, Books VII and XII.

heaven.\textsuperscript{38}

Throughout the \textit{Paradiso} the souls and the angels are manifested as 'lights',\textsuperscript{39} and are arranged hierarchically in concentric circles.

God himself appears earlier in the \textit{Paradiso} as an immaterial light which manifests itself as a minute point of light of infinite intensity on the surface of the ninth sphere. Around this point revolve the concentric circles of angels, the stars, planets, indeed the entire universe.\textsuperscript{40} In the final cantos, however, Dante enters 'the heaven which is pure light; light intellectual full-charged with love' (XXX, ll.39–40). Here the infinitessimal point is revealed as simultaneously the \textit{primum mobile}, which encloses within its immensity the whole of the corporeal universe. The vision of the Primal Light (\textit{la prima luce}, XXIX, l.136) is ultimately the vision of all (XXXIII, ll.82–90):

\begin{quote}
Oh grace abounding, wherein I presumed to fix my look on the eternal light so long that I wearied my sight thereon! Within its depths I saw ingathered, bound by love in one volume, the scattered leaves of all the universe; substance and accidents and their relations, as though together fused, after such fashion that what I tell of is one simple flame \textit{[un semplice lume]}.
\end{quote}

(ii) Beauty

According to the metaphysicists of light, the structural principle of the universe of forms of light was Beauty, the presence of God in creation through radiated light. For Dionysius, Good, Light and Beauty were inseparable as primary effects of the primal Cause (\textit{Celestial Hierarchies IV}). The created universe is a hierarchy of luminous incarnations of the Primal Light; as Dante explains in the \textit{Convivio} III, ch.2, 'inasmuch as every effect retains something of the nature of its cause . . . every form possesses, in a fashion, the existence of the divine nature'.\textsuperscript{41} Each creature manifested the image of God, according to the measure of light it had received. In the \textit{Purgatorio} XV, ll.67–70, Virgil explains the heavenly source of virtue:

\begin{quote}
That infinite and ineffable Good, that is on high, speedeth so to love as a ray of light comes to a bright body. As much of ardour as it finds, so much of itself doth it give.
\end{quote}

Thus beauty is manifested as light and through vision, the sense associated with light.\textsuperscript{42}

What the eye perceived in an object was its species, or \textit{forma}, from which Latin derives its word \textit{formosa}, meaning 'beautiful'. The purpose of the 'form' of created beings is to make

\textsuperscript{38}See also Beatrice's account of the phenomenon in canto II, ll.133–148.

\textsuperscript{39}See, for example, cantos XIII, l.29; XXIII, l.110; and XXIV, l.153.

\textsuperscript{40}See cantos II, l.114; XXVIII, l.41; XXX, l.108; and XXXIII. This image is a source—although not the only source—for Eliot's 'still point of the turning world'.

\textsuperscript{41}The translation is Thomas Okey's, Temple Classics edition (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1903), pp.142–43. Subsequent references will be inserted in the text.

\textsuperscript{42}Eyesight was held in mediaeval philosophy to be the most 'knowing' of the senses. It could perceive beauty, whereas the other senses were limited to the perception of 'goodness'. In \textit{Paradiso} XXVIII (ll.109–11) Beatrice notes that the state of blessedness 'is founded on the act that seeth, not that which loveth, which after followeth'.
known the Creator (who was praised as *formosissimus et speciosissimus*—'most beautiful, and having the utmost possible form') by reflecting his light.\(^{43}\) Each creature was thus a mirror, or *speculum*, of God; and God himself could be approached through 'speculation', the contemplation of the reflection of his essence in mirrors of ever-growing purity and beauty. In his *Epistle to Can Grande* (section 21; p.106) Dante wrote:

> it is clear that both the essence and the virtue of any thing proceed from the first thing, and are received by things of lesser intelligence as if from something sending out rays; and that these things in turn reflect the rays from the higher things, like mirrors, to the lower things.\(^{44}\)

Eliot refers obliquely to this point of mediaeval thought in the lines preceding the rose-garden vision:

> What might have been is an abstraction
> Remaining a perpetual possibility
> Only in a world of speculation.

In other words, when the world is taken to be a system of mirrors which reflect the Divine reality rather than express an individual existence, the purely earthly limitations of time, space and history are revealed as fictions. There exists an alternative world of 'speculative' meaning.\(^{45}\)

Corporeal—and especially human—beauty was given a very important function in luring us towards God. Each living being was an 'image' of the Divine Life, manifested in matter; but whereas the souls of plants and animals were drawn from 'compounds having potency' by 'the ray and movement of the sacred lights', human life was 'breathed without mean by the supreme benificence', which 'enamoured [it] of itself, so that thereafter it doth ever long for it' (*Paradiso* VII, II.139–144). Human beauty was therefore held to be an especially revealing *speculum*: 'the human soul, which is the noblest form of all those that are generated beneath the heaven, receives more of the divine nature than any other' (*Convivio* III, ch.2, p.143). For Dante, a foretaste of heavenly bliss may be drawn from looking upon the bodily aspect of his lady—especially her eyes and her smile (*Convivio* III, ch.8).\(^{46}\) Yet to dwell upon that aspect would be to overlook its spiritual significance, for it is 'by reason of the excellence of her soul, [that] sensible beauty appeareth' (III, ch.8, p.179).

Thus it is Beatrice, the surpassing *speculum* who guides Dante through the universe of *specula* to God himself.\(^{47}\) At each stage of the journey, Beatrice radiates a greater intensity of reflected light and therefore appears more beautiful. To compensate for her increasing brightness, and to prepare him for the beatific vision, Dante's powers of vision have to be

---

\(^{43}\)See Augustine, *De Vera Religione*, 18, 35; *P.L.*, 34: col.137.

\(^{44}\)See also *Purgatorio* XV, II.70–75, and *Paradiso* XXIX, II.142–45: 'See now the height and breadth of the eternal worth, since it hath made itself so many mirrors *speculi* wherein it is reflected, remaining in itself one as before'. (Dante is here referring specifically to the angels.) The image originated with Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchies* III, ch.2.

\(^{45}\)See also the note on Eliot's allusions to Alice's looking-glass world, below p.80.

\(^{46}\)The Italian word for eyes is *luci*, which means literally 'lights'.

\(^{47}\)In *Purgatorio* XXXI, II.121–23, Dante sees reflected in her eyes the changing shape of the Gryphon, who symbolizes the dual nature of the Incarnate Christ.
renewed several times. Beatrice leaves Dante only as he catches sight of the Virgin, whose
radiance surpasses that of all of the saints (XXXI, l.123); and it is she, the archetypal ‘God­
bearing image’, who grants him his vision of the Light of God.

(iii) Love

The motive force in this process is Love; indeed, Love, according to mediaeval theology, was
both the motivation and the goal of all movement. In Aristotelian tradition, Love is the natural
longing of anything towards its object, its proper place in the scheme of the universe. All things
have a desire to attain the place that is natural to them, and the goal of all movement is the state
of rest. Thus, man loves because he is not in his proper place; he is alienated from God who
implanted within his unique and immortal soul a natural desire to return to its Creator.

Dante deals with the philosophy of Love in Purgatorio XVI–XVIII, the cantos at the very
centre of the Commedia. Love is a natural and holy instinct, Virgil explains, but, when
perverted from its proper end, it can be ‘the seed of every virtue in you, and of every deed
that deserves punishment’ (XVII, l.103–05). Love perceives the specific virtue of substantial
forms, the ‘inward image’ of God in an object; it is attracted to it and yearns for union with it. In
the Convivio III, ch.2, Dante describes love as ‘a spiritual union of the soul and the loved thing’,
whereby the soul seeks to ‘fortify its own being’ through union with God; ‘And because it is
in the excellences of nature and of reason that the divine excellence manifests itself, therefore
the human soul naturally unites herself with them in spiritual fashion, the more swiftly and the
more mightily in proportion as they appear more perfect’ (pp.142–43).

Thus the love we feel for created things is not so much a physical attraction as a spiritual
impulse, responding to the reflection of God in corporeal beauty; and yet we must learn to
purge this instinct of any sensual tendency and to direct it towards its fulfillment in the love
of God. Dante describes the soul, ‘like a pilgrim’, turning to one thing and then another in
its search for the highest Good (Convivio IV, ch.12, p.289), and in La Vita Nuova and the
Commedia he describes a lover who, in his pursuit of beauty, discovers that he is in fact seeking
the universal and absolute Beauty. ‘The final cause’, which, in Eliot’s words, ‘is the attraction
towards God’, is reached by the progression from ‘lower’ to ‘higher . . . carnal love, the
transition from Beatrice living to Beatrice dead, rising to the Cult of the Virgin’ (SE, pp.274–
75).

The union with the Divine is, moreover, a re-union; for Dante implies in the Commedia a
kind of Platonic ‘anamnesis’ as the initial inspiration of human longing for God. According
to Plato, the soul, in its pre-existent state, follows in the train of the gods, witnessing all the
perfect forms of Beauty, Wisdom, and Justice of which the earthly phenomena are shadows.
Before being implanted in a body, however, the soul is bathed in the river of forgetfulness
and enters the world innocent. It can nevertheless be reminded of the world of perfection
by the contemplation of corporeal beauty, which inspires it with a nostalgic longing for its
pre-existent bliss.

One such occasion, in canto XXX, is used by Eliot in Burnt Norton I. See below, p.84.

Eliot marked the passages on Love in his copy of the Commedia. See Soldo, ‘Eliot’s Dantean Vision and his
Markings in his Copy of the Divina Commedia’, p.17. Subsequent references will be included in the text.

It will be recalled that Dante’s Earthly Paradise contains a river of forgetfulness, the Lethe, and that Dante
re-enters the world of innocence only after he has been dipped in it (Purgatorio XXXI).
This idea was first adapted into Christian philosophy in the early work of Augustine. Initially he accepted the Platonic doctrine completely, but in later works he baulked on the notion of the pre-existence of souls, and adapted the Platonic terminology to another purpose. In *Confessions* VII, ch.17, he notes that some knowledge of God must be lodged in the memory if a soul is to recognize him at a later stage. The immanence of God in his *specula* awakens in the soul the memory, not of a pre-existent state, but of the moment of its individual creation.\(^51\) In the *Purgatorio*, Virgil explains that the rational soul is a direct creation of God, breathed into the embryo during gestation.\(^52\)

The primary purpose of corporeal beauty is to remind the soul of the perfect beauty which surrounded it at its special creation.\(^53\) Thus possessed, the soul begins its quest, devoting itself to the beautiful corporeal forms at first, but then renouncing them for the spiritual forms to which they point. Augustine's moment of vision described in *Confessions* VII, ch.17 (pp.151–52), is a classic example of an intimation of God brought about through the process of 'speculation' and culminating in a realization of the divine residue lodged in the memory:

> For when I inquired how it was that I could appreciate the beauty of bodies, both celestial and terrestrial . . . I realized that I had found the unchangeable and true eternity of truth above my changeable mind.

> And thus by degrees I was led upward from bodies to the soul which perceives them by means of the bodily senses, and from there on to the soul’s inward faculty, to which the bodily senses report outward things . . . and thence on up to the reasoning power . . . . And when the power of reason within me also found that it was changeable, it raised itself up to its own intellectual principle . . . . Then, without any doubting, it cried out that the unchangeable was better than the changeable. From this it follows that the mind somehow knew the unchangeable, for, unless it had known it in some fashion, it could have had no sure ground for preferring it to the changeable. And thus with the flash of a trembling glance, it arrived at *that which is*. And I saw thy invisibility understood by means of the things that are made. But I was not able to sustain my gaze. My weakness was dashed back, and I lapsed again into my accustomed ways, carrying along with me nothing but a loving memory of my vision, and an appetite for what I had, as it were, smelled the odor of, but was not yet able to eat.

Similarly, the physical beauty of Beatrice reminds Dante of his momentary experience of the beauty and light of God. Initially, however, it is the erotic attraction which dominates. This is interrupted suddenly by Beatrice's death; and Dante begins the process of 'disillusion' which Eliot described in his 1929 essay (*SE*, p.275), whereby the soul is forced to renounce its love of created beings themselves and to turn its devotion to the Divine essence which they reflect.

---

\(^{51}\) There is some doubt as to whether Augustine meant to refer specifically to the special creation of the soul (see Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Augustine* (London: Lowe & Brydone, 1960), pp.71, 103). However, this was the standard interpretation of 'anamnesis' maintained by commentators on Augustine and used by Dante.

\(^{52}\) XVI, II.85–90; XXV, II.67–75; Eliot marked both passages (Soldo, p.17), and used the first as the basis for his poem, *Animula*.

\(^{53}\) Eliot had used the idea previously in 'Gerontion': 'I that was near your heart was removed therefrom/ To lose beauty in terror'.

Dante’s ‘disillusion’ is not completed, however, until the latter cantos of the *Purgatorio*, where he reaches the Earthly Paradise, the garden from which our first parents, had they not sinned, would have set out on their journey towards God. It is here that he sees Beatrice again, and experiences the ‘recrudescence’ of his ‘ancient passion’. Beatrice insists that, in order that his love might reach its true meaning, he must renounce his original passion for her and remember only the first cause of his attraction.

In the *Paradiso* Dante’s love for Beatrice culminates in his vision of God. After St Bernard’s prayer to the Virgin to prepare Dante’s sight for the beatific vision, Dante himself declares (XXXIII, 11.46–48):

> And I, who to the goal of my longings was drawing nigh, even as was meet, the ardour of the yearning quenched within me.

Afterwards Dante must again practice the discipline of memory; for all that remains of it is a ‘loving memory’ like Augustine’s, the ‘sweetness’ which it imparted as a half-remembered dream imprists a passion upon the heart. This, he prays, will give to his words a ‘single spark of [God’s] glory’ (1.71) which future generations may discern. The poet’s words will stir in the reader a memory of that mystic bliss which is the fountain and destiny of all our longing.

### IV ‘Burnt Norton’s’ Rose–Garden

#### (i) ‘Footfalls in the memory’

A study of the allusive texture of *Burnt Norton’s* rose–garden passage reveals the extent of Eliot’s debt to Dante and to the crucial philosophical ideas which lay behind the Beatrice–theme of the *Commedia*. The orderly meditation on the ‘unredeemable’ nature of time with which the poem begins gives way as the poet considers the existence of ‘a world of speculation’ in which ‘what might have been’ remains ‘a perpetual possibility’. Immediately, the poet finds himself, as it were, in the vestibule of that ‘world’; the things around him begin to reflect another level of reality, and to intimate a realm beyond our own:

> Footfalls echo in the memory
> Down the passage which we did not take
> Towards the door we never opened
> Into the rose–garden.

The image of the ‘footfalls’ has been linked in Chapter 3 (p.42) to Augustine’s discussion of time in *Confessions* XI. The memory, Augustine argued, is the faculty wherein our past is made present again, and, what is more, it is the faculty through which we become aware of God by remembering our former communion with him. The example Augustine chooses to

---


55 There is an interesting analogy to the Augustinian notion in the *Brihad–Aranyaka Upanisad* (the source for the Thunder’s message in *The Waste Land*) which describes the relation of the individual self (ātman) to Brahma. The ātman ‘is the trace (padanīya) of this All, for by it one knows this All. Just as, verily, one might find by a footprint (pada), some thing that was lost, thus one finds this All by its footprint, the self (ātman)’ (*Hume*, p.83). The worship of the footprints of a Deity is a familiar notion in Eastern religion, especially Hinduism.
illustrate his point offers a further parallel with Eliot’s poem (XI, ch.18; p.257):

My childhood, for instance, which is no longer, still exists in time past, which does not now exist. But when I call to mind its image and speak of it, I see it in the present because it is still in my memory.

The world which Eliot’s memory recalls to his mind is also that of childhood:56 the images of the passage, the door and the garden beyond it—images which have no parallel in the garden at Burnt Norton—seem to be derived first of all from an incident which the poet related twice to the pupils of the Mary Institute in St Louis. During his visit to the United States in 1932–33 and again in 1959 Eliot spoke of his childhood escapades in the schoolyard which abutted on his father’s property:57

There was at the front of our house a sort of picket fence which divided our front yard from the schoolyard. This picket fence merged a little later into a high brick wall which concealed our back garden and also concealed the schoolyard from our back garden. There was a door in this wall and there was a key to this door. Now when the young ladies had left the school in the afternoon and at the end of the week, I had access to the schoolyard and used it for my own purposes of play . . . . I remained extremely shy with girls. And, of course, when they were in the schoolyard I was always on the other side of the wall; and on one occasion I remember, when I ventured into the schoolyard a little too early when there were still a few on the premises and I saw them staring at me through a window, I took flight at once.58

In Burnt Norton I, the memory of this event merges with that of the experience in the rose-garden at Burnt Norton; but it is overlaid also by the memory of two literary treatments of the imaginative world of children.59 On a number of occasions, Eliot acknowledged Rudyard Kipling’s story They and Lewis Carroll’s ‘Alice’ stories as sources for the first section of the poem.60 In Kipling’s story a man who has lost a wife and a child stumbles upon a secluded house inhabited by a blind old spinster. As he approaches he senses that he is being watched by children who are hidden in the trees.61

I listened, but the wood was so full of the noises of summer (though the birds had mated) that I could not at first distinguish these from the tread of small cautious feet stealing across the dead leaves.

56In his 1950 introduction to Huckleberry Finn (p.xiv), Eliot described childhood as ‘a period of life in which one experiences much more than one is aware of’.
59Compare Reilly’s comment on ‘memories of childhood’ in The Cocktail Party (pp.402–03), quoted in Chapter 3, p.43.
61Rudyard Kipling, Short Stories: 1, ‘A Sahib’s War’ and Other Stories, selected by Andrew Rutherford (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1971), p.100. Subsequent page references will be included in the text.
In reality, the children in the story are illusions in the minds of adults who have been bereaved of their own children. The illusion is somehow sustained by the devoted belief of the blind woman, who, unable to have children herself, invites the souls of dead children to play in her garden.\(^62\)

Numerous verbal parallels could be maintained between the story and *Burnt Norton*. Eliot’s sense of a return to ‘our first world’ echoes the blind woman’s remark, ‘We are so out of the world, I don’t wonder you were lost!’ (p.98); and the phrase ‘accepted and accepting’ recalls Kipling’s description of the old house, which, ‘accepting another day at end, as it had accepted an hundred thousand gone, seemed to settle deeper into its rest among the shadows’ (p.97). The house also features a box-circle: it is ‘flanked by semi-circular walls, also red-rose, that closed the lawn of the fourth side, and at their feet a box hedge grew man-high’; and there is a possible adumbration of the water-light apparition of *Burnt Norton* (p.93; emphasis added):

\[
\text{A quick turn plunged me first into a green cutting brim-full of liquid sunshine,} \\
\text{next into a gloomy tunnel where last year’s dead leaves whispered and scuffled.}
\]

One such parallel was explicitly identified by Eliot himself. A song which Kipling’s blind woman sings quotes Elizabeth Barret Browning’s poem, ‘The Lost Bower’, which tells how the poet, as a child, stumbles upon a ‘bower’ in a wood where she is enchanted by music and senses ‘Mystic presences of power [which] up–snatched me to the Timeless, then returned me to the Hour’. She vows to return to the bower but never finds it again; nevertheless she is assured that what is lost is not lost in ‘God’s Eden–land’. Eliot’s memory of the poem, he commented to John Hayward, merged with that of Kipling’s story: ‘the quotation from E.B. Browning has always stuck in my head, and that may be due to “They” rather than to the Bardess herself’ (Gardner, p.29). The quotation to which Eliot refers is not found in *Burnt Norton*, but in The Dry Salvages I.\(^63\) However, Browning’s ‘presences’ perform a function similar to the mysterious ‘they’ of *Burnt Norton* I.

Kipling’s theme also anticipates Eliot’s: the momentary experience of happiness which appears to restore something that has been lost; the longing to repeat the experience in spite of its air of unreality; the ability of love to transcend reason. Through the love of a blind woman for imaginary children she cannot see, or bear, or lose, the narrator is shown the secret of retaining the happiness of ‘what might have been.’

As Eliot suggested, the influence of Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass is also to be discerned in *Burnt Norton* I. Early in her visit to Wonderland, Alice is following the footsteps of the White Rabbit down a corridor when she finds a door into ‘the loveliest garden you ever saw’ (ch.1).\(^64\) The door is so tiny, however, that she can only peer through it; indeed, it is only after she has traversed the wonderland that she finally reaches the garden: ‘then she walked down the little passage: and then—she found herself at last in the beautiful garden, among the bright flower–beds and the cool fountains’ (ch.7, p.65).\(^65\) The garden in Carroll’s

---

\(^62\) The story was written not long after the death of Kipling’s own daughter in 1899. Eliot wrote with tenderness of Kipling’s reaction to the deaths of both his children (his son was killed in World War I) in his introduction to the collection of Kipling’s verse he edited in 1941 (OPP, p.237).

\(^63\) See Appendix III, p.219.


\(^65\) Various other incidental correspondences could be noted; for instance: the ‘crowd of little birds and animals waiting outside’ the door (ch.4, p.32), and the ‘pattering of feet’ (the White Rabbit’s) on the stairs (ch.3, p.24);
story lacks the more sensuous aspects of Eliot's garden, however, and has no parallel for its redemptive function. The significance of the allusion is in Carroll's account of an innocent mind which makes real what it imagines. Through her simple imaginative curiosity Alice gains access to another world which is no less real than that of her parents. She is able to explore, as it were, the 'world of speculation', the world which lies behind the mirror.

In his 1929 essay on Dante, Eliot linked Alice's journey 'through the looking-glass' to Dante's attempt to understand the meaning of his first meeting with Beatrice. Dante's vision of the Divine Light 'mirrored' in the beauty of his lady, Eliot says, leads him—and should lead us—to make 'the conscious attempt, as difficult and hard as rebirth, to pass through the looking-glass into a world which is just as reasonable as our own' (SE, p.276). Eliot is alluding not only to 'Alice', but also to the teaching of Christ: 'Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom and God' (John 3. 3); 'Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein' (Mark 10. 15). Once we have regained the attitude of a child, Eliot goes on, and seen earthly impulses resolved into their final causes, we are able to enter that other kingdom, and we begin to wonder whether it 'is not both larger and more solid than our own'.

Thus, the personal 'echoes' in Eliot's garden merge with the imagination of Carroll, Kipling, and Dante. Indeed, the rose-garden passage of Burnt Norton has less of the sense of remembered detail than it has of the symbolic significances of these earlier works.66

(ii) 'Into our first world'

Initially, however, the poet is wary about responding to the echoes:

But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know.

The bowl to which this line refers is not a vase of fresh flowers. It is a 'rose bowl', a kind of potpourri which was filled with dried and spiced rose petals from the previous summer and used to air a sitting-room or parlour.67 The rose-leaves symbolize the poet's former passion—specifically, for Eliot, the 'hyacinth girl' experience of The Waste Land which first ushered him out of the world of innocence.68 What is more, the poet addresses a companion ('My words

66 Other literary sources have been suggested as analogues to Eliot's rose-garden. An account of several possibilities is given in Appendix I, section I.

67 Elisabeth W. Schneider notes that many rose bowls originated in China, and were decorated with the kind of symmetrical designs to which Eliot refers in Part V of Burnt Norton—'as a Chinese jar still/Moves perpetually in its stillness' (T.S. Eliot: The Pattern in the Carpet (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California University Press, 1975), p.177).

68 Eliot may also have had in mind Shelley's use of the image in 'To—; Music, when soft voices die':

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,
Are heaped for the beloved's bed;
And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,
Love itself shall slumber on.
echo/ Thus in your mind', 'Shall we follow?') who, it seems, shares an understanding of the rose-leaves and their significance. In order to re-enter the rose-garden, they must disturb the dust on the rose-leaves and thereby invite a 'recrudescence' of those old feelings and the temptations associated with their return. This the poet, at least, is reluctant to do.

The 'other echoes' entice them into the garden, however:

Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,  
Round the corner. Through the first gate,  
Into our first world, shall we follow  
The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.

Although birds are common symbols of natural beauty and wisdom there appears to have been some personal significance in them for Eliot.69 Birds—and among them the thrush in particular—are important symbols of hope and restoration in Eliot's poetry. In The Waste Land V, a 'hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees', its 'sweetness of tone and exquisite modulation', as Eliot elaborates in his notes, resembling the dripping of water, and thereby symbolizing hope for the rain which eventually comes to the parched land. Another bird (whose species is not identified) calls upon the poet in Ash Wednesday IV to 'Redeem the time'; and in Marina the 'woodthrush' calls 'through the fog' to Pericles as he approaches the shore where he will find his lost daughter.70

The poet understands that what this thrush is holding out to him is a 'deception', a speculative 'unreal' world, but a world which may prove to be just as solid as his own.71 After a moment of indecision he accepts the 'deception' and, with his companion, enters the garden. Immediately, the tension evaporates, for this 'recrudescence' of sensual feeling is placed 'in a new situation, which comprehends, enlarges, and gives meaning to it'. The poet's experience is revealed as an analogue, not so much of the rekindling of Dante's 'ancient flame' and the attendant conviction of sin, as of Dante's passage through the Eunoë, when the memory of his former deeds and passions is restored to him stripped of its concomitant pain and guilt and 'redeemed' by being integrated into its final cause. The poet has surrendered the memory of his 'experience' and has re-entered momentarily the 'first world' of remembered innocence.

The focus of attention in the garden is no longer personal feeling but symbolic detail, of which the garden is full:

There they were, dignified, invisible,  
Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,  
In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air.

69He asks in his 'Conclusion' to The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (p.148): 'Why, for all of us, out of all that we have heard, seen, felt, in a lifetime, do certain images recur, charged with emotion, rather than others? The song of one bird, the leap of one fish, ... the scent of one flower ... such memories may have symbolic value, but of what we cannot tell, for they come to represent the depths of feeling into which we cannot peer'.

70Eliot's phrasing in Burnt Norton is adapted from a minor poem, 'Cape Ann': 'O quick quick quick, quick hear the song-sparrow'.

71Mark Reinsberg suggests that, given Eliot's keen boyhood interest in the birds of his native Missouri, the thrush in Burnt Norton 'can only be the "water-thrush", indigenous to the Mississippi River Valley and characterized by its ability to mislead. The deception consists in pretending to be injured when animals approach its nest. The thrush limps along the ground, luring to a safe and confusing distance the would-be despoiler of its eggs'. See 'A Footnote to Four Quartets', American Literature, 21, no.3(Mar. 1950), 342–44.
Eliot does not at this point attach any specific identity to these presences; for the moment 'they' are the anonymous 'mystic presences' of E.B. Browning's timeless bower, who, though familiar with the world of innocence, are nevertheless present as the 'guests' of the poet and his companion. Later in the passage it will perhaps become more clear that 'they' are the shades of the people whom the poet and his companion 'might have been'.

The other features of the garden partake of the same sublimity. The 'unheard music hidden in the shrubbery', echoes Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn':

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.

The image recalls the notion—common in mediaeval times, but originating in early Greek philosophy—which held that music of the highest order (the music which Dante hears as he enters Paradise) cannot be heard with the physical senses, but can be appreciated only by the perfected soul as a spiritual phenomenon. There is a similar air of the ineffable about the next lines:

And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses
Had the look of flowers that are looked at.

The image of the 'eyebeam' has generally been taken as an allusion to John Donne's *The Extasie*:

Our hands were firmly cimented
With a fast balme, which thence did spring,
Our eye-beames twisted, and did thred
Our eyes, upon one double string.

Donne is using the Platonic theory of vision to indicate the merging of the sensual relationship of the two lovers with more permanent spiritual principles. Sight, according to this theory, consists of the emanation of beams of light from the eye which strike objects and reflect an image back to the viewer. Despite the verbal similarity, however, the Donne–Plato allusion is not the most illuminating. A stronger parallel can be drawn between Eliot's lines and Mallarmé's *Toast Funèbre*:

---

72 Many early commentators identified 'they' as Adam and Eve, no doubt looking forward to the end of *Little Gidding* when the poet returns 'through the first gate' to a garden which is clearly Edenic. In this early passage, however, a restriction of meaning to such obvious theological counters would seem out of character.

73 A more complete account of the Eliot's use of the metaphor of music will be found in Chapter 6. The allusion to Keats prefigures the echoes of his 'Grecian Urn' in the image of the 'Chinese jar' which Eliot uses in *Burnt Norton V*.

74 See *Timaeus*, 45b–46a.

75 Eliot commented unfavourably upon Donne's use of the eye–beam image in 'Deux Attitudes Mystiques: Dante et Donne'—a translation, by Jean de Menasce, of one of the unpublished Clark lectures—noteing that the image 'ne rend nullement le sentiment d'extase d'amants qui se perdent dans leurs regards, et ajoute à la difficulté de comprendre ce dont il est question'. See *Chroniques* (Paris), 3(1927), 149–73 (p.162).
The 'regard' is that of the poet, Gautier, whose creation of poetic artifacts out of natural phenomena Mallarmé compares with a creative Berkeleyan God bringing into being and sustaining the world by looking upon it. By looking upon and naming the flowers in his poetic 'Eden' (the Rose and the Lily are specified) Gautier immortalizes them as poetic symbols. Those who enter Gautier's garden perceive the creative gaze of the poet reflected in its beauties. The notion that the flowers, and indeed the whole of the garden, exists—or at least has significance—only in the eye of the artist, and ultimately in the eye of God, is what links Mallarmé's lines with Eliot's.77

(iii) 'In a formal pattern'

In the following lines, the sense that the events in the rose-garden are being orchestrated by unseen powers expands to include the poet and his companion:

There they were as our guests, accepted and accepting,
So we moved, and they, in a formal pattern,
Along the empty alley, into the box circle,
To look down into the drained pool.

In the ordered movement of the dance, the partners 'accept' and are 'accepted' and begin to move in unison, in 'a formal pattern'.78 This dance is overlaid with a further significance, however, for Eliot appears to be alluding to a passage from Lancelot Andrewes' 'Sermon 5 On the Nativity', which he had quoted in his essay on Andrewes (FLA, p.23): 'Let us then make this so accepted a time in itself twice acceptable by our accepting, which He will acceptably take at our hands'. Andrewes, whose sermons are full of this kind of serious play on the meanings of words, is discussing the need for each individual to 'accept' Christ 'as a child'; that is, to accept that he is indeed the incarnation of God despite the humble condition of his birth, and to co-operate with his redemptive plan in an attitude of childlike faith. Similarly, in taking part in the dance, the poet and his companion are 'accepting' the mysterious 'they' as representatives of a higher truth.

There is also a pun here on the word 'box', which is a small evergreen shrub or tree (Buxus sempervivens) commonly used for ornamental borders and hedges; in the 'garden' context what is described is a circle of hedge surrounding the dry pool. A 'box-circle', however, is

76 'the translucent gaze, remaining there on those flowers, not one of which shall fade, may single out amid the hour and sunbeam of the day'. The translation is by Anthony Hartley, Mallarmé (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1965), p.61. Unless otherwise specified, translations from Mallarmé will be from this edition.

77 As was noted above (p.64), the Symbolist aesthetic shared its origins with mediaeval light-metaphysics. The notion that light was projected onto natural objects by the eye was a feature of Romantic thought which was eschewed by the Symbolists, just as Dante had refuted the Platonic theory of vision in his account of the revelation of God in natural phenomena (Convivio III, ch.9, p.188).

78 Eliot seems to refer to the geometrically-shaped walks which are found in many traditional English gardens.
the tier of private stalls in a theatre. The pun and the imagery of the dance prepare us for the 'show' with which the imaginative vision of the rose-garden will culminate.\(^79\)

(iv) 'Out of heart of light'

Looking down into the 'drained pool', the poet witnesses a miraculous phenomenon:

```
Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light,
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.\(^80\)
```

The passage is suffused with the light imagery of Dante's *Paradiso*. Eliot's description of the transformation of the empty pool resembles the manner in which the vision of the heavenly city comes to Dante, in *Paradiso* XXX. Dante is surprised by a sudden flash of 'living light' which presently takes the form of a river of light sparkling like gems and banked with flowers. Beatrice explains to him that these are not true essences but 'shadowy prefaces' (I.78) which are comprehensible to a mortal. She instructs Dante to bathe his eyes in the river, whereupon a transformation takes place, and it appears to him to become a circular pool, created out of the light which proceeds from the Divine essence. In this pool he sees reflected the courts of Paradise, rising in the form of a huge rose.

In the same way, Eliot's luminous pool reflects the 'heart of light' which constitutes the beauty of Divinity. There is here a strong verbal echo of a passage from *Paradiso* XII, which Eliot marked in his copy of the *Commedia* (Soldo, p.18).\(^81\) As the canto opens, Dante and Beatrice are surrounded by a circle of souls in the form of lights; the circle begins to revolve and immediately a second dancing circle encloses it. (This second circle includes the soul of St Augustine.) Both move together to the accompaniment of ineffable celestial music, forming what Dante describes as 'two garlands of... sempiternal roses' (II.19–20). Suddenly the whole 'festival' stops and Dante is turned like 'the needle to the star' towards a voice which speaks 'del cor dell'una delle luci nuove' ('from out of the heart of one of the new lights'; I.28). The significance of the allusion appears to end here, for the voice is that of St Bonaventure, who delivers an encomium of St Dominic and a diatribe against the excesses of his successors. The parallel with *Burnt Norton* seems to be that Eliot too is describing a 'dance' which is suddenly arrested by a communication from the 'heart of light'.

The immediate source for this phrase is, of course, the hyacinth-garden episode from *The Waste Land* I. This vision of the 'heart of light' is not accompanied by paralysis, however, although it shares with the earlier passage the vertiginous awareness of the *mysterium tremendum* of Divinity. Nor is there any sense of evil, or of a clash between the sensual and spiritual. Nevertheless, the sensual is very much in evidence, for the symbol which the poet finds at the centre of the vision is not the rose, but the lotus.

\(^79\)The word 'alley', in light of its French root 'allée'—an aisle, as in a theatre—reinforces the hidden imagery.

\(^80\)This 'miracle' is analogous to the crucial redemptive event in *The Waste Land*, the 'damp gust bringing rain'. In both cases it is the transformation of dryness to wetness which heralds the experience of transcendence.

\(^81\)The source was also confirmed by Eliot's close friend, John Hayward, in his notes to Pierre Leyris' French translation of the *Quartets, Quatre Quatours* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1950), p.132.
The inclusion of the 'lotos' in the vision is a significant departure from the Dantean aura of the passage, and from the Western tradition of garden-imagery. 'Lotos' (or, more commonly, 'lotus') is a name which refers to a number of aquatic plants found in the Middle East and Asia. The most important in symbolic terms are *Nymphæa Lotus*, the giant water-lily of Egypt and Asia, whose leaves—often as much as four feet across—form a platform which rises up to six feet above the water, instead of resting on the surface as most water-lilies do; and *Nelumbo nucifera*, the sacred lotus of the Hindus, which sinks and rises as it receives the warmth of the sun (Wilkins, p.110). The colour and shape of the lotus varies, but in Eastern and Egyptian art it is most often depicted in the form of a wheel, with white petals as its spokes.\(^{82}\)

As the rose is major floral symbol of Western culture, so the lotus is of Eastern civilization. It is fundamentally a symbol of fertility set against the corruption of the flux of time,\(^{83}\) and is used to signify fecundity, in either physical terms (birth and sexuality) or spiritual (rebirth, purity and divinity).\(^{84}\) In his Harvard notes for 1913–14, Eliot observed that 'the lotos alone is perfect, because it has many flowers and many fruits at once. The real entity is represented in the fruit, its manifestation in the flower'.\(^{85}\) Although its symbolic resonances are equally as diverse as the rose’s, the lotus connotes a much more powerful and consistent sensuality.

Among the ancient Egyptians it was the flower of the Nile, and was sacred to Horus, the child of the sun–god, who was born anew from its petals every day, and, like the Buddha in Buddhist art, is depicted seated in the midst of its petals.\(^{86}\) The apposition of the sun with the lotus is frequent in oriental mysticism. The lotus was the Hindu symbol of the 'solar Matrix', the womb from which the sun rose each morning. Moreover, the integration of sun and flower symbolized the union of the male and female creative forces, and the spiritual attainment of harmony. Vedic myth has the lotus flower growing out of the navel of Viśnu, and from it springing Brahman, the creator deity of Hinduism. It appears in a vision given to Arjuna in the *Gītā* (ch.11, 15) as the throne of Brahma.\(^{87}\)

One reason for the early Christian fathers’ suspicion towards rose–symbolism may have been the extent of cross–fertilization between the rose and the lotus in pagan religion. The lotus represented that aspect of flower–symbolism which they wanted suppressed. The Beloved in the *Song of Songs* describes himself as 'the Rose of Sharon and the lily [or lotus] of the valley'. This may indicate an influence of the contemporary art of the cult of Isis and Horus which used


\(^{83}\) In the *Bhagavad–Gītā* (ch.5, 10) Krishna refers to the lotus growing out of the mud of unclean ponds without being defiled by its environment, and uses it as an image of the devotee who has learnt total detachment from the fruit of his actions.

\(^{84}\) M.S. Pati notes that the thousand–petalled lotos is the supreme point of yogic illumination, of intersection between being and Being, *jiva* and *purusha*. See 'Four Quartets: An Indian View', *Literary Criterion* (Mysore), 14, no.1(1979), 50–72, (p.51).


\(^{87}\) Eliot almost certainly read at Harvard the *Saddharmapundarīka–Sūtra, or Lotus–Sūtra*—part of the Mahāyāna, and one of the key Buddhist texts—which employs the lotus as the symbol of the invitation extended to all to share in enlightenment.
the flowers interchangeably. Indeed, as the early fathers had feared, the rose came to be used in Christian iconography in a similar way to that in which the lotus was in Eastern art. Both the Virgin and the pagan female deities, for instance, were frequently shown holding the flowers in the hand like a sceptre, and an icon common to both Occidental and Oriental art has the rose or lotus forming a circle, with Christ, the Virgin, Buddha, or Śiva comprising the centre.

Moreover, the rose-imagery of Dante’s *Paradiso* has significant parallels with the lotus symbolism of Eastern religious art. In the *Paradiso* XXIII (ll. 70–4), for instance, Mary is depicted as the mystical rose, the living ‘throne’ of her son. She is ‘the Rose wherein the Word Divine made itself flesh’. When the great Rose of Paradise appears, it too has petals which are white, and, as the lotus is depicted as the throne of Brahma, so these petals are in fact the shining thrones of the Blessed, the most honoured of the saints. In Buddhist tradition, moreover, Heaven is sometimes conceived of as a structure of thirty-three storeys on the uppermost of which Buddha sits enthroned upon his lotus surveying the whole world.

The appearance of the lotus at the centre of the rose-garden vision of *Burnt Norton* is therefore auspicious. Its function is initially descriptive, for the trick of light and shadow which Eliot sees in the dry basin of the pool certainly resembles a pond whose surface is dappled with lily-pads; but Eliot could hardly have been unaware that he was also invoking a religious and erotic symbol of the most complex kind.

That Eliot was indeed conscious of the intensely sensual connotative value of the lotus is indicated by the marked similarity between its description and function in *Burnt Norton* I and that which it is given in the following passage:

> Life, the ever-present, knows no finality, no finished crystallisation. The perfect rose is only a running flame, emerging and flowing off, and never in any sense at rest, static, finished. Herein lies its transcendent loveliness. The whole tide of all life and all time suddenly heaves, and appears before us as an apparition, a revelation. We look at the very white quick of nascent creation. A water–lily heaves herself from the flood, looks around, gleams, and is gone. We have seen the incarnation, the quick of the ever-swirling flood. We have seen the invisible. We have seen, we have touched, we have partaken of the very substance of creative change, creative mutation. If you tell me about the lotus, tell me of nothing changeless or eternal. Tell me of the mystery of the inexhaustible, forever-unfolding creative spark. Tell me of the incarnate disclosure of the flux, mutation in blossom, laughter and decay perfectly open in their transit, nude in their movement before us.

The writer is D.H. Lawrence; the passage is from his ‘Introduction’ to *New Poems* (1920).

---

89 Williams, p.255. See also *Maitri Upaniṣad* (6.2; *Hume*, pp.424–25): ‘What is this lotus, and of what does it consist? This lotus, assuredly, is the same as space. These four quarters of heaven and the four intermediate quarters are the form of its leaves’.
90 Eliot’s eagerness to reinforce the connection between the two flowers—given his frequent use of verbal play—is perhaps implicit in his use of the word ‘rose’ to describe the movement of the lotus.
91 Eliot probably did not have in mind the ‘lotus-eaters’ either of Tennyson or Homer, whose lotus is an entirely different species. The analogue is a tempting one, however, if we take into account the sensuality which the flower symbolizes there, and compare it with the strain of garden-imagery in Eliot’s poetry.
Eliot had been reading Lawrence in the United States in 1932–33 in preparation for a series of lectures at the University of Virginia—subsequently published as After Strange Gods—and so the material was obviously present in his mind. Nevertheless, the possibility of a conscious allusion is intriguing, given the antipathy which Eliot had expressed towards Lawrence in After Strange Gods (see pp.38, 58–61). As much as he disliked Lawrence's social and theological heterodoxy, however, Eliot could not deny his 'extraordinarily keen sensibility and capacity for profound intuition' (ASG, p.58), albeit marred by an absence of proper discrimination.

In 1933, Eliot wrote of Matthew Arnold a statement which could as readily describe his own relationship to Lawrence: 'Sometimes a critic may choose an author to criticise . . . as far as possible the antithesis of himself, a personality which has actualized all that has been suppressed in himself; we can sometimes arrive at a very satisfactory intimacy with our anti-masks' (UPUC, p.112). Some of the profundity of Lawrence's intensely erotic mysticism appears to have found its way into Eliot's vision of a sensuality transformed into something permanent and holy.

The focus of Eliot's rose-garden, with its framework of Dantesque imagery and mediaeval philosophy, has settled upon the lotus, the symbol of Eastern fertility and Lawrentian vitalism. This is more than merely a 'collocation' of Eastern and Western sources, as Eliot attempted in 'The Fire Sermon', or of the icons of innocence and experience. Eliot's lotus-rose symbolizes a complex of spiritual and erotic feelings; it is an 'intensive manifold' which reveals simultaneously and from a variety of angles the co-existence and co-inherence of body and spirit which first appeared to Eliot in the hyacinth-garden. There is one last level of significance, however, which resolves the contradictions of the rose-garden vision into a unity, and locates it finally within the tradition of Roman Catholic dogma and the poetry of Dante.

The Greek term for the cup-shaped vessel of the water-lily or lotus is χιλθόπτων, the word which, in its Latin form, ciborium, was adopted as the name for the chalice in which the Eucharist is reserved in the Roman Catholic liturgy. Eliot's phrase 'the lotos rose' would therefore suggest the elevation of the Host, the moment when transubstantiation, the transformation of the elements into the flesh and blood of Christ, is said to take place. The experience in the rose-garden is thus linked with the central act of the Roman Catholic liturgy, and what was for Eliot the central doctrine of the Christian faith, the Incarnation, through which the transcendent God became available to mankind in human form.

It is thereby also linked with Dante's beatific vision in the last canto of the Paradiso, where the essence of God is revealed to him in the incarnate Christ, in God 'painted with our effigy' (XXXIII, 1.131). This is the ultimate affirmation of the purpose of Dante's 'personal animal feelings'—the union of body and soul, sensual and spiritual in the person of Christ.

---

Footnotes:

93 Eliot's rose-garden episode also bears some similarity to Lawrence's short story 'The Shadow in the Rose Garden' (1914) which Eliot analysed in his lectures (ASG pp.35–37.). An account of the story is given in Appendix I, p.198.


95 T.E. Hulme, whose theory of art had a considerable influence upon Eliot, coined this phrase to refer to any 'complex thing which yet cannot be said to have parts because the parts run into each other, forming a continuous whole, and whose parts cannot even be conceived as existing separately'. See Speculations: Essays in Humanism and the Philosophy of Art, ed. Herbert Read, second edition (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1924), p.181.
(vi) ‘Reflected in the pool’

The theophanic vision bestows upon the poet a recognition of a lesser, but more personal, kind. As the poet looks into the ‘heart of light’ he sees that ‘they were behind us, reflected in the pool’. ‘They’, who were previously invisible and ethereal, are now revealed. Their reality, which appeared tentative and in a sense dependant upon the assent of the poet and his companion, is now affirmed. It is perhaps now admissible to identify them as the selves which ‘might have been’ had the passion which the rose-leaves symbolize not been tainted by the sin attendant upon sensuality. The initial emotion is now fulfilled in the ‘looking glass world’, a situation ‘which comprehends, enlarges, and gives meaning to it’.96

At this point, however, the light fades and the vision ends:

Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.
Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,
Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.
Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.

The fulfillment which seemed so complete and accessible is available only in a moment of illumination. As quickly as the poet was admitted into the garden he is ushered out.97 The bird reminds him, however, that the world created by an act of memory, infused with imagination and touched by Divine grace possesses a greater measure of ‘reality’ than the ‘ordinary’ existence to which he must return.98 Even though the sense of fulfillment dissipates along with the vision, he is assured that it exists in the ‘world of speculation’, the world which is ‘just as reasonable as our own’ and perhaps ‘larger and more solid’.

V The Rose-Garden in ‘The Family Reunion’ and the other ‘Quartets’

Though satisfying in itself, the experience of Burnt Norton I is locked within an ‘imaginary’ moment outside of time. It is nevertheless the central incident of the poem, and of the Quartets as a whole. In the remainder of Burnt Norton, in The Family Reunion—which was written before East Coker—and in the later Quartets, Eliot will return repeatedly to the experience in the rose-garden. Words and phrases from the passage will echo throughout the rest of the

---

96 There is a possible allusion to the Paradiso III, a passage which was a favourite of Eliot’s (see above, p.70n.). Dante sees reflected in a stream the souls of those who broke vows, among whom is Piccarda dei Donati who explains to Dante that she is satisfied with the status she has been given in heaven, and does not covet a greater share of bliss. She concludes with the phrase which Eliot used in Ash Wednesday: ‘his will is our peace’ (I.85). Eliot too is affirming the possibility of peace for the poet, his companion and their ‘shades’ in the humble acceptance of the will of God.

97 The hidden children are a last hint of Paradise. In Paradiso XXXII, ll.46–48, Dante encounters the souls of innocent children; he does not see them at first, however, but only hears them among the petals of the Celestial Rose.

98 The phrase ‘human kind cannot bear very much reality’ originated in Murder in the Cathedral where Becket charges the priests with an inability to discern God’s plan in the approach of the murderous knights (CPP, p.271).
work until, with the blossoming of the ‘midwinter spring’ in Little Gidding and the vision of eventual ‘oneness’ in the last lines of that poem, some measure of the fulfillment of Burnt Norton I will be restored.

In Burnt Norton II, Eliot attempts to describe poetically the meaning of the experience and its centrality to the attempt to become ‘conscious’ of ‘reality’. In Part III, however, he returns to the ‘place of disaffection’, the desolate landscape of unredeemed time. The references to London and its insensate commuters establish a parallel with the description in The Waste Land of the human desert to which the poet is confined and from which he contemplates his memory of the hyacinth-garden episode. There are important differences, nevertheless, for in the later poem Eliot prescribes an avenue of escape through the conscious ‘descent’ of the mystics’ via negativa. Through entering ‘internal darkness’ we may hope to regain the knowledge of Divine grace.

Burnt Norton IV is set in a garden, but one which differs significantly from the rose-garden of the opening movement:

Time and the bell have buried the day,
The black cloud carries the sun away.
Will the sunflower turn to us, will the clematis
Stray down, bend to us; tendril and spray
Clutch and cling?
Chill
Fingers of yew be curled
Down on us?

The preoccupation of this lyric is with death. The ‘black cloud’, which in Part I interrupted the vision of the pool and the lotus, is here triumphant, heralding the dusk and ending the possibility of vision. The plants have similar funereal overtones. The sunflower, which normally faces the light, turns earthward as it passes maturity; the clematis is known in some European cultures (especially in Italy) as the ‘flower of death’; and the yew is commonly associated with graveyards. Nevertheless, even as twilight engulfs the world, and even as life approaches its inevitable end, the momentary flash of the kingfisher’s wing restores the memory of the light and of the source of light at ‘the still point of the turning world’.

99 This passage will be explored in depth in Chapter 5, section I, part ii.
100 As was noted in Chapter 3, p.46n., the images of wind in Burnt Norton III and in The Waste Land I are derived from Dante’s Inferno III. Throughout Eliot’s work, wind is a recurring symbol of emptiness and lack of purpose. Examples abound, from ‘Gerontion’ (‘an old man driven by the Trades’), and ‘The Hollow Men’ (‘Our dried voices when /We whisper together /Are quiet and meaningless /As wind in dry grass’), to A Song for Simeon (‘waiting for the death wind’), and Chorus VII from The Rock (‘man without GOD is a seed upon the wind: driven this way and that, and finding no place of lodgement and germination’; CPP, p.160). In ‘What Dante Means to Me’, Eliot compared the wind imagery in the Inferno with the light imagery of the Paradiso (TCTC, p.130).
101 Helen Gardner notes the similarities between Burnt Norton IV and the garden of the Perkins, with whom Eliot was staying in the summer of 1934. She also gives an account of a visit to Kelham nearby where Eliot reputedly saw a kingfisher (Gardner, pp.36–37).
102 The phrase ‘light to light’ carries a faint echo of the passage in the Paradiso XII from which Eliot may have derived the phrase ‘the heart of light’. Dante describes the circles of light which surround him as, ‘alike of song and flashing light with light [luce con luce], gladsome and benign’ (II.23–24). (A more specifically Christian significance of the phrase and of the kingfisher will be noted in Chapter 5, p.120n.).
In the final section of *Burnt Norton*, Eliot's thoughts turn to the distinction between 'desire' and 'Love':

Desire itself is movement
Not in itself desirable;
Love is itself unmoving,
Only the cause and end of movement.

The parallel with Dante's Aristotelian theory of Love, though not explicitly established, is difficult to deny. Love is indeed the Unmoved Mover which regulates and gives significance to individual instances of 'desire', which Eliot describes as the 'details' of the pattern which is Love itself. Apart from the final 'cause', desire has no meaning; but Love is accessible to us only when we consider a specific instance of desire and attempt to identify the pattern of which it forms a part.\(^{103}\)

As the poet meditates upon those moments when the eternal pattern is revealed through such a 'form of limitation', the images of the rose-garden reappear before him:

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
Even while the dust moves
There rises the hidden laughter
Of children in the foliage
Quick now, here, now, always—
Ridiculous the waste sad time
Stretching before and after.\(^{104}\)

Eliot's use of the rose-garden image in *The Family Reunion* offers another vista upon what the *Burnt Norton* experience meant to him.\(^{105}\) The central character of that play, Harry, returns after eight years to the scene of his childhood, ostensibly to celebrate his mother's birthday, but in fact to recover some sense of direction in life following the death of his wife, for which he thinks himself culpable. Even before his arrival, we are warned by his aunt Agatha that he cannot hope to regain the fleeting moments of childhood happiness by returning home (CPP, p.288):

Harry must often have remembered Wishwood—
The nursery tea, the school holiday,
The daring feats on the old pony,
And thought to creep back through the little door.
He will find a new Wishwood . . .
Yes. I mean that at Wishwood he will find another Harry.

---

\(^{103}\) This notion is, of course, analogous to Augustine's doctrine of 'form' discussed in section III above.

\(^{104}\) The 'shaft of sunlight', although implied in the rose-garden passage, is more correctly an echo of *Murder in the Cathedral*. In the opening chorus (CPP, p.240), the women of Canterbury explain their sense of the nearness of God's plan: 'Destiny waits in the hand of God, shaping the still unshapen: I have seen these things in a shaft of sunlight'.

\(^{105}\) *Murder in the Cathedral* could also be included here, since the phrase 'into the rose-garden' first appeared in the lines which were cut from that play. The significance of the image is not, however, developed to the level of complexity found in the later plays.
The man who returns will have to meet
The boy who left. Round by the stables,
In the coach-house, in the orchard,
In the plantation, down the corridor
That led to the nursery, round the corner
Of the new wing, he will have to face him.

Harry himself realizes upon his arrival that his past is 'unredeemable' (p.294); he confesses to his cousin, Mary (p.308):

Whatever I hoped for
Now that I am here I know I shall not find it.
The instinct to return to the point of departure
And start again as if nothing had happened,
Isn't that all folly?

Mary insists that 'what you need to alter is something inside you'. Harry recognizes some liberating truth in this, and comments (p.310):

You bring me news
Of a door that opens at the end of a corridor,
Sunlight and singing; when I had felt sure
That every corridor only led to another,
Or to a blank wall.

This intimation of the rose-garden is dispelled by the appearance of the Furies, but the imagery is revived when Harry talks with Agatha. Agatha recalls how she prevented Harry's father from murdering his mother at the time she was carrying Harry; in doing so, she feels somehow that she is Harry's real mother. She describes her experience of closeness to Harry with another echo of Burnt Norton (pp.334–35):

I only looked through the little door
When the sun was shining on the rose-garden:
And heard in the distance tiny voices
And then a black raven flew over.
And then I was only my own feet walking
Away, down a concrete corridor
In a dead air. Only feet walking
And sharp heels scraping.

Harry responds by entering her rose-garden reverie (p.335):

106 In a letter to E. Martin Browne, Eliot indicated that the rose garden in which Harry meets both Mary and Agatha is intended to have sexual undertones. The letter is quoted by Seward, p.174.

107 The image of the 'little door'—an echo in itself of Lewis Carroll—recurs in The Confidential Clerk, where Sir Claude suggests to Colby that: 'when you are alone at your piano, in the evening, I believe you will go through the private door' Into the real world, as I do, sometimes' (CPP, p.465).
I was not there, you were not there, only our phantasms
And what did not happen is as true as what did happen
O my dear, and you walked through the little door
And I ran to meet you in the rose-garden.

The rose-garden here seems to symbolize an ideal world in which individuals share experiences of joy which empower their lives thereafter.\(^{108}\) Just as in *Burnt Norton*, the rose-garden experience initiates a quest through descent into the 'dark night'. After his vision Harry sets out upon a path of renunciation, with the garden as both his inspiration and his goal (p.339):

To the worship in the desert, the thirst and deprivation,
A stony sanctuary and a primitive altar.

The rose-garden is not so prominent in *East Coker* and *The Dry Salvages* as in either *Burnt Norton* or *The Family Reunion*. This is perhaps due to that fact that they explore further 'the way down', the approach to life in time whose premise is the negation of the world of the senses. Despite this emphasis, the imagery of the garden—which is never itself included among those things to be renounced—returns at crucial moments. In *East Coker III*, Eliot describes at some length the painful process of the downward path; but sandwiched between passages about the descent into the darkness is a reminder of *Burnt Norton I*:

Whisper of running streams, and winter lightning.
The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,
The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy
Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony
Of death and birth.

In *Ash Wednesday III*, a similar vision of natural beauty was eschewed as part of ascetic devotion. Here, however, the 'affirmative way', the intense enjoyment of the created world, is seen as complementary to the purification of the soul. This joyful experience is 'not lost'; rather, it beckons us to undergo the 'agony of death' which will be revealed as a birth. The way down will become the way up.\(^{109}\) In Part IV of *East Coker* Eliot hints at the final reconciliation of the 'ecstasy' and the 'agony' with an image which looks forward to the final image of the sequence:

If to be warmed, then I must freeze
And quake in frigid purgatorial fires
Of which the flame is roses, and the smoke is briars.

---

108 In *The Confidential Clerk* Eliot uses the garden as an image of the private world of the imagination to which some characters can retreat. In Act II (*CFP*, pp.473–74), Lucasta expresses her envy of Colby’s ‘secret garden . . . ./ Where you hear a music that no one else could hear./ And the flowers have a scent that no one else could smell’. Colby in turn envies the garden of Eggerson, which is ‘more real than mine . . . [because] His garden is part of one single world’. For a private garden to be ‘real’, Colby continues, it must be shared, either with God, or with another person.

109 The phrase ‘wild thyme’ may be an allusion to Blake’s *Milton* (Book II, Plate 35, II.42–60), where Blake discusses a similar kind of timeless moment. It is ‘a Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find’, and ‘when it once is found/ It renovates every Moment of the Day if rightly placed’. This special moment is associated with wild thyme, for ‘The Wild Thyme is Los’s Messenger to Eden’; it bears his tidings of a new era in which spirit and matter will unite. See Anita Gandolfo, ‘Eliot’s *East Coker*’, *Explicator*, 39, no.4 (Summer 1981), 24–5. Both Blake and Eliot are, of course, echoing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, II, i, 249: ‘I know a bank where the wild thyme blows’.
The agonies of renunciation, the poet affirms, will eventually be revealed as a flame composed of roses.

The early sections of *The Dry Salvages* immerse the reader in the finality of a destruction which is 'endless', both without cessation and without purpose. Against the background of eternal time, symbolized by the river and the sea, the rose remains as an image of fragile and threatened beauty: 'The salt is on the briar rose'. In Part III, however, the poet begins to question the totality of destruction, or at least to attempt to salvage some sense of significance out of human existence. Early in the exposition, Eliot reintroduces the symbol of the rose. The section begins:

I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant— . . .

That the future is a faded song, a Royal Rose or a lavender spray
Of wistful regret for those who are not yet here to regret,
Pressed between yellow leaves of a book that has never been opened.

The capitalization indicates that the poet is referring to something other than the flower of the rose-garden. In 1941, Eliot explained to Bonamy Dobrée:110

There are really three roses in the set of poems; the sensuous rose, the socio-political Rose (always appearing with a capital letter) and the spiritual rose: and the three have got to be in some way identified as one.

The first two manifestations have appeared before; but in *The Dry Salvages* Eliot begins to link the personal and the metaphysical roses with the movement of human history and society. In this passage Eliot seems to refer to the apparent cyclical nature of history. Great dynasties, periods of imperial splendour and intellectual vigour, have come and gone, but can be expected to occur again in the future. The Royal Rose is as transient as the 'sensuous' rose, but may also aspire to the permanence of the 'spiritual'. (This idea will be explored more fully when the capitalized Rose appears again in *Little Gidding* III.)

For the moment, the poet finds some consolation in the Eastern notion of 'right action', or *karma*, which offers to individuals an assurance of the continuity in some form or other of their special virtues. The good (and the evil) that men do lives on by reshaping the soul in preparation for its next incarnation. Eliot then extends this hope by introducing the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. Christ entered the world of time in human form and lived a life of eternal significance; we too might hope to live with purpose by becoming receptive to intimations of the immanence of God in the world.

The perfection of the awareness of the Divine is 'an occupation for the saint'; but all of us, Eliot says, receive such intimations at some time. As he describes these moments he turns again to the imagery of the rose-garden:

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 it 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.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.

Eliot here collects images from *Burnt Norton* I (the ‘unheard’ music) and V (the ‘shaft of sunlight’), and from *East Coker* (the ‘wild thyme’), and even anticipates the ending of *Little Gidding* with the image of the waterfall. Incarnation is an inextricable part of the created order, and is what gives meaning to it. The ‘hints’ which are given to us through such moments assure us, Eliot concludes, that the soil to which we will eventually return will be ‘significant soil’.

With *Little Gidding*, the rose-garden experience is reasserted and interpreted in its broadest context. The opening passage features the familiar collocation of water, flowers and reflected light:

Midwinter spring is its own season
Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown,
Suspected in time, between pole and tropic.
When the short day is brightest, with frost and fire,
The brief sun flames the ice, on pond and ditches,
In windless cold that is the heart’s heat,
Reflecting in a watery mirror
A glare that is blindness in the early afternoon.

The ‘midwinter spring’ is an experience of blinding luminosity—the glare of sunlight on the pure white of hoar-frost and snow. It is a visionary rejuvenation which takes place outside of ‘time’s covenant’, as if the fleeting experience of the ‘heart of light’ in *Burnt Norton* I were frozen (literally) in a moment of time.

Among Eliot’s literary sources for such a phenomenon—and for his use of the word ‘sempiternal’—is a passage in the *Paradiso* XXX, 11.124–26, where Dante finds himself:

> Within the yellow of the eternal rose [rosa sempiterna], which doth expand, rank upon rank, and reeketh perfume of praise unto the Sun that maketh spring for ever.\(^{111}\)

The inference we may take is that Eliot is here describing the settled, mature vision of the kind which Dante sees from inside the Celestial Rose. Dante’s ‘river of light’—mentioned above with relation to Eliot’s ‘water out of sunlight’—was primarily an illusion caused by his inability to adjust his vision fully. His perception of the pool or sea of light was the first indication that his eyes were adjusting. This, if the parallel is accepted, is as far as the poet gets in *Burnt Norton* I; the cloud passes and the vision is gone.

In *Little Gidding* I, however, the poet is surrounded by the ‘heart of light’; the experience shares with the earlier episode the sense of rapture, but has lost its sense of transience.

---

\(^{111}\)The word ‘sempiterne’ also appears in canto XII, II.19–21, in the passage from which Eliot may have taken the phrase, ‘the heart of light’.
Although less ecstatic, it is less illusory; and it is more satisfying since it is experienced by a mind adjusted by the varied meditations and experiences of which the previous Quartets give account. Nevertheless, the experience of the midwinter spring still exists outside of the scheme of time to which it offers transcendence. It is merely an extended period during which the ‘intersection’ of the timeless with time is perceived.

The remainder of Little Gidding explores the legacy which such ‘intersections’ leave to the world of time. Part I deals with the religious community at Little Gidding: a place ‘where prayer has been valid’ in the past, and which therefore retains some numinal residue from the spiritual integrity of its former inhabitants. In Part II the poet relates a colloquy with the ghost of a poet, an incident which Eliot claimed was based upon a half-conscious ‘hallucination’ he experienced while patrolling the streets of London after an air-raid. In the third part of the poem Eliot considers in more depth the ‘socio–political’ manifestation of the rose. His point of reference, for very sound reasons, is English society and politics. The rose has been a major heraldic device in England since the ‘War of the Roses’, at the conclusion of which the red and white roses of Lancaster and York were finally united in Henry VII. It is therefore a symbol both of civil war and of the united England which resulted.

Eliot considers what attitude should be taken towards such political and social concerns, and concludes that it is only through detachment—through an acceptance as partial of those experiences and causes we deem significant—that we can hope to transcend the era of which we are a part. He distinguishes the attempt to become aware of tradition, to recognize the ‘symbols’ that the past has left us, from the attempt to resurrect old causes and to ascribe to them a particular meaning. The latter, he says, would be ‘an incantation to summon the spectre of a Rose’.

In this phrase Eliot goes some way towards the union into which he intended the three ‘roses’—sensuous, spiritual and socio–political—to be resolved. On one level it refers to the rivalries of the Civil War, whose revival would be futile; but the phrase also contains an allusion to Diaghilev’s ballet Le Spectre de la Rose which Eliot may have seen performed (by Vaslav Nijinsky and Thamar Karsavina) in London during the summer of 1912. The ballet is based upon a poem by Gautier about a young girl just returned from a ball, who dreams of the rose given to her by her lover. Eliot’s thoughts may have turned to this evocation of a young girl’s innocent dream as an example of a compelling and yet ultimately intangible memory of sensual passion.

The warning has a wider significance, however, since Eliot is alluding to an alchemical experiment of the kind which he deprecated in The Dry Salvages V, which attempted to summon the ghost of a rose. Northrop Frye explains:

---

112 See Appendix IV, p.226.

113 The white rose was later adopted as an emblem by the Jacobites, who sought to restore the Stuart line of Charles. Their secret organizations were known by such names as the ‘Order of the White Rose’ and the ‘Cycle of the White Rose’. The Royal Rose of The Dry Salvages may have stood for Charles I, the ‘broken king’ of Little Gidding.

114 Eliot acknowledged the ballet as a source (Gardner, p.202), and reluctantly admitted a reminiscence of Sir Thomas Browne’s The Garden of Cyrus, V: ‘Nor will the sweetest delight of Gardens afford much comfort in sleep; wherein the dulness of that sense shakes hands with delectable odours; and though in the Bed of Cleopatra, can hardly with any delight raise up the ghost of a Rose’ (The Religio Medici and Other Writings, Everyman’s Library (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1906), p.229).

Many seventeenth-century writers were fascinated by a curious experiment of burning a flower, usually a rose, to ashes and seeing the ghost of the flower hovering over the ashes, which apparently afforded a dubious argument for immortality, or, at least, the permanence of things in time.\footnote{The phenomenon is described in Francis Thompson’s ‘Mistress of Vision’, a poem which concerns the Virgin Mary: ‘as a necromancer/ Raises from the rose-ash/ The ghost of the rose’ (The Poems of Francis Thompson (London: Hollis & Carter, 1946), p.289).}

Eliot refers to the same experiment earlier, in Part II of Little Gidding: ‘Ash on an old man’s sleeve/ Is all the ash the burnt roses leave’. The failure of these ‘incantations’ illustrates the futility of any attempt to resurrect a ‘moment in the rose-garden’ or any other experience of ‘intersection’ by some artifice. The significance of the experience—be it spiritual, sensual or political—will be found only in the revelation of its final cause.

In the last movement of Little Gidding, Eliot attempts to reconcile the sense of meaning that is ascribed respectively to periods of history and to the present experience of individuals. The former he associates with the yew-tree, whose life-span can encompass 1500 years, long enough to witness the rise and fall of any civilization the world has known;\footnote{The yew appeared as a funerary symbol in Burnt Norton IV, but in The Dry Salvages V (as earlier in Ash Wednesday IV and VI) it took on its more Christian connotations of immortality.} the latter he associates with the rose, whose blossom has long been a symbol of the transience of nature. In his scheme, however, ‘The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree/ Are of equal duration’. ‘History’ is merely the pattern formed by ‘timeless moments’. Therefore ‘moments’ from the distant past, such as the flowering of English culture under Charles I, or the devoted service of the community at Little Gidding, are included and in a sense reincarnated in the present experience of the eternal. Each holds equal status in the redemptive pattern which will eventually emerge.

The last verse paragraph of Little Gidding forms a kind of coda, not only to that poem, but to Four Quartets as a whole. In this finale Eliot looks forward to the completion of the eternal pattern, which will be characterized by a return to his starting point:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

The echoing of the rose-garden passage is augmented by layers of meaning which were not present, or not made explicit, in the initial experience. In particular, the notion of anamnesis is expressed without ambiguity and is expanded to include the whole of humanity:

At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always—\footnote{The passage also echoes The Family Reunion (CPP, p.309):}
The Edenic allusion, which was somewhat overshadowed by the personal aspect of *Burnt Norton* I, is here asserted without ambiguity. We return:

Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover.

And find, 'that which was the beginning . . . the children in the apple—tree'. The return to paradise is not the final goal, however; it merely opens the way, as Dante's passage through the earthly paradise did, to the final union of all things in God. Once again Eliot leans upon his Italian master, and upon his rose—symbolism. All will be resolved, he says:

When the tongues of flames are in—folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

The knot is both visually and by ancient association synonymous with the rose. The detail of the 'crowned knot' echoes not only *Paradiso*, XXIII, 1.119, where Dante describes Mary as 'the crowned flame', but also Dante's vision of the whole of the created order united in God—'The universal form of this complex [nodo ('knot')]' (XXXIII, 1.91).

Eliot celebrates the union which this knot achieves as it ingathers all of the elements of which it is composed into a fusion of the fire of purgation with the rose of beatitude. In Dante's universe, the Divine light of which the Celestial Rose is composed and the 'refining fire' of Purgatory are one and the same substance. The purified souls in Paradise can withstand the intensity of light, but its effect upon the souls undergoing purgation is to burn away the dross of their sins until they can reflect perfectly the nature and radiance of God. Thus the marriage of fire and rose represents the resolution of the life of the individual into its final cause, and its perfection as a lover of God. The sexual connotation of becoming 'one' is also implicit in Eliot's final line; but, just as Dante's vision of God celebrates the union of the Divine and the human in the incarnate Christ, so too the 'oneness' that Eliot speaks of here is a resolution of physical human love, the passionate love of the hyacinth garden, in the mystical love of God.

You have staid in England, yet you seem
Like someone who comes from a very long distance,
Or the distant waterfall in the forest,
Inaccessible, half heard.
And I hear your voice as in the silence
Between two storms, one hears the moderate usual noises
In the grass and leaves, of life persisting,
Which ordinarily pass unnoticed.

119 Eliot had used the image of the apple of Eden is *The Dry Salvages* II ('The bitter apple and the bite in the apple') and in *Ash Wednesday* V ('spitting from the mouth the withered apple—seed').

120 The connection is illustrated, for instance, in the knots (Latin: nodi) which represented the 'roses' of the rosary (that is, the prayers to be recited) before being replaced by beads. See Wilkins, p.205.

121 The term 'crowned knot' also refers to a knot in which three strands of rope are tied together and their ends turned inward in such a way as to prevent fraying. The image is apt both to Eliot's and to Dante's final vision of order.

122 Tennyson's *Maud* and George MacDonald's children's stories have also been suggested as specific forerunners of the conjunction of rose and fire. See Appendix IV, p.234.
Chapter 5

Mystical Theology in ‘Four Quartets’

The timeless moment in the rose-garden at Burnt Norton is without doubt the seminal experience of the Quartets. The various themes or ‘topoi’ form their distinctive patterns around this central event, each enclosing and being enclosed by the others. While the rose-garden incident is a moment of release from time, generating an exploration into the nature and meaning of temporal existence, it is simultaneously an account of the ‘recrudescence’ of intense personal and erotic feeling which inspires an exploration of the final causes of moments of remembered passion. The identification of those causes as spiritual in nature—the attraction of the soul towards God—takes the poet beyond the realms of philosophy and psychology into those of mystical theology, the third ‘topos’ to be examined.

The previous chapter considered in some detail the religious aspect of the rose-garden vision; however, in later parts of the poem, the spiritual themes which in the opening passage of Burnt Norton were merely one part of a complex of imagery and allusion are isolated and developed independently. Indeed, the Quartets appear to have been, to some degree, part of Eliot’s attempt to repair what he saw as a shortcoming in modern poetry. In a letter to his friend and spiritual advisor William Force Stead, Eliot wrote, ‘between the usual subjects of poetry and “devotional” verse there is a very important field still very unexplored by modern poets—the experience of man in search of God, and trying to explain to himself his intenser human feelings in terms of the divine goal’.1

The methodology by which Eliot sets out to understand the Divine cause of his experience and to integrate it into a pattern which can ‘redeem’ the rest of his life in time is closely modelled upon the traditional forms of mystical literature and thought. The poet’s personal experience is held up against the pattern which is described by the manifold experience of the Divine as recorded by men and women throughout all ages and cultures. However, as his comments to Stead indicate, his approach is not ‘devotional’. In 1939, in an unpublished lecture entitled ‘Types of English Religious Verse’, Eliot described ‘the probable direction of religious poetry in the immediate future’ as being, ‘towards something more impersonal than that of [the nineteenth century] . . . . It will be much more interested in the dogma and the doctrine: in religious thought, rather than purely personal religious feeling’. It will be ‘deeply influenced by Thomism, and to some extent also by Karl Barth and Kierkegaard’, and

---

1The letter is dated 9 August, 1930, and is quoted in Gardner, p.29. Ronald Bush adds to the quotation—without citing a further reference—the sentence: ‘I have tried to do something of that in Ash Wednesday’ (T.S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style, p.131). In view of the similarities between the earlier poem and the Quartets it seems reasonable to impute to Eliot a comparable ambition in writing the later sequence.
will concern itself 'primarily with giving poetic form to theological thought'. In so doing it
'will tend to have more kinship with [the religious verse] of the seventeenth century, than with
that of the nineteenth', in that it will be 'content to meditate upon the central mysteries of the
Incarnation and the Eucharist'.

It will become apparent that Eliot's debt to the mystical tradition in Four Quartets is based
upon a selection of influences from within mystical literature, influences which concentrate
upon mystical experience as a revelation of theological truths—among them especially the
truths of the Incarnation and the Eucharist. Moreover, through this selection, Eliot's point of
reference will once again gravitate towards the sensibility of the late Middle Ages.

I 'A Taste For Mysticism'

Whereas philosophers and, to a lesser extent, theologians have attempted to extrapolate mean­
ing from the observed phenomena of the natural world, mystics have given primacy to the
sense of meaning itself, and to those experiences of self-transcendence which assure us of
our metaphysical existence and significance. For them, the quantifiable universe is, at best, an
allegory of the principles which underpin our life and experience, and, at worst, a distortion
of them. Mystical 'science' has taken as its data what Eliot called 'states of soul which are
to be found . . . only beyond the limit of the visible spectrum of human feeling, and which
can be experienced only in moments of illumination, or by the development of another organ
of perception than that of everyday vision'.

A knowledge of such states, he went on, was essential to an adequate understanding of humanity:

To be wholly ignorant of [mystical] literature, to be unacquainted with examples
of it from several languages and civilizations, is to lack some vital information
about Man; just as much, as if we read only those historical works which ig­
nore the action of religion upon history. But to learn from these writers needs
something more than mere acquaintance. We have to abandon some of our usual
motives for reading. We must surrender the Love of Power—whether over others,
or over ourselves, or over the material world. We must abandon even the Love of
Knowledge. We must not be distracted by interest in the personality of particular
authors, or by delight in the phrases in which they have expressed their insights.
What these writers aim at, in their various idioms, in whatever language or in
the terms of whatever religion, is the Love of God. They gave their lives to this:
and their destination is not one which we can reach any quicker than they did, or
without the same tireless activity and tireless passivity.

As this statement suggests, Eliot's own appreciation of mystical literature underwent a
development which paralleled that of his ideas, his personality, and his experience of the more
remote 'states of soul'. The first indications of Eliot's interest in mysticism are to be found
in his courses of study at Harvard (1908–1914), where he read widely in the works of such
contemplatives as St Bernard of Clairvaux, St Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross, Dame

2 The typescript of the lecture is held in the Eliot Collection, King's College, Cambridge, and is quoted by
Ronald Bush, p.224.

3 'Preface' to N. Gangulee, Thoughts for Meditation (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), pp.11–14 (pp.12–13).
Juliana of Norwich, St Ignatius Loyola, Mme Guyon, Walter Hilton, Henry Suso, Jacob Böhme and Richard Jeffries. Eliot also spent two of his years at Harvard studying Indian philosophy, language and religion, and read widely in the Sanskrit and Pāli scriptures. His reading list features the Upaniṣads and Sūtras of the Vedānta (later Vedic literature), and the Bhagavad-Gītā, which he read in the original Sanskrit. He also delved into the metaphysical mysteries of Pātañjali’s Yoga Sūtra, and studied the Dhammapada and the sermons of Buddha.

Several modern studies of mysticism and religious experience appear on his reading list as well, foremost among them William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism* (1911), from which Eliot took copious notes. Evelyn Underhill was, with writers like Dean Inge and Baron von Hügel, a leading light in the mystical ‘revival’ which took place in England in the years before the First World War. During this period, a resurgence in the scholarly study of mysticism paralleled the vogue for psychological investigations of the supernormal powers of the human mind and the renewed interest in the occult. Numerous studies of individual mystics or schools of mystics were published, along with many new editions and translations of mystical texts. Evelyn Underhill, for instance, produced editions of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Jan van Ruysbroeck, Richard Rolle, Jacob Böhme and Walter Hilton.

Eliot’s early interest in mysticism appears to have coincided with a crucial period of his life. Lyndall Gordon notes that by 1914 Eliot was ‘circling . . . on the edge of conversion’ (Gordon, p.58). The precise nature of his religious interest is somewhat unclear, however. He confided to Gabriela Mistral that he had been considering becoming a Buddhist, and the intense religious poetry which he was writing at the time shows an interest in the extremes of asceticism. These poems (which Eliot never published) reveal an obsession with the austerities of self-abnegation. The excruciating joy and pain of the self-flagellant and the martyr are described in stylized images of whipping, bleeding, immolation and agonizing death (Gordon, pp.61–63). They indicate the religious sensibility of what William James termed ‘diabolical mysticism’, the kind of mortification which was frequently accompanied by delusional insanity.

Eliot’s early exposure to mysticism was thus tainted with morbid preoccupations. His impulse appears to have been less an attraction towards God than a desire to embrace suffering.

---


6 Eliot had already imbied a certain amount of Eastern thought from the works of the Thoreau and Emerson, which were standard fare in the Unitarian households of late nineteenth–century America, and through Sir Edwin Arnold’s verse–biography of Gautama Buddha, *The Light of Asia*, which he had admired as a child (see Chapter 6, p.161). Arnold also published a translation of the *Gītā* in 1891.

7 Lyndall Gordon records that Eliot payed special attention to Underhill’s chapter on ‘Voices and Visions’ (*Gordon*, p.155, n.79).


and to achieve the kind of death which might secure the religious consolation either of beatitude or of the personal annihilation of nirvāṇa. Nevertheless, this period of religious speculation passed without any definite affirmation of faith. Eliot’s letters indicate that he acknowledged the speciousness and pretence of his poems of religious horror, and felt the need to undergo true suffering—the askestis which Providence might bestow upon him—before making any genuine dogmatic commitment (Gordon, p.64).11

In the years that followed, Eliot continued to ponder the form which a tenable religious position might take. He roundly condemned a book which he reviewed in the International Journal of Ethics for attempting to make the Christian vocation seem ‘easier’, and defended the practices of asceticism, celibacy and monasticism. He concluded, ‘Certain saints found the following of Christ very hard, but modern methods have facilitated everything’.12 In 1917 he published a short philosophical prose piece in which a character named Eeldrop (who works as a bank clerk and is thereby clearly recognizable as Eliot himself) is described as ‘a sceptic, with a taste for mysticism’.13

This earnestness was obscured, however, in the poetry which he wrote and began to publish during this period. In his first volumes of poetry, Prufrock and Other Observations (1917) and especially Poems 1920, the focus rests upon the boredom, paralysis and (increasingly) the sordidness of urban life. Eliot populates his world, not with saints, but with despairing old men, prostitutes and philanderers. The poems place the inane pretentiousness of upper-class salons alongside the licence and indulgence of ‘broadbottomed’ Sweeney and his troupe of ‘nightingales’.

This schizophrenia in Eliot’s early poetry illustrates the tendency which he later confessed to his friend and spiritual advisor, Paul Elmer More: ‘I am one’, he wrote, ‘whom this sense of the void tends to drive towards asceticism or sensuality’.14 In poems like ‘Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service’ and ‘The Hippopotamus’, religion is invaded by the sensual—the mating hippopotamus who is taken to heaven, and Sweeney taking a bath in the ‘avenue of penitence’. The stance is satiric to the point of blasphemy. However, these poems should be considered alongside Eliot’s later pronouncements on blasphemy, which he described as ‘the product of partial belief’ and indeed as ‘a way of affirming belief’ (‘Baudelaire’, SE, p.421). In After Strange Gods he went so far as to claim that genuine blasphemy requires ‘profound faith’ and ‘a mind in a peculiar and unusual state of spiritual sickness’ (ASG, p.52).

11 The spectre of ascetic insanity would continue to haunt him at least until his conversion in 1927 if not beyond. In 1926 (in the Clark lectures, which remained unpublished, perhaps at Eliot’s own request) Eliot expressed reservations about the element of psychological self-manipulation which he discerned in the writings of Sts Teresa and John of the Cross (see Hay, p.99).


14 The letter is dated ‘Shrove Tuesday, 1928’, and is quoted by Margolis in T.S. Eliot’s Intellectual Development: 1922–1939, p.142. Eliot continues: ‘only Christianity helps to reconcile me to life, which is otherwise disgusting’.
II The Time of Tension

It is this ‘spiritual sickness’ which infects the poet of *The Waste Land*, whom the sense of the void drives once more, first towards sensuality, and then towards asceticism. However, the success of the poem as a serious meditation upon a spiritual malaise was due in large part to the maieutic skill of Ezra Pound, whose excision of several morbidly ‘religious’ passages from the original manuscript served to focus the poem upon the one central experience and the spiritual themes which it generated. As was noted in the previous chapter, the hyacinth-girl episode which forms the emotional ‘centre of gravity’ of the poem is both a moment of romantic and sensual passion, and an awakening to the existence of absolute Good and absolute Evil, which Eliot described as ‘the first requisite of spiritual life’ (*ASG*, p.53). This simultaneous generation of intense religious and erotic feelings is accompanied, however, by an awareness of ‘the void’, a consciousness of the poet’s ineluctable alienation from others and from God. Neither his passionate nor his religious feelings can be realized, for both God and the objects of his physical and emotional longing inhabit a realm from which he is isolated.

Some fifteen years later Eliot would remark, ‘There are moments, perhaps not known to everyone, when a man may be nearly crushed by the terrible awareness of his isolation from every other human being; and I pity him if he finds himself only alone with himself and his meanness and futility, alone without God’. The poet is left with this sense of the profound disjuncture between himself and the spiritual realm in which he will find his purpose. Condemned to live in a world characterized by sexual violation and depraved sensuality, he finds his only hope to be that offered by the ascetic impulse towards the total renunciation of his society and culture.

In ‘The Fire Sermon’, Eliot invokes the accounts of such mortification found in two classical mystical texts, both of which use the image of fire to signify the method of release from the contaminations of the flesh. From the Buddha’s ‘Fire Sermon’ Eliot borrowed not only the title of this section of the poem, but also the line ‘Burning burning burning burning’; and from Augustine’s *Confessions* III he took ‘To Carthage then I came’, to which his notes add the rest of the sentence: ‘where a cauldron of unholy loves sang all about mine ears’.

The asceticism which Eliot is espousing here is not merely a personal impulse, however; these images of immolation are no longer linked to a morbid self-glorification, although they do describe a ‘state of spiritual sickness’. The allusion to Augustine, in particular, illustrates that Eliot was also proposing a response to the chaos of the decaying European civilization as a whole. Augustine wrote when the collapse of the Roman Empire was imminent, and advised Christians not to place their hope in earthly power but in the eternal ‘City of God’ which would be realized among those who had escaped the perversion of the world around them. This and other passages in *The Waste Land* express in a modern context the same ascetic impulse to expect, and indeed to seek to accelerate, that annihilation of a society which is a necessary prelude to the creation of a purified culture from its ashes.

---

15The version which Pound first received from Eliot included ‘The Death of Saint Narcissus’ (*Facs*, pp.95–97), one of the martyr-poems written several years earlier. Among the other cuts which Pound made were two poems, ‘Exequy’ (p.101) and ‘Elegy’ (p.117), which featured prayers, grave-clothes and intimations from the world of the dead.


17This idea lies behind the passage of Herman Hesse’s *Blick ins Chaos* which Eliot quotes in his note to lines 366–76. Hesse, and Dostoyevsky of whom he was writing, anticipated the twilight of Europe which would be
What is lacking, however, is any assurance that anything of worth could survive the rigorous *askesis* needed to purge both society and poet of their ills. In ‘Death by Water’ Eliot poses the necessity of a sea-change, but the possibility that such a process could ever come to fruition is contradicted by the prerequisite of death. It is only with the final part of the poem, which considers the very prospect of the survival of death, and specifically the propitiatory death of Christ, that ‘Death by Water’ may in retrospect be seen as an analogue of Christian baptism. ‘What the Thunder Said’ is located by its opening lines in the period after the death of Christ and before his resurrection:

He who was living is now dead  
We who were living are now dying  
With a little patience.

It is during the aftermath of suffering—his own, but also the Deity’s—that the poet receives the instruction which will enable him, at some future time, to pursue a religious vocation. There are hints of the resurrection, but the imporunate reminder is of the poet’s need to flee the ‘falling towers’ of Europe to the solitude of the wilderness where he may prepare himself for the possibility of an efficacious ‘death by water’.

His instruction comes from the Eastern mystical and ascetic tradition, from the words spoken by the thunder in the *Brihad-Āranyaka Upaniṣad*. Characteristically, the message is in the form of an incantation of three esoteric words, or rather three glosses upon one mystic syllable, *Da: Datta* (‘give’), *Dayadhvam* (‘sympathize’), and *Damyata* (‘control’). The injunction is to practise the central virtue of all mysticism and religion, humility. This is no guarantee of redemption, however, but merely an indication of the state of soul in which it might be received. The poem ends with the poet sitting amongst his ruins, considering the ‘fragments’ which he has shored against them to secure what wisdom he has gained against the chaotic forces which still beset him. He senses, as will the penitent of *Ash Wednesday*, the need to ‘construct something’ upon which to base his further ascetic endeavours.

*The Waste Land* ends with a Sanskrit blessing which Eliot translates in his notes, ‘The Peace which passeth understanding’. The hope which this expresses remains, however, within the context of a mysticism which is not yet complete. Until such time as the resurrection which has been foreshadowed takes place, the only tenable religious position will be one which requires an asceticism of equal severity to the disgust which the poet feels towards himself and his surroundings. Not until *Burnt Norton* will a positive option other than rigorous *askesis* be offered.

Viewed in retrospect, the ending to *The Waste Land* can be said to contain the seeds of Eliot’s conversion; although the settings of the poems written after his confirmation into the followed by an age of purgation and finally the emergence of a renewed humanity.

---

18 *Āranyaka* means literally ‘wilderness’ and refers to the desert (or sometimes the forest) to which the Indian sages retreated and which became the typical locus of revelatory vision.

19 One of the ‘fragments’ is a line from the *Purgatorio* XXVI spoken by the poet, Arnaut Daniel, whom Dante finds among the lustful burning in the purgative fires. The allusion signals a progression from ‘A Game of Chess’ which, in the original manuscript, made explicit a reference to Paolo and Francesca, who are among the lustful in Dante’s *Inferno* V. They are tortured eternally by the passions which still overwhelm them, but which they can no longer fulfill; Daniel, who tried to overcome his lusts while living, is tortured by flames which he knows will eventually cleanse him.
Church of England have religious significance, the 'mindscape' which they describe is essentially a progression of that into which the poet enters in 'What the Thunder Said'. The account of the Nativity in The Journey of the Magi and A Song for Simeon is thus a further exploration of The Waste Land's theme of askesis. Both Simeon and the Magi bear witness to the reality of the portent of Christ, but, as with the poet of The Waste Land, this does not absolve them of the need for the renunciation of both self and society. They look forward only to their own deaths, with an understanding of the necessity of that death as the end of an old order, but not of its purpose in the establishment of an eternal order upon the ashes of the old.

In the same way, the religious sensibility of Ash Wednesday differs from that of The Waste Land in degree rather than in kind. Although Christian liturgy has become much more of a determining factor in the tone and structure of the poem, the austerities of Ash Wednesday are carried out in the same spirit of humility with which The Waste Land ended. The ruins of the earlier poem are replaced by the dissembled bodily members of the later. The intimations of resurrection in 'What the Thunder Said' are still not confirmed, and the poet remains in 'the time of tension between dying and birth'.

What must be said, however, is that in Ash Wednesday the poet adopts a more conscious and deliberate approach to self-abandonment, to the extent that it eclipses other themes. The poem describes a sickness of soul which is less absorbed in the details of its external, or indeed of its internal, causes, than was that described in the earlier poems. Instead, the poet concentrates upon the process of the cure, and struggles to maintain the attitude of humility and honesty which the thunder prescribed, an attitude quite alien to the self-absorbed morbidity of the early 'religious' poems.

The suffering in Ash Wednesday is more easily recognizable as purgative in nature. The poet's despair and disillusion are of the kind which Eliot described in his essay on Pascal, written two years after the publication of Ash Wednesday; they are 'essential moments in the progress of the intellectual soul; and for the type of Pascal they are the analogue of the drought, the dark night, which is an essential stage in the progress of the Christian mystic'. Pascal's despair, he concluded, 'was a necessary prelude to, and element in, the joy of faith' (SE, p.412). By the end of Ash Wednesday the poet stands on the edge of the possession of a hope which would enable him to affirm, as Eliot will do in East Coker IV, that his 'disease' is in fact a sign of 'health'.

The progress of Eliot's soul in the course of the 1920s was matched by the intense private suffering of his troubled marriage. As Lyndall Gordon notes, the intolerable burden of life with a deeply disturbed wife and the accompanying sense of guilt and failure seem to have been the major constituents of the personal askesis which lay behind Eliot's work (Gordon, p.64). When, in 1932, Eliot filed for separation, that particular 'time of tension' came to an end, although he would be haunted by the decision for the rest of his career.

His subsequent work brought with it a change of tone. In the autumn of 1934, Eliot began work on Murder in the Cathedral, a verse-drama on the martyrdom of England's greatest saint, Thomas à Becket. The play deals with many familiar themes—the coming of a 'malady' upon the land, the sense of imminent upheaval, and the duty of the individual in times of strife—but focusses upon the spiritual progress of one man. Much of it is given over to the stylized account of Archbishop Becket's temptations as he faces the possibility of assassination at the

20 Much of the imagery in Ash Wednesday, it will be remembered, is derived from Dante's description of his experience at the summit of the Mount of Purgatory.
hands of King Henry's knights. His wisdom and resolve carry him through the first three of these temptations, but he is not so well prepared for the fourth: the temptation to seek martyrdom as the means to heavenly reward, or as he himself puts it, 'To do the right deed for the wrong reason' (CPP, p.258). It was into this trap that the protagonists of Eliot's early visionary poems fell: mortification whose inspiration is the hope of gain. In conquering this temptation Becket qualifies himself for the final purification of martyrdom.

In Becket, Eliot presents the successful completion of an askesis, the progression of a mystical journey beyond self-abnegation. Although his humility does not allow him to seek reward, neither does it prevent him from accepting the honour of martyrdom as God's will. Shortly before his death, Becket confesses (CPP, p.272): 'I have had a tremor of bliss, a wink of heaven, a whisper; And I would no longer be denied'. The perfection of Becket's soul does not lead him to seek suffering for its own sake; instead, he sees the hope beyond suffering, and proceeds, once he has been purged of selfishness, to grasp it.

III  The Mystical Tradition of the ‘Quartets’

In Four Quartets Eliot presents his most comprehensive account of religious and mystical experience; an account which embraces illuminative vision and rigorous askesis and, like Murder in the Cathedral, culminates in the possession of hope, and the contemplation of the mystic goal. In describing this process, Eliot makes frequent allusion to the literary traditions of mysticism, both to individual mystics and their writings and to the themes and systems of imagery which have been characteristic of mystical expression. Once again there are patterns to be discerned in the allusive texture. Although the selection of mystical texts and writers to whom the Quartets make allusion is not exclusively 'mediaeval', it can nevertheless be described as 'classical'. From a body of literature which has perhaps a more genuine claim to timelessness than any other, Eliot chose writers and works whose influence was definitive and unifying, and who therefore represent the apex of their respective traditions.

Foremost among these are the two great 'mystical' poets of mediaeval Europe: Dante and St John of the Cross. In 1927 Eliot had used their work to illustrate the relationship between poetry and mystical experience:21

There is apt to prevail a critical misconception about any poet who is also suspected of being a mystic. The question whether a poet is a mystic is not, for literary criticism, a question at all. The question is, how far are the poetry and the mysticism one thing? Poetry is mystical when it intends to convey, and succeeds in conveying, to the reader (at the same time that it is real poetry) the statement of a perfectly definite experience which we call the mystical experience. And if it is real poetry it will convey this experience in some degree to every reader who genuinely feels it as poetry. Instead of being obscure, it will be pellucid. I do not care to deny that good poetry can be at the same time a sort of cryptogram of a mysticism only visible to the initiate; only, in that case, the poetry and the mysticism will be two different things . . . . A genuine mystical statement is to be found in the last canto of the Paradiso; this is primarily great poetry. An equally

genuine mysticism is expressed in the verses of St. John of the Cross; this is not a statement, but a riddling expression; it belongs to great mysticism, but not to great poetry.

The distinction Eliot makes between the two poets is reflected in his use of their work in *Four Quartets*. Dante wrote 'mystical poetry' by maintaining his focus upon the 'perfectly definite experience' of the beatific vision. Although the final truth which his vision represented remained inexpressible, Dante allowed his experience to become material for poetry. As Eliot pointed out in a later lecture, the writing of the poetry was 'a fresh “experience” for him' (*UPUC*, p.126), an experience in which the mystical insight was made tangible through a synthesis of biographical elements (in particular Dante's love for Beatrice), with the imagery of courtly love poetry, and with the philosophical and theological traditions of mediaeval Europe. In this way, Dante's vision of God expanded to embrace the whole 'mind' of his civilization. Allusions to the mystical elements of Dante's poetry appear in those passages of *Four Quartets* in which Eliot attempts to describe the religious intuition of the unity of experience. In the rose-garden passage of *Burnt Norton*, for instance, or the final movement of *Little Gidding*, the synthesis of personal symbols with those of religion, race and culture is carried out under the shadow of Dante.

The writings of St John of the Cross, on the other hand, do not contribute directly to the accounts of illuminative experience (although his use of the conventional imagery for these experiences could be cited along with that of Dante and others). Instead, Eliot's allusions to his work are concentrated in the more prosaic passages of the *Quartets*, as part of the dialectical process which the more 'poetic' passages inspire. Although St John remains perhaps the greatest lyric poet Spain has produced (his devotional poems, cast in the form and language of courtly love poetry, rank alongside those of the great English devotional poets of the following century: Herbert, Crashaw and Vaughan) he is remembered as an exponent of 'poetic mysticism', rather than 'mystical poetry'. Much of his fame rests upon the mystical treatises—in particular, *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul*—which he wrote as commentaries to his poems for use in the Carmelite monasteries and convents which he supervised.

In these treatises the poems are anatomized as 'cryptograms' of mystical truths; a single line or phrase will imply a complicated spiritual principle which will require several chapters of exposition. The poetry, in Eliot's words, 'is not a statement, but a riddling expression'; it is a seconding of the linguistic features of imagery, rhythm, and conceit in the attempt to define the spiritual realities which had been intimated during contemplative prayer.

Nevertheless, St John of the Cross is of great importance to Eliot as one who attempted to define ineffable truths as precisely as possible. Indeed it is from his treatises rather than from his poems that Eliot borrows images and phrases for *Four Quartets*. St John is also important as a spokesman to the late mediaeval era for the great traditions of Christian spirituality and devotion. His 'discalced' (unshod) Carmelites re instituted the strict monastic rule of the great mendicant patrons, Sts Dominic and Francis, which had been diluted in many religious orders; and in his treatises St John taught the central tenets of Dionysian mysticism—the way of ignorance, the Divine ray of darkness, the flight of the soul to God through separation from creatures—using the precise terminology of St Thomas Aquinas, of whose philosophy he was

---

22 This includes the lines of doggerel verse quoted at the end of *East Coker* III, which come from *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (hereafter cited as *Ascent*).
(like Dante) an avid follower. More than any other single figure, St John of the Cross represents the mysticism of Christendom, a fact which was acknowledged in 1926, when he was made a doctor of the Universal Church, with the specific title ‘Doctor of Mystical Theology’.  

Dante and St John of the Cross are the mystical mentors of Burnt Norton and East Coker. In The Dry Salvages, however, Eliot turns his attention to the jewel of Eastern religious literature, the Bhagavad-Gītā. The Gītā is one of the final sections of the great Hindu epic, the Mahābhārata, and was composed sometime between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200. It subsequently became the most popular text among the entire spectrum of Indian sects and schools, from the dualistic Sāṃkhya to the nondualistic Advaita Vedānta. The Gītā surpassed even the Upaniṣads as the quintessential expression of the Vedic teaching, and its influence has remained constant through a steady succession of commentaries.

Some readers have objected to Eliot’s explicit use of non-Christain mysticism in Four Quartets; the most influential among them has been Dame Helen Gardner, who found the introduction of the Gītā into The Dry Salvages an error of decorum.  


25 Indeed, he later disowned the harshness of tone which characterized After Strange Gods by forbidding the volume from being reprinted.

26 Only one A minus is recorded among a string of A grades (Gardner, p.54, n.49).

27 Robert Sencourt, writing in The Criterion in 1931, described St John as ‘the most precise authority on mysticism known to the Church of Christ’. See ‘St. John of the Cross’, The Criterion, 10, no.41(July 1931), 637–53 (p.638).

28 The review was of Sri Ananda Acharya’s Brahmadarsanam, or Intuition of the Absolute and was published in the International Journal of Ethics 28, no.3(Apr. 1918), 445–46.

29 In terms of spiritual and psychological insight, Eastern religious thought offers numerous analogues to Judaic and Christian writings; however it is in its negative attitude towards the material world that Eastern religion (and especially Hinduism) differs from that of the West. The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, the perfect coinherence of matter and spirit in one particular human being, might be said to resolve the dilemma of the
and as such to occupy a place alongside the great mystical literature of the West.

Eliot returned to Western mysticism and to the mediaeval era in *Little Gidding* where he introduced the English mystics of the fourteenth century: Juliana of Norwich (1343–1443) and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (late 14th century). These writers, along with Richard Rolle (c.1300–1349), and Walter Hilton (d.1396), formed the first great ‘school’ of English mysticism, Anglicizing the great European traditions of Dionysius and Augustine with their vernacular treatises and poems. For Eliot, these writers appear to have represented the grafting of a peculiarly English genius onto mediaeval spirituality.

These four sources are identified by direct allusion as the key mystical traditions in the world of the *Quartets*. There are, however, mystical ideas found in the poems which are not associated with specific works or authors, but which are commonplace within the spectrum of religious literature. Eliot’s use of notions such as detachment and humility, or his use of paradox and oxymoron indicate a more general debt to mystical patterns of thought.

There is also the most general of debts to be discerned in the structure of the *Quartets* to the various accounts given by mystic writers of the progressive stages of their quest. Although we should be shy of attempting to see *Four Quartets* as a ‘cryptogram’ of a particular mystical regimen, it is nevertheless true that the sequence itself highlights distinct movements in religious consciousness. Evelyn Underhill—who also distrusted detailed guides to the mystical life—notes that (*Underhill*, p.97):

> The movement of mystic consciousness towards this consummation, is not merely the sudden admission to an overwhelming vision of Truth: it is rather an ordered movement towards ever higher levels of reality, ever closer identification with the Infinite.

Underhill attempts a ‘composite portrait’ of the ‘mystic way’ which identifies five phases: *Awakening, Purgation, Illumination, the Dark Night,* and *Union* (*Underhill*, pp.205–07). She admits, however, that this classification is quite arbitrary, and that manifold variations of the ‘ordered movement’ exist. The *Quartets* coincide in some respects with this scheme, but share a much closer affinity with Underhill’s account of the ‘pilgrimage idea’, which is the basis for the ‘faithful and detailed description of the Mystic Way’ that she attributes to Dante. Within this less discriminate of schemes, Underhill delineates three stages. There is first of all *Attraction*, the experience which ignites the spark of divinity within the soul and inspires the search for the ‘Hidden Treasure which desires to be found’. This is immediately succeeded by *Devotion*, ‘the long, hard journey towards a known and definite goal or state’. During this journey all forms of support other than God himself—physical, intellectual and spiritual—are progressively renounced, until the soul must make its affirmation of faith from out of the depths of self-abasement and despair. Once this process is completed the soul is prepared for *Elevation*, the attainment—seldom, if ever, achieved in life—of divine rest (*Underhill*, pp.154–56).

earlier systems.

30 It was not, of course, a formal collaboration, as each worked independently with little, if any, apparent contact with the others.

31 This has been attempted (with little success) by some critics. See, for instance, Sister Corona Sharp’s interpretation of the five-part structure of the poems in terms of St John of the Cross’s three-stage progress to maturity (‘ “The Unheard Music”: T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* and John of the Cross’, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 51, no.3(Spring 1982), 264–78).
Although, *Four Quartets* does not resist such a 'scaffold', there is no evidence to suggest that Eliot was consciously following Underhill (he was, however, consciously following Dante). It will serve, nevertheless, as a framework upon which to consider the progression in the *Quartets* from transient vision (*Burnt Norton* I and II), through darkness and negation (*Burnt Norton* III to *The Dry Salvages* II), the salvaging of hope out of despair (*The Dry Salvages* III–V), to the achievement of some measure of assurance and settled wisdom (*Little Gidding*).

**IV Attraction**

(i) 'A perfectly definite experience'

The mystic journey of *Four Quartets* begins with *Burnt Norton* I, a passage which—as has been noted in Chapter 4—gathers together and develops key themes and images from Eliot's earlier work. The opening meditation, for instance, with its denial of hope and declaration of the 'unredeemable' nature of time, was adapted from lines originally intended for one of Becket's priests. This 'sensible' response to the temptation to seek a return in time shares with *Ash Wednesday* a tone of penitential meekness. It is the same voice, unassuming to the point of despair, as that which began the earlier poem—'Because I do not hope to turn again'.

This mood is interrupted, and its adequacy called into question, when a 'tremor of bliss' analogous to Becket's is vouchsafed to the poet in the vision of the rose-garden. The vision is identified, moreover, as in some sense a recurrence of the experience of the 'void' in *The Waste Land* I, to which it is linked by the repeated phrase, 'heart of light'. Both glimpses into the void are clearly mystical and religious in nature—examples of what Evelyn Underhill calls 'a temporary unification of consciousness around that centre of transcendental perception' (*Underhill*, p.437). But whereas the former terrifies the poet with its eternal 'silence', and initiates a bifurcation of the impulses to sensuality and asceticism, the latter is a rapprochment of those impulses, in which both are seen as manifestations of the attraction towards a God who is simultaneously transcendent and immanent. The second experience invites the poet to abandon the introspective meditation of *Ash Wednesday* to which the first led him, and to press on towards the fulfillment of his askesis.

Eliot's account of this progression, as has been noted elsewhere, deliberately associates it with that described in Dante's poetry. As the garden of *The Waste Land* is 'redeemed' by that of *Burnt Norton*, so the passionate experience described in *La Vita Nuova* is affirmed retrospectively as a genuine mystical intuition, first in the Earthly Paradise and finally in the last cantos of the *Paradiso*. Like Dante, Eliot is trying to write poetry which conveys 'the statement of a perfectly definite experience which we call the mystical experience'. *Burnt Norton* I describes a theophany which, though in itself indescribable, could nevertheless be made the material for poetry. Its particular insight into the nature and structure of reality is

---

32 See Chapter 3, p.41.

33 The link is attested by several verbal echoes: the word 'unredeemable', for instance, and the phrase 'always present' (cf. 'redeem the time', *Ash Wednesday* IV; and 'time is always time', *Ash Wednesday* I).

34 Each of the philosophical traditions described in Chapter 4 with relation to Eliot's use of Dante in *Burnt Norton* I—the notion of anamnesis, the intimation of eternal verity in earthly beauty and the communication of God's love through light—has its roots in the Neo-Platonism which also fertilized much Christian mystical thought.
fused in the poet’s mind with images and ideas from religious, personal and literary sources.

(ii) ‘The still point’: Expounding the Ineffable

In the prosaic section of *Burnt Norton* II Eliot undertakes the task of explaining more precisely the nature and meaning of the ‘state of soul’ described in the rose-garden experience, and examining the normal conduct of his life in its light. Here his debt to the wider tradition of mystical literature becomes more obvious. Many of the metaphors, arguments and strategies that Eliot uses to describe his experience are adapted from the writings of the mystics, and in particular from their attempts to describe the nature of God.

Eliot begins by locating the rose-garden vision ‘at the still point of the turning world’, an image common to many spheres of thought—physical science, geometry, cosmology, metaphysics, theology and psychology\(^\text{35}\)—among whom mystical theology takes its place. In both Western and Eastern mystical traditions, the still point is used as a symbol of the Divine goal of the mystic, and of the soul which has attained perfection through harmony or union with it.

In the Vedic tradition, for instance, a hub or still point is used to represent both the individual soul (ātman) and the Divine soul (Brahman). In the *Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1. 5. 15; *Hume*, p.89) we read:

> That which is the self (ātman) is a hub; wealth, a felly. Therefore even if one is overcome by the loss of everything, provided he himself lives, people say merely: ‘He has come off with the loss of a felly!’

And in the *Īṣa Upaniṣad* (4–5; *Hume*, pp.362–63):

> Unmoving, the One (ekam) is swifter than the mind.  
> The sense-powers (deva) reached not It, speeding on before.  
> Past others running, This goes standing . . .  
> It moves. It moves not.  
> It is far, and It is near.  
> It is within all this  
> And it is outside of all this.

The apex of this tradition of ‘still centre’ imagery was the *maṇḍala* and the devotional iconography associated with it. The *maṇḍala* (Sanskrit, ‘circle’) is a geometric icon, usually consisting of a circle divided into four parts (the number four being an archetype of harmony and unity), which was used as an aid to meditation in Tantric Hinduism and Buddhism. It symbolizes the unity of the entire cosmos; the circumference of the *maṇḍala*, the world of phenomena, is resolved into its centre, the navel of the universe, which was usually occupied by a Buddha or by a Hindu emblem of Brahman, often the sacred lotus.

The *maṇḍala* was used as a *yantra*, an object of psychic contemplation which, it was believed, could condition the return of the soul to its potent core. Through focussing his whole being upon this nuclear motif of the universe, and especially upon its fixed central point where all opposites are resolved, a devotee hoped to develop the harmonious state of mind conducive

\(^{35}\)A full account of this complex of imagery will be given in Chapter 6, section IV.
to enlightenment. By repetition of its associated prayers and by total concentration upon its
form the adept would interiorize the mandala completely. At each step a greater psychic whole-
ness would be achieved as the ātman came into harmony with the forces of Brahman. Finally,
when the ātman was concentrated entirely upon the central point of the mandala, it would be
reabsorbed into Brahman, its Divine source.

The similarities between Burnt Norton I and the mandala suggest that Eliot was conscious
of at least the broad outlines of the tradition, and perhaps of some of its details.36 The ‘formal
pattern’ in which the rose-garden is arranged appears to be a series of circles, indicated by the
gate, the box-circle, and finally the pool at whose centre appears the apparition of the lotus, the
symbol of Eastern and, by the hidden pun on the word ciborium, of Western Divinity. Eliot’s
use of the still point in Part II to describe his vision strengthens the possibility of an allusion,
for the collocation of lotus and hub is common in accounts of the union at the heart of the
mandala. Kabir, a fifteenth-century Hindu poet, celebrates the attainment of enlightenment
by declaring, ‘What a wonderful lotus it is, that blooms at the heart of the spinning wheel of
the universe. Only a few pure souls know of its true delight!’37

It is unlikely, however, that Eliot was referring exclusively to the mandala in Burnt Norton;
for his description of the still point shows the influence of its counterpart in Western mysticism,
the notion of the Divine Centre. The immediate fountainhead for the use of this concept among
Christian mystics was the Plotinian notion of God as the One from which all other modes of
being emanate as concentric circles from a single, motionless point. For Plotinus, and the
Neo-Platonic tradition of mystical thought which continued throughout the Middle Ages, the
journey of the soul was conceived of as a flight to its own centre, which was simultaneously
the centre of the Divine. Thus the aim of spiritual exercise was the return of the soul to its
‘root’, whereupon it and God would be revealed as one Being and not two.38

The figure of the Divine ‘centre’ was a commonplace for Western mystical literature from
Augustine, who described the soul’s movement towards God as an attraction to a gravitational
centre (Confessions XIII, ch.9),39 to Pascal, who stated that, in the ‘eternal sphere’ of the
universe, ‘Jesus Christ is the end of all, and the centre to which all tend’.40 It was incorporated
into Christian doctrine as the ‘synteresis’, the divine nucleus of the soul and seat of the mystical
faculty. The synteresis was variously described as the soul’s Ground, to which we must descend
in order for the mystic union with God to take place, and as its Apex or ‘scintilla’ (literally,
‘spark’). The term was first used by St Jerome, and among the early scholastic mystics it
was regarded as an internal remnant of the sinless state before the fall—the soul’s own Eden,

36 The correlation was first explored by Elizabeth Drew, whose comments are predicated upon her Jungian read-
ing both of the mandala and of Eliot’s work (T.S. Eliot: The Design of his Poetry (New York: Charles Scrib-
ner’s Sons, 1949), pp.140–44). Later critics have tended to avoid such speculation upon the poet’s own psyche; my
treatment of the theme is indebted to P.S. Sri’s, in T.S. Eliot, Vedanta and Buddhism (Vancouver: University
of British Columbia Press, 1985), pp.103–05.

37 One Hundred Poems of Kabir, tr. Rabindranath Tagore and Evelyn Underhill (London: Macmillan & Co.,

38 See Plotinus, Enneads VI, ch.9, 8.

39 See also De Ordine I, ch.3: ‘to see the One we must withdraw from plurality . . . [and] seek as it were the centre
of the circle which holds the whole together’ (quoted by Henry Chadwick, Augustine, Past Masters (Oxford: Ox-

as it were.\textsuperscript{41} Juliana of Norwich describes it as ‘our higher part’ which ‘is knit to God, in the
making’;\textsuperscript{42} and St John of the Cross goes so far as to identify the syneresis with God himself:\textsuperscript{43} The centre of the soul is God; and, when the soul has attained to Him according
to the whole capacity of its being, and according to the force of its operation, it
will have reached the last and the deepest centre of the soul, which will be when
with all its powers it loves and understands and enjoys God.

The still point speaks most effectively of the paradoxical nature of the central mystical
truths, especially as they are perceived during illuminative visions of Divinity. It is upon this
aspect of the image that Eliot elaborates:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline.

The paradox of the still point can be explained only through other paradoxes. Opposites, such
as the dance and the still point, or the past and the future, are wedded; and both terms of a binary
set of possibilities are denied (‘neither arrest nor movement’, ‘neither ascent nor decline’).

Eliot is here utilizing one of the major linguistic and rhetorical features of the literature of
mystical vision. Paradox is especially common in Christian Neo-Platonist writings.\textsuperscript{44} August­
tine, one of the first Christians to try to purge from Neo-Platonist doctrine those aspects which
were incompatible with Christianity, nevertheless shows his debt to its style of expression in
his account of the nature of God (\textit{Confessions I}, ch.4, p.33):

Most high, most excellent, most potent . . . unchangeable, yet changing all things;
ever new, never old; making all things new, yet bringing old age . . . always
working, ever at rest; gathering, yet needing nothing; . . . Thou dost love, but
without passion; art jealous, yet free from care; dost repent without remorse; art
angry, yet remainest serene . . . Thou art never in need but still thou dost rejoice
at thy gains; art never greedy, yet demandest dividends . . . . Thou owest men
nothing, yet payest out to them as if in debt to thy creature, and when thou dost
cancel debts thou losest nothing thereby.

Eliot’s use of the ‘neither . . . nor’ construction recalls the work of another Christian
interpreter of Neo-Platonism, Dionysius the Areopagite. Eliot would have found the following
quotation in William James’ discussion of Dionysius—whom he describes as ‘The fountain­
head of Christian mysticism’ (James, pp.407–08):

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
p.138. (The work will hereafter be referred to as \textit{Revelations}; page numbers from this edition will be included
in the text.) She goes on to note that, through the incarnation of Christ, our ‘lower part’ is now also knit to
God.
\item[43] \textit{The Living Flame of Love} (hereafter cited as \textit{Living Flame}), Stanza 1, exposition, 12; Peers, III, p.22.
\item[44] Those Christian mystics who do not use paradox, St Bernard of Clairvaux, for instance, tend not to be much
influenced by this school.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
The cause of all things is neither soul nor intellect; nor has it imagination, opinion, or reason, or intelligence; nor is it reason or intelligence; nor is it spoken or thought. It is neither number, nor order, nor magnitude, nor littleness, nor equality, nor inequality, nor similarity, nor dissimilarity. It neither stands, nor moves, nor rests... It is neither essence, nor eternity, nor time... not one; not unity; not divinity or goodness; nor even spirit as we know it.

Examples could be multiplied from throughout Western and Eastern mysticism. Eliot's initial focus, however, is upon the Christian notion of the Incarnation, in which the transcendent God became immanent in human form, 'Neither flesh nor fleshless'. This particular doctrine has been a favourite among Christian mystics, who have seen in it a promise that God might make himself manifest in their own physical being. Juliana of Norwich, for instance, claims that humans can aspire to a dual nature like Christ's (Revelations ch.55, p.133):

For I saw full assuredly that our Substance is in God, and also I saw that in our sense-soul God is: for in the self-[same] point that our Soul is made sensual, in the self-[same] point is the City of God ordained to Him from without beginning.

For Eliot, the Incarnation was the central paradox of human existence, and, as we shall see later, the doctrine which distinguished Christianity from other religions. In his essay on Pascal he described the process whereby 'the intellectual soul' is drawn to Christian belief through contemplating the fact that the paradox of the Incarnation is necessary so that the world might make sense (SE, p.408). Eliot implies here what many mystics affirm: that paradox is a heuristic device, whose apparent contradictions disabuse the mind of its 'logical' assumptions. Certain paradoxes, when held before the mind, inspire in it a condition of doubt and anguish through confronting it with the possibility of a realm of reality in which logic, causality and syllogism are no longer valid. Nicolas Cusanus, in The Vision of God (1453), speaks of the place wherein God is to be found as:

girt round with the coincidence of contradictories, and this is the wall of Paradise wherein Thou dost abide. The door whereof is guarded by the most proud spirit

45 For instance, Meister Eckhart in Sermon XCIX: 'Love him as he is: a not-God, a not-spirit, a not-Person, a not-image; as sheer, pure, limpid unity, alien from all duality. And in this one let us sink down eternally from nothingness to nothingness' (Meister Eckhart, ed. Franz Fesiffer, tr. C. de B. Evans, 2 vols (London: John M. Watkins, 1924), I, pp.247–48); or, from the Buddhist Udana VIII, 1: 'Monks, there exists that condition wherein is neither earth nor water nor air: wherein is neither the sphere of infinite space nor of infinite consciousness nor of nothingness nor of neither-consciousness-nor-unconsciousness; where there is neither this world nor a world beyond nor both together nor moon-and-sun... That indeed is the end of Ill' (The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon, Part II, tr. F.L. Woodward, Sacred Books of the Buddhists, vol.8 (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), p.97).

46 The Incarnation, of course, was implied in Burnt Norton I by the veiled reference to the Eucharist in the elevation of the lotus.

47 The passage is quoted in full below, p.137.

48 Eliot may have been influenced by the dialectical school of theology which flourished in the early 1930s under the leadership of Karl Barth (see above, p.98). Barth stressed that God transcends rational comprehension and can be 'known' to the mind only through the affirmation of paradoxes, a process which served rather to clear the mind of rational assumptions than to give positive understanding.

of Reason, and, unless he be vanquished, the way in will not lie open . . .

[Therefore] I observe how needful it is for me to enter into the darkness, and to admit the coincidence of opposites, beyond all the grasp of reason, and there to seek the truth where impossibility meeteth me. And beyond that, beyond even the highest ascent of intellect, when I shall have attained unto that which is unknown to every intellect, and which every intellect judgeth to be most far removed from truth, there, my God, art Thou, who art Absolute Necessity.

This was not merely a game with words and irrationalities, for the paradoxes of the mystic were linked to a definite metaphysic. For Christian mystics in the Neo-Platonic tradition of Dionysius, that metaphysic was monist: their paradoxes attempted to illustrate the fact that all apparent opposites were, from God's perspective, resolved into unity. True wisdom, therefore, could be attained only by a mind in a state of perfect counterpoise between all opposing tensions. Eliot himself affirmed this truth when he wrote, 'it may be the man who affirms the apparently incompatible who is right'. Paradox will eventually be seen to be the highest wisdom.

In *Burnt Norton* II, Eliot goes on to speak paradoxically of the psychological state induced by mystical vision:

I can only say there we have been: but I cannot say where.
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.

This kind of disorientation, the inability to fix one's position in the world of space and time, is reported by many writers—St John of the Cross, for example:

But, when this Divine light strikes the soul . . . it neither perceives darkness nor observes light, nor apprehends aught that it knows, from whatever source; hence at times the soul remains as it were in a great forgetfulness, so that it knows not where it has been or what it has done, nor is it aware of the passage of time. Wherefore it may happen, and does happen, that many hours are spent in this forgetfulness, and, when the soul returns to itself, it believes that less than a moment has passed, or no time at all.

In this state of forgetfulness, the soul experiences:

The inner freedom from the practical desire,
The release from action and suffering, release from the inner
And the outer compulsion.

Although common to all schools, this notion is strongly suggestive of the Hindu and Buddhist doctrine of *mokṣa*, the release from the cycle of *karma* in which the soul is endlessly reincarnated in the form of life determined by its previous conduct. Strictly speaking, such release

---

50 Eliot wrote his doctoral thesis on the monist philosophy of F.H. Bradley, and specifically on the epistemological status of intuitive experience.

51 'Virgil and the Christian World' *(OPP*, p.126). See also Eliot's long essay, *George Herbert*, British Writers and their Work (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1962), p.20: 'one has recourse to diverse and even mutually contradictory metaphors and images to express the inexpressible'.

is granted only after death, where the truly virtuous personality is incorporated into the divine essence. In the Buddha’s teaching, however, an adept who has cleansed the self of all *tanhā* (‘desire’) may become an *arhat*, one who is granted *nirvāṇa* while still living.\(^{53}\)

Christian tradition also speaks of the ‘release from action and suffering’ in Augustine’s famous dictum, ‘thou hast made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee’ (*Confessions* I, ch.1, p.31). Again, this is consigned to the perfection achieved after death, although a foretaste of this release is granted through fleeting experiences of mystical ecstasy. Contrary to most Eastern teaching, however, orthodox Christians are not urged to seek experiences of release, but to accept them as unmerited gifts of Divine grace. For the Christian, ‘action and suffering’ are to be embraced as purgative experiences, which prepare the soul to enter its rest.

In its momentary experience of enlargement, Eliot describes the soul as:

```
surrounded
By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving,
*Erhebung* without motion, concentration
Without elimination, both a new world
And the old made explicit, understood
In the completion of its partial ecstasy,
The resolution of its partial horror.
```

Light imagery, which Eliot described as ‘the form of certain types of mystical experience’ (*SE*, p.267), was of crucial importance to mystical writers. Evelyn Underhill remarks of their experience of ‘Illumination’ that ‘the illuminatives, one and all, seem to assure us that its apparently symbolic name is a realistic one; that it appears to them as a kind of radiance, a flooding of the personality with new light’ (*Underhill*, p.298). In *Confessions* VII, ch.10 (p.147), for instance, Augustine describes a vision of ‘Immutable Light’ which strikes ‘the eye of [his] soul’ as he begins to contemplate Divine truth. Similarly, St John of the Cross notes in *Ascent of Mount Carmel* that there are times when, without warning, the soul undergoes a passive ‘reception of light’ (Bk.II, ch.15, 2, p.121). This light is visible only because of the motes of dust which it illuminates (it is perhaps to such movement of dust that Eliot refers when he describes the light as paradoxically ‘still’ and yet ‘moving’). The dust symbolizes the created order, which reflects the light of God, but which must be removed from the consciousness before the soul can receive that light in its pure, invisible form (Bk.II, ch.14, 9, p.115). Eliot will use the image of ‘dust in sunlight’ when he recalls the rose-garden experience in *Burnt Norton* V.

Eliot introduces another paradox of stillness and motion in the phrase ‘*Erhebung* without motion’. If some special significance was intended in the Eliot’s use of the German word *erhebung* (which means simply ‘lifting up’) it has escaped his critics.\(^{54}\) It seems most likely that he used it to avoid the connotations of such English equivalents as ‘exaltation’, ‘rapture’ or ‘elevation’.\(^{55}\) The experience Eliot describes is attested by many mystics; an intense ‘act

---

\(^{53}\)Eliot develops this notion of the ‘saint’ in *The Dry Salvages* V.

\(^{54}\)The word does not feature prominently in any of German philosophers with whose work Eliot was known to be familiar (Leibniz, Kant, Hegel etc.).

of contemplation', Evelyn Underhill says, often 'leaves no sharp image on the mind: only a knowledge that we have been lifted up' (Underhill, p.293). 56

Similarly, the phrase 'concentration without elimination' describes the kind of mystic vision in which the whole universal scheme is understood without any loss of awareness of particulars. Evelyn Underhill notes that during 'illumination', 'the actual physical perceptions are strangely heightened' (Underhill, p.289). The mystic vision unifies the One with the All and the All with the One, making plain the place of each detail in a vast and yet simple pattern. 57 From this point of view, accidents of time, space, pain and pleasure, are revealed as merely 'partial', and are resolved with their apparent opposites in the unifying scheme. 58

The paradox with which Eliot concludes *Burnt Norton II*, however, signals a change in direction:

\[
\text{Time past and time future} \\
\text{Allow but a little consciousness.} \\
\text{To be conscious is not to be in time} \\
\text{But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,} \\
\text{The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,} \\
\text{The moment in the draughty church at smokefall} \\
\text{Be remembered.}
\]

The 'enchainment of past and future', he says, protects us from the 'reality' which is perceived in the timeless moment of the rose-garden. True consciousness requires an escape from time and its endless processes, separations and contradictions. Permanence, stillness and completion must replace partiality, movement and change. Nevertheless, these moments can occur only at a specific point in the flux of time, and their effect can only be gauged in the world of transience.

The mystic vision appears to render time irrelevant, but as it does so it sacramentalizes the moment in which it occurs. 'Only through time time is conquered', Eliot concludes (emphasis added). The components from which are formed these moments of vision are locked within the scheme of duration, as are the benefits to be gained from them. Would-be mystics must therefore turn away from their visionary experiences to the world of time which is their proper sphere of action, and continue the 'long, hard journey' to which their intuition of God has called them.

Eliot's conclusion regarding mystical vision is similar to that of St John of the Cross (*Ascent*, Bk.II, ch.24, 6–8, pp.178–80):

\[
\text{The effect which these visions produce in the soul is that of quiet, illumination, joy} \\
\text{like that of glory, sweetness, purity and love, humility and inclination or elevation}
\]

56 St John of the Cross speaks of the state of perfect prayer whose 'effects are the lifting up of the spirit to the heavenly intelligence, and its withdrawal and abstraction from all things and forms and figures and memories thereof' (*Ascent*, Bk.II, ch.14, 11, p.117).

57 Dante's account in *Paradiso* XXXIII (II.85–90) of his apprehension of this truth was perhaps foremost in Eliot's mind.

58 The 'new world' and the 'old world' which are both 'made explicit' may refer to the Old and New Covenants of Christian doctrine, which are dependent upon each other for their meaning. The old world of the Mosaic Law was completed (and thereby made obsolete) by the new world of God's grace available through Christ; however, the significance of Christ's life and death could be appreciated only in the light of the religious system which it fulfilled.
of the spirit in God . . . [A]lthough it is true that the remembrance of them impels the soul to a certain love of God and contemplation, yet it is impelled and exalted much more by pure faith and detachment in darkness from them all, without its knowing how or whence it comes to it.

St John’s advice is to lay aside such visions—which, if retained, may become ‘enchantments’ of the kind Eliot goes on to describe in East Coker II—and ‘seek to journey to God by the way of unknowing’.59 This is what Eliot proceeds to do in Burnt Norton III.

V Devotion

(i) ‘Via Negativa’: The Way Down

Mystical thought falls into two broad categories or approaches, which co-exist despite their apparent opposition. At one pole is the ‘Way of Affirmation’, often referred as the Via Affirmativa or as ‘cataphatic’ mysticism. It emphasizes the immanence of the Divine in creation, and, makes much of the beauty of the natural world which God has not only created but entered in incarnate form (Christ, in Christian thought, and, to a lesser degree, Krishna, in Eastern religion). Experiences like that described in Burnt Norton I and II are central to cataphatic mysticism, and are to be valued and cultivated. At the opposite pole is the ‘Way of Negation’, otherwise known as the Via Negativa or as ‘apophatic’ mysticism. Its fundamental tenet is that the Divine exists as ‘Other’, as wholly apart from the created order. The spiritual quest therefore involves the denial and active renunciation of the sublunary world and its attractions in an effort to develop a genuine awareness of the Divine. Visionary experiences are acknowledged as gifts from God, but are valued only for their effect upon the soul.

The distinction was first formulated by Dionysius in his preface to Mystical Theology.60

Mystical Theology is like a ladder set up on the earth whose top reached to Heaven on which the angels of God were ascending and descending, and above which stood Almighty God. The Angel ascending is the ‘negative’ which distinguishes Almighty God from all created things. God is not matter—soul, mind, spirit, any being, nor even being itself, but above and beyond all these. The Angel descending is the ‘affirmative’. God is good, wise, powerful, the Being, until we come to Symbolic Theology, which denotes Him under material forms and conditions. Theology prefers the negative because Almighty God is more appropriately presented by distinction than by comparison.61

59 Ascent, Bk.II, ch.26, 18, p.190. In The Dark Night of the Soul (hereafter cited as Dark Night), Bk.I, ch.1, 2–3; Peers, I, pp.330–31, he describes this renunciation as a kind of ‘weaning’ of beginners from their childish consolations.


61 The ladder was a favourite metaphor of mediaeval thought. Bodies of knowledge were often systematized as hierarchical scales, and growth in wisdom and understanding seen as progress from step to step. Dionysius’ ladder of celestial hierarchies is part of a long tradition which includes Thomas Aquinas’ ‘Ladder of Being’ and St John of the Cross’s ‘ladder of contemplation’ (see below).
The symbolism of ascent and descent is frequently ambiguous in mystical literature, for mystic writers insist that the two ways are in fact one, a belief to which Eliot alludes in his second epigraph to *Burnt Norton*: ‘δόξα ἄνω κάτω μια καὶ δυνα’. Indeed, Heraclitus’ words are echoed throughout mystical literature: St John of the Cross, for instance, who will be Eliot’s guide through the *Via Negativa*, describes the ‘ladder of contemplation’ (*Dark Night*, Bk.II, ch.18, 2, p.433):

We may also call it a ladder because, even as the ladder has those same steps in order that men may mount, it has them also that they may descend; even so it is likewise with this secret contemplation, for those same communications which it causes in the soul raise it up to God, yet humble it with respect to itself. For, upon this road, to go down is to go up, and to go up, to go down, for he that humbles himself is exalted and he that exalts himself is humbled. And besides the fact that the virtue of humility is greatness, for the exercise of the soul therein, God is wont to make it mount by this ladder so that it may descend, and to make it descend so that it may mount.

Although the two approaches (at least in Christian tradition) coincide on fundamentals of theology, such as God’s loving character and Christ’s salvific work, they produce markedly diverse schools of spirituality.

After the visionary ecstasies of *Burnt Norton* I and II, Eliot describes in Part III a return to a world antipodal to such experiences. Stranded in ‘a place of disaffection’, a kind of limbo characterized by vacancy and apathy, the poet finds nothing to ‘affirm’, and responds by turning to the second mystical ‘way’. This has a marked effect upon the style of the poetry, for the Negative Way is a process which eschews positive sensation and therefore positive description. Its language is primarily the language of denial; every apparent positive is denied in the attempt to express the one true Positive. In *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (Bk.II, ch.15, 4, p.121) St John of the Cross teaches that genuine contemplative prayer begins ‘when the soul has completely purified and voided itself of all forms and images that can be apprehended’. None of these, he insists, not even imaginative experiences of a supernatural origin, such as Eliot’s rose-garden vision, can be ‘proximate means of union with God’ (*Ascent*, Bk.II, ch.12, 3, p.104).

The poetry in which Eliot describes this ‘way’, then, is characterized by an absence of images; particularly visual images. Instead, he uses the bare, abstract language and uncompromising tone of the treatises of his Spanish master. The poet seeks:

darkness to purify the soul  
Emptying the sensual with deprivation  
Cleansing affection from the temporal.

Such ideas are fundamental to the ‘dark night’ of St John of the Cross. In order to be purified, the soul must enter into a complete physical and spiritual darkness—a total absence of any created being, any sense-impression, any thought, any quality, which might act as a ‘light’

---

62 Many writers (among them, we shall see, Eliot) picture the Affirmative Way as an ascent and the Negative Way as a descent. Others, notably St John of the Cross, play on the paradox constantly. Dionysius describes here the descent of God’s messenger which becomes an ascent for mankind.

63 St John is himself echoing Aquinas’ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk.IV, ch.1.
to the soul, and thus prevent its entry into the 'abyss of faith' in which union with God is achieved.64

Eliot had quoted St John of the Cross to this effect in the epigraph to *Sweeney Agonistes*: 'Hence the soul cannot be possessed of divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings'.65 Affections for creatures, St John says 'are pure darkness in the eyes of God, and, when the soul is clothed in these affections, it has no capacity for being enlightened and possessed by the pure and simple light of God' (*Ascent*, Bk.I, ch.4, 1, p.23). The only way to mortify desire is through deprivation of its objects (ch.12, 6, p.56).

This doctrine would seem to be diametrically opposed to the theory of 'speculation' which was discussed in the previous chapter. In fact, the two are complementary. In the *Convivio*, Bk.IV, ch.12 (see Chapter 4, p.75), Dante speaks of the soul being attracted to earthly forms only to become disillusioned when they do not provide the spiritual nourishment which it seeks. In renouncing them it attains to higher objects of love, and progresses in this manner to the love of God, when, *in retrospect*, the lesser forms are revealed as reflections of the Light of God. Eliot explained this to Bonamy Dobree in 1936:66

The doctrine that in order to arrive at the love of God one must divest oneself of the love of created beings . . . . is fundamentally true, I believe. Or to put your belief in your own way, that only through the love of created beings can we approach the love of God, that I believe to be UNTRUE. Whether we mean by that domestic and friendly affections, or a more comprehensive love of the 'neighbour', of humanity in general. I don't think that ordinary human affections are capable of leading us to the love of God, but rather that the love of God is capable of informing, intensifying and elevating our human affections, which otherwise have little to distinguish them from the 'natural' affections of animals.

The poet surveys the world around him—a world of 'unhealthy souls' moving in 'appetency'67 like 'bits of paper' blown about by the wind. Turning from this he is impelled towards renunciation:

    Descend lower, descend only
     Into the world of perpetual solitude,
     World not world, but that which is not world,
     Internal darkness, deprivation

64See *Ascent*, Bk.I, ch.1, 3; Bk.II, chs 3–4; *Dark Night*, Bk.I, chs 1–7.
65The exact source of Eliot's quotation has eluded commentators. It is, however, one of St John's constant themes, and many equivalent passages could be cited (for example, *Ascent*, Bk.I, ch.5, 2, p.29; Bk.II, ch.5, 4, p.76). Eliot echoes the sentiment in his introduction to Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (London: Faber & Faber, 1937; rpt. 1950), pp.1–7 (p.7): 'all of us, so far as we attach ourselves to created objects and surrender our wills to temporal ends, are eaten by the same worm'.
67'Appetency' is in direct opposition to the mystical tendency. It is *tanha*, the craving which in Indian philosophy is said to perpetuate the wheel of suffering and rebirth. In his essay 'John Bramhall' Eliot criticized I.A. Richards and Bertrand Russell for their endorsement of 'appetency' as a moral norm. He quotes Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism*: 'Anything is valuable which will satisfy an appetency without involving the frustration of some equal or more important appetency; in other words, the only reason which can be given for not satisfying a desire is that more important desires will thereby be thwarted' (*SE*, p.356).
And destitution of all property,
Desiccation of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy,
Inoperancy of the world of spirit.

Here Eliot again summarizes the teaching of the early chapters of *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, which describe the paradoxical descent–ascent which the soul undertakes through renouncing the 'appetency' of its senses and the spirit. At first, these austerities are undertaken by the soul itself—hence the term active 'dark night'. Later will come the passive 'dark night' when God himself will undertake to purify the soul, whose duty it will be merely to submit to his ministrations.

In the meantime, it is the duty of the soul to seek 'the world of perpetual solitude'. St John of the Cross comments (*Dark Night*, Bk.I, ch.9, 6, p.354):

together with the aridity and emptiness which [the dark night] causes in the senses, it gives the soul an inclination and desire to be alone and in quietness, without being able to think of any particular thing or having the desire to do so.

Later he speaks of the deprivation and destitution which the soul undergoes as it is emptied of the three kinds of good which usually nourish it. His analysis of this tripartite impoverishment is echoed in Eliot's lines (*Dark Night*, Bk.II, ch.6, 4, p.386):

the soul must needs be in all its parts reduced to a state of emptiness, poverty and abandonment and must be left dry and empty and in darkness. For the sensual part is purified in aridity, the faculties are purified in the emptiness of their perceptions and the spirit is purified in thick darkness.

In the fourth movement of *Burnt Norton* the poet reflects upon the experience in the rose-garden in light of the course of purgation which he has adopted in Part III. Each of the short lyrical movements of the *Quartets* is concerned with the possibility of hope beyond death, and, as has already been noted, *Burnt Norton* IV reverberates with funereal overtones. A glimmer of hope presents itself in the last lines, however, with the appearance of the kingfisher. The bird is a traditional emblem of calm, tranquility and contemplation, but in mediaeval times became symbolically associated with Christ, whose death is perhaps intimated at the beginning of the poem:

---

68 Eliot’s vocabulary here draws upon that of mediaeval psychology, which sought to define common concepts like 'sense', 'knowledge', 'memory', 'fancy' and so on. The words 'property', 'desiccation', 'evacuation' and 'inoperancy' have about them the air of clinical precision which characterized the Aristotelian terminology and style of St John of the Cross and St Thomas Aquinas.

69 See Chapter 3, p.46, and Chapter 4, p.89.

70 See Appendix III, p.220, for the origins of these connotations.

71 Given the common use in devotional literature of the 'sun/Son' conceit with reference to Christ, the line 'The black cloud carries the sun away' could be taken as a reference to the darkness which came over the earth at the Crucifixion. The 'sunflower' could also be interpreted allegorically as Christ and the 'clematis', whose common name is 'Virgin's Bower', as the Virgin Mary. Kristian Smidt, in *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T.S. Eliot* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p.216, suggests that the yew—tree—with its reputation of immortality—may also sustain a hint of God the Father. It is also difficult to resist the parallel between the kingfisher and the Fisher–king legend of *The Waste Land*. Although too close a correlation should be avoided, the notion of the redemption of an otherwise 'waste' landscape by a divine act is common to both passages.
After the kingfisher’s wing
Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still
At the still point of the turning world.

The light momentarily reflected in its wing could be taken as an emblem of the light of God reflected in Christ during his brief earthly life and now, after his death and resurrection, resident ‘at the still point of the turning world’, where it is intimated to us in experiences like that described in *Burnt Norton* 1.72

The lyric affirms hope in the existence of the light, but not in its availability. As in the ‘Ariel’ poems, spiritual fulfillment resides in a *Deus absconditas*, a hidden God, who is to be found only with great difficulty. This theme is continued in the final part of the poem which begins with a meditation upon the decay of words and meanings which have no stable signification outside of their relation to the eternal ‘Word’ of God.73 This Word, however, is in the same plight as that described in *Ash Wednesday*; it is again ‘lost’, ‘spent’, ‘unheard’ and ‘unspoken’, for it is ‘in the desert’:

attacked by voices of temptation,
The crying shadow in the funeral dance,
The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera.

The reference is to Christ’s temptation by Satan in the wilderness, through which it was made clear that even the Divine solution to the alienation of mankind must involve a period of testing and purgation.

Eliot describes the process of mystic purgation as an integration of individual ‘details’ into a larger ‘pattern’. The specific pattern which he mentions is ‘the figure of the ten stairs’, a phrase which seems to refer to the drawing of the ‘Mount of Perfection’ prefixed to most editions of *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. The drawing—reputedly based upon one which St John used to teach his pupils74—shows three roads: the ‘camino de spiritu imperfecto’ (‘the way of spiritual imperfection’), the ‘camino de spiritu errado’ (‘the way of spiritual error’), and in the middle the ‘senda estrecha dela perfeccion’ (‘the narrow path to perfection’), the only road to reach the summit. This ‘middle way’ is flanked on the left by the five ‘bienas del cielo’ (‘benefits of heaven’) and on the right by the five ‘bienas del tierra’ (‘earthly benefits’); and its upward course is marked by six ‘nadas’ (‘dispossession’), signifying the renunciation of these ‘bienas’.75 Inscribed at the bottom of the drawing is the passage which Eliot will adapt in *East Coker* III.

The ‘figure of the ten stairs’ represents the subsumption of momentary vision and purgative discipline within a larger pattern,76 a notion made tenable only by the doctrine which affirms God, personified as Love, as the guiding principle of pattern:

---

72Eliot’s phrase ‘light to light’ echoes Christ’s description in the Nicene Creed: ‘We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light’.

73The notion of the Word, both in its Christian and its Heraclitean formulation, will be discussed in Chapter 6, section I, part i.


75A passage from St John’s elaboration upon this ‘ladder of contemplation’ in *Dark Night* Bk.II, chs 18–20, is quoted above (p.118).

76Cf. *Little Gidding* V: ‘History is a pattern of timeless moments’. 
Love is itself unmoving,
Only the cause and end of movement.

The Aristotelian theory of the Unmoved Mover is a constant source of assurance to the mystics, promising as it does that their quest has been inspired by God and will eventually return them to him. Here, at the end of Burnt Norton, the contemplation of the Divine pattern brings to the poet’s mind echoes of the theophanic experience of the rose-garden, and strengthens his resolve to escape ‘the waste sad time’ at all costs and attain to the substance of his vision.

(ii) ‘Via Negativa’: The Darkness of God

In the first two sections of East Coker Eliot meditates upon the mortality and decay inherent in all things, and concludes that no wisdom—and especially not that ‘derived from experience’—can account for life within the endless cycles of birth and death, other than ‘the wisdom of humility’ which is also ‘endless’. Humility has always been the central virtue of all major religious and mystical traditions; it is the first prerequisite for the knowledge both of oneself and of God. Eliot spoke of its importance on numerous occasions, and admitted that East Coker was written in response to a disillusionment ‘which seemed to demand an act of personal contrition, of humility, repentance and amendment’ (Idea, p.64).

In the third part of the poem, Eliot pursues this virtue to the outermost boundaries of the Via Negativa. All of humankind, great and small, good and evil, learned and ignorant, will ultimately ‘go into the dark’, and all that the poet can do is to accept this in humility, in the hope that God can (and will) be found in the depth of darkness:

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God.

St John of the Cross notes this step of the mystic’s journey in Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book II: ‘When the spiritual person cannot meditate, let him learn to be still in God’ (ch.15, 5, p.122). Eliot appears to be describing the entry into the ‘passive dark night’ wherein all striving for perfection is relinquished in favour of total abandonment to God.

The notion of the ‘darkness of God’, a darkness even greater than worldly darkness, is an ancient tenet of mysticism. Eliot’s phrasing suggests that he had in mind the Old Testament accounts of God’s first revelation of himself to Moses. The Hebrew scriptures maintained the usual association of darkness with evil and the world of the dead (Sheol), except for when it came to describing the nature and person of Yahweh, the God whose name could not even be

77In Living Flame, Stanza 4, exposition, 2nd redaction, ch.4, 6, pp.188–9, St John of the Cross describes the initial ‘awakening’ of the soul as ‘a movement of the Word in the substance of the soul’ which is brought about, ‘not because [the Word] moves itself, but because it is the beginning and root of all movement; remaining in itself stable’.

78St John of the Cross affirms this in Ascent, Bk.III, ch.9, 4, p.230: ‘all visions, revelations and feelings coming from Heaven, and any thoughts that may proceed from these, are of less worth than the least act of humility’.

79For instance, ‘Humility is the most difficult of all virtues to achieve; nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself, ... The stoical attitude is the reverse of Christian humility’ (‘Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca’, SE, pp.130, 132); ‘Without humility, submission and love, nothing is possible’ (‘Towards a Christian Britain’, The Listener, 25, no.639(10 April 1941), 524–25 (p.525). See also ‘The Mysticism of Blake’, The Nation and Athenaeum, 41(17 Sept. 1927), p.779, and ‘Virgil and the Christian World’, OPAP, pp.127–28.
uttered. In Exodus 20. 21, we read, 'Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God [was]' (the Hebrew uses no verb form). This 'thick darkness where God' continues as a major image for the Divine presence throughout the Old Testament, while lesser 'darknesses' are invoked by the psalmists and prophets to represent spiritual trial and hardship. The metaphor was expanded into a doctrine by Christian mystics, notably Dionysius, who speak of the 'Divine ray of Darkness' by which God's presence is communicated. The dark 'abyss of faith' into which the soul must journey is, of course, a favourite image of St John of the Cross.

Once it has entered into this darkness, the soul can do nothing but wait, a discipline which extinguishes and transforms even the conscious practice of the great Christian virtues:

- 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.

According to Evelyn Underhill, one of the central paradoxes of the mystical way is that the soul must learn to serve God without hope of reward and without any longing for the spiritual good which nevertheless is its goal (Underhill, p.110). The reason, as St John of the Cross (and now Eliot) explains, is that such hope and love could never be totally selfless. In Ascent of Mount Carmel (Bk.II, ch.6, pp.79–82) he lists the 'three theological virtues'—faith, hope and charity—as qualities to be renounced, and concludes that, just as are the senses, 'the spiritual faculties are voided and purified of all that is not God'. The soul needs to divest itself of the encumbrances of creation and also 'must be annihilated and detached from all that belongs to its spirit' (Bk.II, ch.7, 4, p.83). The soul is left in a state of passivity; its energies are concentrated not upon the exercise of virtue, but upon waiting for God. In the words of the psalmist, 'I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait .... My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning' (Psalm 130. 5–6).

The experience of waiting without any sense of God's presence is a necessary exercise in humility. The mystic holds to the promise that the annihilation of the soul in darkness is not final, but is a prelude to illumination. After a period of 'waiting', Eliot says, 'the darkness shall be light, and the stillness the dancing'. St John of the Cross assures his pupils that this transformation will eventually take place (Dark Night, Bk.II, ch.9, 1–2, pp.396–98):

- It now remains to be said that, although this happy night brings darkness to the spirit, it does so only to give it light in everything; and that, although it humbles it and makes it miserable, it does so only to exalt it and to raise it up .... for the light which is to be given to it is a Divine light of the highest kind, which transcends all natural light, and which by nature can find no place in the understanding.

---

80 See, for example, Deuteronomy 4. 11; 5. 22; Psalms 18. 11; 97. 2; II Samuel 22. 12; I Kings 8. 12. One passage which is quoted by several Christian mystics, including St John of the Cross, is Isaiah 50. 10–11, where those who 'walk in darkness, without a light' are encouraged to continue in that state, putting their trust in God, and refusing to kindle a light of their own.

81 Curious though it may seem, the notion was an extrapolation of Neo-Platonic light metaphysics. The pure Light which is the substance of God was held to be so great that it appeared dark to human eyes. It is perhaps best described in Milton's phrase, 'dark with excessive bright' (Paradise Lost, Bk.III, 1.380).

82 See, for instance, Ascent, Bk.II, ch.18, 2, p.137.

83 This passage, and others illustrative of meditative passivity (for example, Psalms 27. 14 and 33. 20; and Isaiah 8. 17), would have been familiar to Eliot through Anglican liturgy.
Eliot concludes *East Coker* III by quoting almost verbatim the passage of verse from *Ascent of Mount Carmel* Bk.I, ch.13, 11, p.59, which accompanied the 'figure of the ten stairs':

In order to arrive at having pleasure in everything,
Desire to have pleasure in nothing.
In order to arrive at possessing everything,
Desire to possess nothing.
In order to arrive at being everything,
Desire to be nothing.
In order to arrive at knowing everything,
Desire to know nothing.
In order to arrive at that wherein thou hast no pleasure,
Thou must go by a way wherein thou hast no pleasure.
In order to arrive at that which thou knowest not,
Thou must go by a way that thou knowest not.
In order to arrive at that which thou possessest not,
Thou must go by a way that thou possessest not.
In order to arrive at that which thou art not,
Thou must go through that which thou art not.

William James quoted the passage in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and accused its author of playing with the 'vertigo of self-contradiction' (James, p.300). As the paradoxes of *Burnt Norton* II illustrate, Eliot saw a purpose in the 'vertigo' which such figures produce. This passage differs, however, in employing oxymoron—mere contradiction—rather than true logical paradox. If paradox is the use of logic to transcend the limits of logic, oxymoron is the use of assertion to deny assertion. Whereas the former is a critique of reason, the latter is a denial of thought itself. The oxymora of this passage from St John of the Cross deny the simplest terms of existence—'being', 'going', and 'possessing'—and challenge us to detach ourselves from these most basic counters of thought and expression.

The need to surpass all categories of intellect has been expressed frequently in mystical and theological literature. Oxymoron has had particular appeal to the Eastern mind, and incantatory passages similar to the one Eliot quotes are common meditative devices in Hindu and Buddhist literature. Instead of a mode of thought, paradox becomes a tool of meditation, or a kind of chant. The *Kena Upaniṣad*, for example, speaks of the renunciation of knowledge which enables the soul to be merged with Brahman (2. 3; *Hume*, p.337):

It is conceived of by him by whom It is not conceived of.
He by whom It is conceived of, knows It not.
It is not understood by those who [say they] understand It.
It is understood by those who [say they] understand It not.

Mystics from many traditions affirm that knowledge is available only through the deliberate pursuit of ignorance. Juliana of Norwich claims that 'the more we busy us to know His secret counsels . . . the farther shall we be from the knowing thereof' (*Revelations* ch.33, p.69); and

---

84 In some Buddhist traditions, would-be contemplatives are given kōans, totally illogical 'problems' (for instance, 'what is the sound of one hand clapping?') which, when kept before the mind by constant repetition, would (it was hoped) eventually bring about a release from the bondage of logical thought.
St Teresa speaks of 'an understanding which understands not'. This inverted epistemology is confirmed by St Thomas Aquinas, who argues that a knowledge of God can be attained primarily through the negative method of 'remotion'.

For the divine essence by its immensity surpasses every form to which our intellect reaches, and thus we cannot apprehend it by knowing what it is. But we have some knowledge thereof by knowing what it is not; and we shall approach all the nearer to the knowledge thereof according as we shall be enabled to remove by our intellect a greater number of things therefrom.

In *East Coker IV*, Eliot explores the ultimate paradox of the *Via Negativa*—the notion that the remedy for the 'sickness of soul' is to be found only in death. The poem features a string of paradoxical images:

Our only health is the disease
If we obey the dying nurse
Whose constant care is not to please
But to remind of our, and Adam's curse,
And that, to be restored, our sickness must grow worse.

The whole earth is our hospital
Endowed by the ruined millionaire,
Wherein, if we do well, we shall
Die of the absolute paternal care
That will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere.

Eliot's use of this familiar conceit has numerous analogies in English poetry, but it was also popular in the mystical, homiletic and liturgical traditions of the Church. Many of the mystics refer to the human condition as a necessary sickness, through suffering which the soul will be purged of its ills. According to St John of the Cross, for instance (*Dark Night*, Bk.II, ch.16, 10, p.425):

this soul is now, as it were, undergoing a cure, in order that it may regain its health—its health being God Himself. His Majesty restricts it to a diet and abstinence from all things, and takes away its appetite for them all. It is like a sick man, who . . . is carefully tended so that he may be cured; the air is not allowed to touch him, nor may he even enjoy the light, nor must he hear footsteps, nor yet the noise of those in the house; and he is given food . . . that is nourishing rather than delectable.

---


86 *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 5 vols, tr. The English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1924), I, Bk.I, ch.14, p.33. See also *Summa Theologiae*, Bk.II, ch.2, q.27, art.4, where Aquinas aligns himself with Dionysius' account of the 'way of negation'.

87 The specific allusions and models which are used in this passage are detailed in Appendix II, section iv.
Frequently, as here, Christ is portrayed as the surgeon, who is himself mortally wounded. Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, elaborates upon this in his typically baroque manner in 'Sermon On the Nativity': 'The Physician slain, and of His Flesh and Blood a receipt made, that the patient might recover!' and who heals by inflicting a 'divine wound' upon the soul. Juliana of Norwich (Revelations, ch.2, pp.3-5) records that she asked God for three things: the 'mind of His Passion', 'bodily sickness', and 'three wounds' ('very contrition', 'kind compassion' and 'steadfast longing toward God'). And in his lyric 'O living flame of love' (Living Flame, p.16) St John of the Cross declares further that in order to heal the 'wound' must be fatal:

Oh, sweet burn! Oh, delectable wound! Oh, soft hand!  
Oh, delicate touch  
That savours of eternal life and pays every debt! In slaying,  
Thou hast changed death into life.

In a letter to Anne Ridler, Eliot records that his friend George Every had criticized the content of East Coker IV as 'Jansenist' (Gardner, p.109). Jansenism was a theological movement within the Roman Catholic church which tended to deprecate the part played by individual effort—as opposed to Divine grace—in salvation. It came to prominence in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it claimed among its adherents the philosopher Pascal and the playwright Racine. Jansenism's main tenet was the arbitrary nature of Divine grace. God's actions could not in any way be predicted or influenced by human action; humanity could do nothing to secure spiritual benefit. For this the movement was bitterly opposed by the Jesuits—who tended towards the Pelagian belief in the perfectability of humanity—and by the Papacy, which issued a series of bulls opposing Jansenist doctrine.

Eliot had discussed the debate at length in the introduction to Pascal’s Pensées, and concluded that, ‘A moment of Jansenism may naturally take place, and take place rightly, in the individual; particularly in the life of a man of great and intense intellectual powers’ (SE, p.414). It is just such a ‘moment of Jansenism’ that is described in East Coker IV, a moment when the soul, having stilled itself and descended into the darkness of God, can contribute nothing to its spiritual advancement, but must wait passively for God to act. In a sense, the Divine act has already been performed in the events of Good Friday, which are celebrated in the last stanza of the lyric. However, the lyric describes only the death of Christ, which reiterates the theme of the renunciation of mystical ecstasy necessary for the purgation of sin.

The final section of East Coker sustains this mood of repudiation. The way forward is:

Not the intense moment  
Isolated, with no before and after,  
But a lifetime burning in every moment  
And not the lifetime of one man only  
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.

88 The notion is derived from Isaiah 53. 5: ‘He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities ... and with his stripes we are healed’.
89 Seventeen Sermons on the Nativity, Ancient and Modern Library of Theological Literature, revised edition (London: Griffiths, Farran, Okeden & Welsh, 1898), p.111. Andrewes is using the word ‘receipt’ to mean a ‘potion’ or ‘recipe’. See also Pascal’s Pensées, no.552, p.148: ‘Jesus suffers in His passions the torments which men inflict upon Him; but in His agony He suffers the torments which He inflicts upon Himself’.
90 Its major centre was the abbey at Port–Royal des Champs, which is mentioned in Chapter 2, p.27.
Mystical ecstasy is subsumed in a lifetime spent in the practice of spiritual purification, and even that can make no claim to finality, but is only completed by the experience of other individuals and the wisdom of other generations, much of which is quite beyond our grasp. There is no adequate response to this other than a constant renunciation of what has become familiar, in the hope that God will at some time grant to us wisdom and peace:

We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion.

VI  The Way Back Up: Affirmation Reaffirmed

(i) 'The Dry Salvages': Karma Yoga

With The Dry Salvages comes a revival of the Via Affirmativa, through an ideosynthesis of Christian and Eastern philosophy which is born out of the despairing vision which occupies the first two movements. The opening passage of the poem presents a world governed by the action of natural, inanimate forces: the river, symbolic of the temporal flux of endless change, and the sea, representing the vastness of universal time which defies contemplation. Eliot depicts these forces as pagan gods at whose whim humankind suffers without hope of recourse or escape. Initially, the only sense of religious purpose is that implied by the ironic quotation of passages from Anglican liturgy. The description of the 'anxious worried women' who mark time 'before the morning watch' echoes the De Profundis (Psalm 130)91 and the account of 'the ground swell, that is and was from the beginning' echoes the Gloria which concludes many of the set prayers of the Anglican service: 'As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be: world without end'.

Like Ash Wednesday, the poem expresses a religious sensibility dominated by despair and aridity. Part II of The Dry Salvages speaks of the 'prayer of the bone on the beach',92 and of the 'calamitous annunciation' by the tolling bell-buoy of the loss of a ship.93 It is a vision of hopelessness of this kind that is foundational to Eastern religion. The classical Indian worldview is founded upon the dual perception of impermanence (anithya) and universal suffering (duḥkha). Eliot himself endorsed this view of life in his introduction to Djuna Barnes' Nightwood (p.5): 'miseries that people suffer through particular abnormalities of temperament are visible on the surface: the deeper design is that of the human misery and bondage which is universal'.

Starting from these two principles, Hinduism formulated the notion of the purposeless 'wheel of existence' (bhāvachakra) upon which all souls are trapped in the endless cycle of transmigration. Eliot had already alluded to this notion in Burnt Norton with his description of the world of unconscious sensuality which spins about the 'bedded axle-tree', and in the

91 'Out of the deep have I called unto thee, O Lord . . . . My soul fleeth unto the Lord: before the morning watch, I say, before the morning watch' (Psalm 130. 1, 6).
92 The phrase echoes the account of the supplication of the bones in Ash Wednesday II.
93 Smidt (p.218) identifies this annunciation with the Fall of mankind and 'the bell of the last annunciation' with the Last Judgement, when 'the sea shall give up her dead' (Revelation 20. 13).
account of the seasonal cycles of death and birth in *East Coker* I. In these passages, the bondage of life upon the wheel was set against the experience of the timeless moment, which offered an escape to a separate world of 'reality' in which human life could have significance.

There is a further parallel at this point with the Eastern doctrine of *māyā*, which treated the phenomenal universe as 'unreal', as an illusion. The impulse to adopt this position is present again in *The Dry Salvages* II, as the poet declares that the round of suffering is 'endless', both in the sense of 'ubiquitous in time and place' and in the sense of 'without purpose'. However, this kind of despair is not the ultimate goal of mystic renunciation (or at least of orthodox Christian renunciation). At the end of *Burnt Norton* II, the final opposition of the timeless moment and the temporal world was avoided; it was affirmed that time would be conquered 'only through time' itself. The same consciousness is preserved—with great difficulty—in the midst of the unrelieved despair of *The Dry Salvages*, for through the maintenance of an attitude of prayer, the 'bone's prayer to Death its God' is subsequently revealed as 'the hardly, barely prayable/ Prayer of the one Annunciation'.

In the Christian calendar, the feast of the Annunciation commemorates the announcement to the Virgin Mary of the conception of Christ. The Annunciation is celebrated on Lady Day (March 25), and is important both as an example of true humility and as a prelude to the Incarnation. The 'barely prayable' prayer to which Eliot alludes is that spoken by the Virgin Mary upon receiving the news from the angel Gabriel (Luke 1. 38): 'be it unto me according to thy word'. Despite the trauma of her shameful pregnancy, Mary accepts the angel's promise that her obedience will result in a manifestation of God. Similarly, the final test of the mystic is the declaration of submission to the will of God even in the midst of the 'dark night' when the soul suffers the despair of total alienation from God and from any source of comfort.

A comparable declaration is enjoined in the third part of *The Dry Salvages*, where Eliot makes his first explicit allusion to the Eastern mystical tradition. The passage begins with the poet contemplating the meaning and implications of the message of Krishna:

> I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant—
> Among other things—or one way of putting the same thing:
> That the future is a faded song, a Royal Rose or a lavender spray
> Of wistful regret for those who are not yet here to regret,
> Pressed between yellow leaves of a book that has never been opened.
> And the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back.

If Eliot is actually quoting from the Hindu scriptures here (the sense does not require it), the exact reference has eluded even Indian commentators. The wisdom which he attributes to Krishna, however, is in keeping with the teaching of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*.

The *Gītā* concerns a fratricidal war in which a prince named Arjuna faces the prospect of fighting and killing members of his own family. Arjuna's hesitancy is resolved through his

---

94 A full account of the Eastern wheel-image and Eliot's use of it is found in Chapter 6, section II.

95 The prayer is quoted in the Angelus-devotion

96 He had considered introducing it sooner. In an early draft of *East Coker* V, he included after the line, 'For a further union, a deeper communion', a line which read: 'Āranyaka, the forest or the sea' (*Gardner*, p.113). The reference is to the Eastern tradition of retreat to the wilderness or forest to await Divine revelation (see above, p.103n.). Eliot appears to have thought the allusion premature.

97 See, for instance, M.S. Pati, *Four Quartets: An Indian View*, p.69.
conversation with Krishna, an incarnation (avatar) of Vishnu who reveals to him the ethical structure of the universe in which human actions may fulfill the will of God. The eternal part of man, the ātman, cannot die, Krishna explains (ch.2, 19), and neither can it kill. Indeed, the ātman exists beyond time past and time to come in a boundless Eternity (ch.2, 20). Once this fact is grasped, pastness and futurity are seen as manifestations of māyā, as illusory states which can repeat each other endlessly—as Eliot’s lines suggest—since they are merely conditions of the eternal present in which the ātman lives. (Eliot links this to the paradox of the two mystic ‘ways’ which, from the Divine perspective, are united as one path towards the love of God.) Once released from the bondage of past and future, the individual can consider ‘with an equal mind’ the meaning of present existence.

The first conclusion to which the poet comes is that his own personality does not abide in time, just as travellers ‘are not the same people who left that station/ Or who will arrive at any terminus’. On the contrary, what we are undergoes constant modification; in the words of East Coker, ‘every moment is a new a shocking/ Valuation of all we have been’. Only when we can view objectively the unending reconstitution of our selves, the flux within our own personality, can we distinguish what is permanent from what is merely ephemeral.

When this attitude of mind is established, more of the wisdom of Krishna can be revealed:

Here between the hither and the farther shore
While time is withdrawn, consider the future
And the past with an equal mind.
At the moment which is not of action or inaction
You can receive this: ‘on whatever sphere of being
The mind of a man may be intent
At the time of death’—that is the one action
(And the time of death is every moment)
Which shall fructify in the lives of others:
And do not think of the fruit of action.

The passage in quotation-marks is from the Bhagavad-Gītā ch.8, 5–8:

Whoso at the hour of death,
Abandoning his mortal frame,
Bears Me in mind and passes on,
Accedes to my Divinity: have no doubt of that.

Whatever state a man may bear in mind
When the time comes at last to cast the mortal frame aside,

98 This notion is not confined to Eastern thought; Eliot was also aware of its background in Heraclitean and Bergsonian philosophy. See Chapter 3, p.53.

99 This is a theme that Eliot voiced in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, where he attacked what he called ‘the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul’ (SE, p.19) and declared void (or, at the most, partial) the notion of ‘personality’.

100 The translation is by R.C. Zaehner, Hindu Scriptures (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1966), p.283. There is no conclusive indication that Eliot preferred any of the various translations which would have been available to him. (He had also studied the Gītā in the original Sanskrit.) I have chosen to follow Helen Gardner in using Zaehner’s translation. Page references to this edition will be included in the text.
Even to that state does he accede,
For ever does that state of being make him grow into itself.

Then muse upon Me always,
And go to war;
For if thou fixest mind and soul on Me,
To Me shalt thou most surely come.

Let a man’s thoughts be integrated with the discipline
Of constant striving: let them not stray to anything else at all;
So by meditating on the divine All-Highest Person,
That man to that All-Highest goes.

Krishna’s meaning is that whatever our state of mind may be at a given moment is in fact what it is in eternity. Thus, at the moment of death we pass into a state of existence commensurate with our present attitude of mind. Our aim, therefore, should be to order our thoughts constantly according to eternal verities so that we may approach nirvāṇa with each successive reincarnation.

Krishna here crystallizes a doctrine of death which can be traced to earlier religious writings. The Maitri Upaniṣad (6. 34; Hume, p.447), for instance, describes samsāra (rebirth) as:

just one’s own thought;
With effort he should cleanse it, then.
What is one’s thought, that he becomes;
This is the eternal mystery.101

The corresponding notion in Catholic theology, the vital importance of the state of the soul at the moment of death, had long intrigued Eliot. The original epigraph to The Waste Land was a quotation from Conrad’s Heart of Darkness which describes Kurtz’s last ‘moment of complete knowledge’ when the horror of his life was revealed to him (Faces, p.3). Eliot alluded to the same incident in the brief epigraph to ‘The Hollow Men’ (‘Mistah Kurtz—he dead’) and in the poem itself explored the psyche of the souls in Limbo who failed to make a final choice either for or against God. Again, in Animula, Eliot pictures another ‘irresolute’ soul which gains an awareness of the significance of life only ‘in the silence after the viaticum’.102 Eliot even hints at this Christian notion in The Dry Salvages III with the parenthetical phrase, ‘(And the time of death is every moment)’ which echoes the declaration from the service of burial, ‘In the midst of life we are in death’.

However, the importance of the Gītā lies in the fact that while it endorses earlier doctrine it makes important modifications to the doctrine of mokṣa, the principle of the liberation of the individual ātman from the cycle of death and reincarnation and its union with the transcendent

---

101 See also the Brīhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad to which Eliot alluded several times in his poetry: ‘According as one acts, according as one conducts himself, so does he become. The doer of good becomes good. The doer of evil becomes evil . . . But people say: ‘A person is made [not of acts, but] of desires only’. As is his desire, such is his resolve; as is his resolve, such is the action he performs; what action (karma) he performs, that he procures for himself [into that does he become changed]’ (4.4.5, Hume, p.140).

102 The viaticum is the administration of the Eucharist to one who is about to die.
Brahman. The attainment of union is *nirvāṇa*, which means literally 'nothingness', and the doctrine which usually accompanies it is a 'Way of Negation' which stresses contemplation and rigorous self-denial. The *Gītā* adds another nuance to the doctrine, however. *Mokṣa*, Krishna says, can be achieved through the performance of good works—especially of one's ordained duty—so long as no desire for the results of these works accompanies them. Eliot's phrase 'do not think of the fruit of action' alludes to the *Gītā*, ch.2, 47 (p.259):

> Work alone is thy proper business,
> Never the fruits [it may produce];
> Let not your motive be the fruit of work,
> Nor your attachment to [mere] worklessness (*akarma*).

Arjuna's task *Karma* is to do his duty without concern for the fruits of his actions. To achieve this he must develop 'an equal mind' (*Yoga*) to release him from servitude to the desires attendant upon either future hopes or past regrets.103

It is this notion of *karma yoga*, of the eternal significance of disinterested action, which is Eliot's chief debt to Eastern thought in the *Quartets*. He had hinted at the idea in *East Coker* V: 'For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business', and earlier in Chorus I from *The Rock* (CPP, p.148):

> All men are ready to invest their money
> But most expect dividends.
> I say to you: *Make perfect your will*.
> I say: take no thought of the harvest,
> But only of proper sowing.104

Nevertheless, in his adaptation of the *Gītā*, Eliot alters the sense somewhat. Whereas Krishna says that the mind of man as it is at death is fructified in the life of the next reincarnation of that soul, Eliot suggests that the fructification of one's thoughts and actions will take place 'in the lives of others', that is, in a perpetuating contribution to the culture which one's descendants will inherit, a gift of spiritual wisdom and an example which will become as a seed planted in the soil of the common mind.

Just as the earlier vision of 'endless' suffering with its Eastern flavour concluded with an allusion to the Annunciation, so Eliot’s retelling of 'what Krishna meant' has, in fact, prepared the way for the return to a specifically Christian frame of reference in Parts IV and V of *The Dry Salvages*. The notion of 'fructifying' in the lives of others is linked verbally with the Incarnation in which Christ emptied himself of his Divine authority and power and entered the

---

103 Eliot cited Arjuna as an example of 'that balance of mind which a few highly-civilized individuals . . . can maintain in action'. See 'A Commentary', *The Criterion*, 16, no.63 (Jan. 1937), 289–93 (p.290).

104 The notion reappears in 'To the Indians who Died in Africa' (1943):

> Let those who go home tell the same story of you:
> Of action with a common purpose, action
> None the less fruitful if neither you nor we
> Know, until the judgement after death,
> What is the fruit of action.
world as the ‘fruit’ of Mary’s womb. Christ himself continued this strain of imagery in a passage which does not seem to have been far from Eliot’s mind: ‘Except a corn of wheat fall into the the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit’ (John 12. 24).

(ii) ‘The unattended moment’

A hint of this fructification is found in The Dry Salvages IV. The lyric is a prayer addressed to the Virgin, the ‘Lady, whose shrine stands on the promontory’, on behalf of seamen, their families and the victims of shipwreck. Eliot claimed in 1961 that the shrine he had in mind was ‘a class of churches’, among them Notre Dame de la Gard, overlooking the Mediterranean at Marseilles, and, no doubt, Our Lady of Good Voyage Church in Gloucester. The lyric also echoes Psalm 107, the traditional prayer of intercession designated for use at sea: ‘They that go down to the sea in ships: and occupy their business in great waters; These men see the works of the Lord: and his wonders in the deep. For at his word the stormy wind ariseth . . . . they cry unto the Lord in their trouble: he delivereth them out of their distress. For he maketh the storm to cease’ (23–30).

In its second stanza Eliot refers to the Virgin as ‘figlia del tuo figlio’ (‘daughter of your son’), the epithet which St Bernard uses to address her in the final canto of the Paradiso when he asks her to grant to Dante the beatific vision. In using this appellation Eliot reminds us of the redemptive paradox of the Incarnation—Christ becomes the child of his own creation—which will become the central image of the final movement of the poem.

This hope is reiterated in the final image of the lyric; the peal of the ‘sea bell’ which in Part II proclaimed the deaths of those lost at sea (‘the last annunciation’), is now identified as a ‘Perpetual angelus’, the bell rung to signal the end of the day, but also to commemorate the Incarnation. There is also a faint allusion in Eliot’s phrase ‘the dark throat’ to the story of Jonah, who was swallowed by a large fish only to be regurgitated three days later. Unlike Jonah, however, the only hope for the drowned sailors of The Dry Salvages IV is the intercession of Christ, who himself read the story of Jonah as a prefigurement of his own death and resurrection and thereby as symbolic of the hope of the resurrection of all the faithful dead.

The final movement opens with a list of bogus methods of dealing with the mysteries of past and future: communication with extra-terrestrial beings or with spirits, astrology and various other kinds of divination. These ‘pastimes’ are forsaken in favour of the apprehension of ‘The point of intersection of the timeless/ With time’, the entry of the eternal into the temporal world. The sustained awareness of this ‘point of intersection’ is, however:

105 At the end of Ash Wednesday IV, Eliot quoted the first phrase of a prayer addressed to the Virgin Mary at the end of the Mass: ‘And after this our exile show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus’.


107 See Chapter 3, p.53. It is also at times devoted to the memory of the Annunciation; see C.A. Bodelsen, T.S. Eliot’s ‘Four Quarters’: A Commentary (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde & Bagger, 1958), p.97.

108 Matthew 12. 39–40. On this point the lyric of The Dry Salvages seems to be a deliberate answer to the questions raised in ‘Death by Water’, the parallel section of The Waste Land. See above, p.103. Christ delivered his interpretation of the Jonah story as an answer to pleas from the Jews for ‘a sign’, an episode to which Eliot had alluded in ‘Gerontion’.

109 Karl Barth, whose theology was mentioned previously as a possible analogue for Eliot’s use of paradox (see
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.

The rest of humanity must be satisfied with those fleeting intimations which give a sense of validity to quotidian experience. Even the saint’s illumination is not induced by any programme of devotion or asceticism, but rather is experienced as ‘something given/ And taken’. This aspect of mystical experience is borne out by many mystics, who record that mystical states are accompanied invariably by a feeling of passive reception.

The illumination granted to most of us consists of:

the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight.

These moments are no less truly mystical for their being ‘unattended’. Eliot wrote of Pascal: ‘Now, Pascal was not a mystic, and his works are not to be classified amongst mystical writings; but what can be called mystical experience happens to many men who do not become mystics’ (SE, p.405). Often these take the form of a sense of pattern or correspondence into which our life fits, as parts of the universal work of creation. Eliot described it as ‘the kind of pattern which we perceive in our own lives only at rare moments of inattention and detachment, drowsing in sunlight’ (SE, p.232). There is, he remarked in ‘Poetry and Drama’, ‘a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus; of feeling of which we are only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action . . . . At such moments, we touch the border of those feelings which only music can express’ (OPP, pp.86–87).

Such moments are celebrated in Eliot’s earlier work. In Chorus VII from The Rock (CPP, p.160), Eliot describes the Incarnation of Christ as:

a moment in time and of time,
A moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call history.

And in Murder in the Cathedral (CPP, p.274), Thomas declares:

It is not in time that my death shall be known;
It is out of time that my decision is taken.

p.113n.), used the concept of the ‘point of intersection’ repeatedly in his Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, which was very influential before the Second World War. (See also Barth’s use of the Taoist ‘still point’, which is described in Chapter 6, p.170.)

10 Eliot’s concept of ‘sainthood’ bears some resemblance to the quality of ‘wisdom’ which he attributed to a number of poets. Speaking of Goethe, he remarked, ‘In some men it may appear fitfully and occasionally, or once in a lifetime, in the rapture of a single experience beatific or awful: in a man like Goethe it appears to have been constant, steady and serene’ (‘Goethe as the Sage’, OPP, p.221).

11 In ‘Thinking in Verse: A Survey of Early Seventeenth–Century Poetry’, The Listener, 3, no.61(12 Mar. 1930), 441–43 (p.443), Eliot called the moment of illumination ‘a gift of grace’ which cannot be induced or cultivated.
Those of us to whom such experiences are given only fitfully should not, however, make any claim of universality for what we perceive. When asked ‘if he was seeking a spiritual revelation in the *Four Quartets*’, Eliot replied that he was not, but was ‘seeking the verbal equivalents for small experiences he had had, and for knowledge derived from reading’.

The ‘verbal equivalents’ in this passage are a series of images and ideas, some of which allude to previous passages in the *Quartets* (the ‘shaft of sunlight’ from *Burnt Norton* V, the ‘wild thyme unseen’ from *East Coker* III), others looking forward to what is to come (the ‘waterfall’, which appears in the final movement of *Little Gidding*), and still others (the ‘winter lightning’, for example) indicating a personal significance which is not elaborated elsewhere in Eliot’s work. The most compelling image, however, is that of:

```
music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts.
```

This image describes the kind of experience common to the higher levels of both mystical and aesthetic experience: the dissolution of the distinction between subject and object.

Mystics from the Eastern tradition especially make much of this sense of the merging of the self with the object of contemplation. ‘Perfect knowledge’, they say, ‘is the realization of the Ātman as one with Brahman’. The mystic experiences a state of non-duality, of the ‘coincidence of contradictions’, in which concepts of personality and impersonality, immanence and transcendence, ‘thatness’ and ‘whatness’, unity and multiplicity cease to have meaning. Henri Delacroix, whose work appears on Eliot’s reading list at Harvard, writes, ‘The mystic has more and more the impression of being that which he knows, and of knowing that which he is’; and Nicholas of Cusa describes the goal of mysticism as that place ‘where seeing is one with being seen, and hearing with being heard’ (*The Vision of God*, pp.46–47).

This need not imply the loss of personal identity which Eastern writers are often accused of advocating. Union with God would only imply a loss of personal consciousness if God were himself unconscious. Moreover, Western mysticism frequently describes the experience in comparable terms. St Simeon the New Theologian writes of the contemplative in this state: ‘he had no bodily cares or concerns of this world on his mind, but forgot the world and was wholly dissolved to become one with the divine light, so that it seemed to him that he was the light’. The Ṣūfī Ḫāmi advises perseverance ‘until He mingles Himself with thy soul, and

112 Smidt, p.174. Eliot had praised his friend, the novelist Charles Williams for his ability to ‘describe, with extraordinary precision, the kind of unexplainable experience which many of us have had, once or twice in our lives, and been unable to put into words’. See ‘The Significance of Charles Williams’, *The Listener*, 36, no.936 (19 December 1946), 894–95 (p.895).

113 Evelyn Underhill notes that ‘of all the arts music alone shares with great mystical literature the power of waking us to response to the life-movement of the universe’ (*Underhill*, p.91).

114 Shankara’s *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, tr. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood (Hollywood, California: Vedanta Press, 1947), p.77. See also *Chāndoga Upanīṣad*, 3. 13. 7 (*Hume*, p.209): ‘Now the light which shines higher than this heaven, . . . in the highest worlds, than which there is no higher—verily, that is the same as this light which is here within a person’.


thine own individual existence passes out of thy sight. Then, if thou regardest thyself, it is He whom thou art regarding; if thou speakest of thyself, it is He of whom thou art speaking'.

Later Christian mystics sustained this doctrine—encouraged, no doubt, by St Thomas Aquinas' Aristotelian epistemology in which knowledge was held to imply an intellectual union of the knower with the known. To know God, the mystics believed, is to partake of God's essence. St John of the Cross uses the illustration of a clean window transmitting a ray of sunlight, thus becoming the ray and yet retaining its distinct nature (Ascent, Bk.II, ch.5, 6–7, pp.77–78). Just as it is 'light by participation', so 'the soul seems to be God rather than a soul, and is indeed God by participation' though its natural being remains distinct.

The parallel which Eliot implies between mystical vision and aesthetic ecstasy is especially illuminating at this point. In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'—an essay which, despite qualifications of its argument in his later prose, nevertheless expresses the core of Eliot's aesthetic theory—he described the experience of the artist during the creation of a work of art (and, by implication, the experience of the person who appreciates the full significance of that work) as an 'escape' from, and indeed an extinction of, personality. The artistic experience was held to be an appreciation of the impersonal 'order' which the whole of the tradition of European civilization formed. Eliot himself acknowledged the parallels with mystical experience. His comment that the essay 'proposes to halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism' (SE, p.21) indicates that a theology of some kind lay behind what he was propounding as an aesthetic. Moreover, some of the phrasing and imagery of that early essay appears to have resurfaced in this new appraisal of mystical-aesthetic experience in The Dry Salvages. In 1919 Eliot spoke of 'significant emotion' (the emphasis is his own), which can be expressed only by the poet who is 'conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living' (p.22). In 1941 he was to speak of the 'life of significant soil' which will be nourished by those whose virtuous deeds retain the power to fructify after their deaths.

Just as the poet cannot rely solely upon moments of inspiration, however, but must struggle constantly within the limitations of his language, so also, the mystics maintain, the gratuitous nature of mystical vision does not abrogate the individual of the responsibility for cultivating a spiritual life. Moments of illumination are to be accepted humbly, but not sought after as a substitute for, or a short-cut to, genuine piety. The duty of the individual, Eliot insists, remains the pursuit of holiness: 'prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action'. In Thoughts After Lambeth (SE, p.373), Eliot noted that:

even the humblest of Christian laymen can and must live what, in the modern world, is comparatively an ascetic life. Discipline of the emotions is even rarer, and in the modern world still more difficult, than discipline of the mind . . . . Thought, study, mortification, sacrifice: it is such notions as these that should be impressed upon the young.

117Happold, p.259.

118In his Spiritual Canticle, Stanza 11, 6–7; pp.65–66, John identifies the mystic's 'life' as having been replaced by Christ's. Another favourite image of Christian mystics is human marriage; the notion of 'two becoming one' is adopted as an image of the soul being transformed into oneness with Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom. See, for example, the opening chapters of Jan van Ruysbroeck's Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage.

119The imagery of 'escape', which permeates the essay, suggests a parallel with the famous Plotinian description of the mystic journey as 'the flight of the alone to the Alone'. Indeed, the impulse towards flight manifests itself in various forms throughout Eliot's early work.

120'Christian asceticism', he wrote in 'The Modern Dilemma', The Christian Register (Boston), 102, no.41(19
‘For the great majority of people’, he continued in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (p.29):

religion must be primarily a matter of behaviour and habit, must be integrated with its social life, with its business and its pleasures; and the specifically religious emotions must be a kind of extension and sanctification of the domestic and social emotions . . . . [For] behaviour is as potent to affect belief, as belief to affect behaviour.

Eliot’s belief in the need for constant discipline stemmed from his allegiance to the doctrine of Original Sin. He concluded his essay on Baudelaire by quoting T.E. Hulme: ‘A man is essentially bad, he can only accomplish anything of value by discipline—ethical and political. Order is thus not merely negative, but creative and liberating. Institutions are necessary’ (*SE*, p.430). The necessary discipline could not be attained, however, within a purely humanistic frame of thought; rather, Eliot wrote, it is only attainable ‘through dogmatic religion’.121

There is much chatter about mysticism: for the modern world the word means some spattering indulgence of emotion, instead of the most terrible concentration and askesis. But it takes perhaps a lifetime merely to realise that men like the forest sages, and the desert sages, and finally the Victorines and John of the Cross and . . . Ignatius really *mean what they say*. Only those have the right to talk of discipline who have looked into the Abyss.

It was equally essential, however, that the life of devotion should not become introverted; as Eliot states in ‘The Penses of Pascal’, ‘neither does even the higher form of religious inspiration suffice for the religious life; even the most exalted mystic must return to the world, and use his reason to employ the results of his experience in daily life’ (*SE*, p.405). For this reason, Eliot concludes his list with ‘thought and action’. Mystical literature from the Gītā (which is in this respect exceptional in Eastern mysticism) to Juliana of Norwich’s *Revelations*, and mystics from St Augustine to St Teresa of Avila, agree that spiritual insight and devotional discipline are inseparable from a life of action, which is, it might be said, the incarnation of what is gained through contemplation. Evelyn Underhill notes that many mystics descend from the heights of contemplation to become artists, spiritual and political leaders and social reformers (*Underhill*, p.495).122

(iii) ‘The hint half guessed’

The remainder of *The Dry Salvages* explores the synthesis of the divine and the human, and, for the first time, identifies by name the doctrine whose revelation has been foreshadowed throughout the sequence: ‘The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation’. The ‘hints’

Oct. 1933), 675-76 (p.676), ‘is a matter of degree; and every life in so far as it is Christian, is ascetic: in self-abnegation, self-discipline, and the love of God. Exceptional austerities are for exceptional men; for ordinary men, the practice of prayer and meditation and the daily battle against the distractions which the world offers to the mind and the spirit’.


122 Eliot had recorded in his reading notes on Underhill’s book that, whereas Oriental mystics insisted on absorption as the end of their quest, ‘Western mysticism insists on activity’ (quoted by Hay, p.204).
are 'lesser but consubstantial forms of the one Incarnation'.\textsuperscript{123} As has been noted elsewhere, the doctrine of the Incarnation was foundational to Eliot's Christianity.\textsuperscript{124} As early as 1926 Eliot was recommending Lancelot Andrewes' \textit{Seventeen Sermons on the Nativity}, Christmas Day sermons preached before King James between 1605 and 1634, 'all on the same subject, the Incarnation' (SE, p.346); and by 1931 he was espousing this doctrine as the primary introduction to Christian belief ('The Pensées of Pascal', SE, p.408):

The Christian thinker—and I mean the man who is trying consciously and conscientiously to explain to himself the sequence which culminates in faith, rather than the public apologist—proceeds by rejection and elimination. He finds the world to be so and so; he finds its character inexplicable by any non-religious theory: among religions he finds Christianity, and Catholic Christianity, to account most satisfactorily for the world and especially for the moral world within; and thus, by what Newman calls 'powerful and concurrent' reasons, he finds himself inexorably committed to the dogma of the Incarnation.

He elaborated in 1937: 'I take for granted that Christian revelation is the only full revelation; and that the fullness of Christian revelation resides in the essential fact of the Incarnation, in relation to which all Christian revelation is to be understood'.\textsuperscript{125}

Here, as earlier in \textit{Burnt Norton} II (see above p.113), Eliot defines the Incarnation as a paradox:

\begin{quote}
Here the impossible union  
Of spheres of existence is actual,  
Here the past and future  
Are conquered, and reconciled.
\end{quote}

It is the union of spheres of existence entirely opposite to one another—the revelation of the eternal within the temporal. For the Christian thinker, this is the central paradox which, when it is affirmed by faith, makes all others intelligible and, moreover, attainable. Whereas the paradoxes of \textit{Burnt Norton} II were functions of thought, operating upon the 'world of speculation', and those of \textit{East Coker} III were mere meditative formulae, the Incarnation is a paradox which is made 'actual' within the parameters of time and space. Moreover, the Incarnation, with its fulfillment in the Redemption of creation, is the principal doctrine which distinguishes Christianity from Eastern religion. Even the \textit{Gītā}, which attributes some value to human action, is set within a religious system which despairs of the natural world: the fruit of action will not even be seen, let alone reaped, in this life, or any subsequent reincarnation, but only in the eventual bliss of \textit{nirvāṇa}.

Indian mysticism, writes Evelyn Underhill, tends to regard the mystic's goal wholly in its passive aspect—as a total self-annihilation. On the other hand, she notes, the goal of Western mysticism, is to become a 'mode of the Infinite'; solitude is eventually abandoned for


\textsuperscript{124}See chapter 3, p.54.

\textsuperscript{125}'Introduction' to \textit{Revelation}, pp.1–2. Later in the essay he went so far as to say that 'revelation in the complete sense is the Incarnation' (p.35, n.1).
work, and the perfected soul begins to imitate the fecundity of the Divine. Mystics are fertile and creative as well as merely active (Underhill, pp.520, 209, 516). For Christian mystics, the Incarnation is a prefiguration of their own progress to maturity. Underhill, again, writes (p.141):

The Incarnation, which is for popular Christianity synonymous with the historical birth and earthly life of Christ, is for the mystic not only this but also a perpetual Cosmic and personal process. It is an everlasting bringing forth, in the universe and also in the individual ascending soul, of the divine and perfect Life, the pure character of God, of which the one historical life dramatized the essential constituents.

Mystics speak of Christ continuing his incarnation within their bodies, and becoming 'flesh' again through their life of devotion: as the Apostle Paul declares, 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me' (Galatians 2. 20), and in the words of St Athanasius' famous dictum, 'God became man in order that man might become God'.

Nevertheless, the identification of the 'hints and guesses' as intimations of this glorious truth does not bring about an immediate reversal in tone in The Dry Salvages. The Incarnation does not assert itself as a dramatic portent (a part played, for instance, by the 'damp gust bringing rain' in The Waste Land V); instead the poem ends in a tone of humility, with an expression of the hope of 'salvaging' some significance from the wastes of endless time:

For most of us, this is the aim
Never here to be realised;
Who are only undefeated
Because we have gone on trying;
We, content at the last
If our temporal reversion nourish
(Not too far from the yew-tree)
The life of significant soil.

Eliot here returns to the notion of bearing fruit after death, upon which Part III of the poem ended. The image is reminiscent of the prayer of praise for Thomas Becket which ends Murder in the Cathedral (CPP, pp.281–82):

For the blood of Thy martyrs and saints
Shall enrich the earth, shall create the holy places.
For wherever a saint has dwelt, wherever a martyr has given his
blood for the blood of Christ,
There is holy ground, and the sanctity shall not depart from it . . .
From such ground springs that which forever renews the earth
Though it is forever denied.

The idea has numerous precedents in mystical literature, either as a metaphor or as a literal reality. The French Quietist, Mme Guyon, writes, 'The soul, after many a redoubled death, expires at last in the arms of Love; but she is unable to perceive these arms . . . . Then, reduced to Nought, there is found in her ashes a seed of immortality, which is preserved in these ashes and will germinate in its season. But she knows not this; and does not expect ever
to see herself living again'. The mystic, Evelyn Underhill comments (p. 495), 'having at last come to full consciousness of reality, completes the circle of Being; and returns to fertilize those levels of existence from which he sprang'.

The image of 'significant soil' combines the notions of the Incarnation, Christ's adoption of earthly form, and of fertility in death, with that of the loss of identity which we all will suffer in burial. It holds out the hope that, even if we do not attain to union with God in life (and even the mystics do not claim this as a sustained experience), we are assured of union with the soil which has been given significance through the Incarnation, and which is a token of our immortality.

VII Elevation: An End and a Beginning

(i) 'Little Gidding' I: 'Grace dissolved in place'

The last Quartet is located upon 'significant soil'. Eliot describes two separate visits to the scene of Nicholas Ferrar's community at Little Gidding, a landscape which, due to the legacy of those long dead 'saints', possesses a sense of divine infusion, of what Eliot called 'Marina' 'grace dissolved in place'. The first of these occasions occurs in 'midwinter spring', when the winter sun is reflected from the snow with such brightness that the hedges appear to have blossomed. This paradoxical season exists outside of 'time's covenant', in another 'timeless moment', and shares with the rose-garden episode of Burnt Norton I the awareness of the miraculous conveyed in the image of dazzling light reflected upon water which has undergone a transfiguration (from light, in Burnt Norton, and into ice, in Little Gidding). Nevertheless, the experience of the 'midwinter spring' brings with it a quality of assurance, a sense of integrity, which the earlier episode lacked. Whereas the rose garden scene was overlaid with an awareness of personal symbolism and significance, the only persona in the Little Gidding passage is that implied by phrases such as 'the heart's heat', and 'A glare that is blindness'; and whereas the earlier vision was momentary, the vision of the 'Zero summer' continues and can be examined by the poet 'for an hour'.

The supernatural element in the landscape is identified as 'pentecostal fire'. The Christian feast of Pentecost commemorates the effective birth of the Church which occurred when the Holy Spirit descended upon the believers. The event occurred at the Jewish harvest-festival, which is called Pentecost (literally 'fiftieth day') because it is held on the fiftieth day after the Passover. Luke describes the miraculous events in Acts, Chapter 2:

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each one of them. And they

---

126 Quoted in Underhill, p.479.

127 The phrase 'temporal reversion' may be an allusion to the legal notion of 'reversion', the return of something to a grantor after the grant has been terminated, as on the death of the grantee. Eliot means that our bodies, which are borrowed from God's earth, will one day return to it, and to him.

128 Eliot's phrase 'not in time's covenant' suggests an allusion to the New Covenant which God made with mankind through the death of Christ and which was initiated on the day of Pentecost. See above, p.116n.
were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

In Christian doctrine, the Holy Spirit is the mediator of Christ’s continued presence in the world—as it were, the vehicle whereby the Incarnation is continued in the life of the Church. The Spirit is commonly associated with fire, a symbol first of holiness and purification, but also of inspiration and authority.\textsuperscript{129} St John of the Cross speaks of the Holy Spirit as ‘the flame of love’ (\textit{Living Flame}, Stanza 1, exposition, 3, p.20):

\begin{quote}
And this flame the soul feels within it, not only as a fire that has consumed and transformed it in sweet love, but also as a fire which burns within it and sends out flame.
\end{quote}

The Christians upon whom the Spirit fell at Pentecost ‘received power’ (Acts 1. 8), and those who witnessed the events were ‘pricked in their heart’ and many immediately repented. A similar phenomenon follows the ‘pentecostal’ miracle which the poet describes in \textit{Little Gidding}; for the account of his return to the place ‘in May’\textsuperscript{130} gives the impression of an innate power within the landscape, a sense of prerogative which draws the poet to itself as a pilgrim to a shrine (just as, three centuries earlier, it had drawn the ‘broken king’, Charles I) and determines the course and the significance of his visit:

\begin{quote}
And what you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
If at all.
\end{quote}

What is more, the place demands a specific attitude of humility:

\begin{quote}
If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same: you would have to put off
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.
\end{quote}

The source of this ‘numinous’ is simply that it is a place ‘Where prayer has been valid’. The purity of soul maintained by the extended family of Nicholas Ferrar has created what St John of the Cross calls ‘actual and substantial spirituality’ (\textit{Ascent}, Bk.II, ch.17, 5, p.132), a real presence of the Divine which inhabits individuals, and which remains even after death in

\textsuperscript{129}See, for instance, Hebrews 12. 29 (‘our God is a consuming fire’); Psalm 39. 3 (‘My heart was hot within me, while I was musing the fire burned’); Jeremiah 20. 9 (‘But [God’s] word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay’).

\textsuperscript{130}Eliot’s first visit to Little Gidding was in that month. See Chapter 2, p.26. May is, moreover, the month in which the feast of Pentecost usually falls.
the places where they lived.131 It is this sense of spiritual continuity, of a tradition of meaning informing the landscape of Little Gidding, its buildings and the history they symbolize, which constitutes the ‘communication of the dead’—what in the Apostles’ Creed is referred to as the mystical ‘communion of the saints’.

Eliot identifies this communication as a union of eternity with time:

Here, the intersection of the timeless moment

The image which in The Dry Salvages V described the heightened awareness of the saint, and the ‘unattended moments’ with which the rest of us are favoured, is now applied to this remote English shrine. The paradox of the Incarnation is actualized in the soil of Little Gidding. The poet’s mystical quest has thus brought him through the dark night to his earthly goal, a place of instruction where he will be shown the path of obedience which he must take towards God. Nevertheless, this ‘communication’ is not merely a matter of words; it will require participation from both poet and reader, for it is a voice of Pentecostal authority, ‘tongued with fire beyond the language of the living’.132

(ii) ‘Little Gidding’ II: ‘That refining fire’

First and foremost, the tangible spirituality of Little Gidding invites submission to the fire of Pentecost. The lyric section of Little Gidding II describes one aspect of fire—the Heraclitean force which alternately destroys and recreates all things in perpetuating the endless cycle of the elements—but in the long narrative account of the poet’s meeting with the ‘familiar compound ghost’ fire is revealed in its purgative and redemptive aspect. The fire imagery of this passage is Christian and specifically Dantean in character. Although it is set in the scorched landscape of London after an air-raid, the retreating German bomber is transformed in the poet’s imagination into ‘the dark dove with the flickering tongue’. The fire which has fallen is thus identified as in some sense the fire of the Holy Spirit, who is frequently depicted as a dove.133

This is, moreover, another ‘intersection time’, a moment when the ‘communication of the dead’ can be received. Eliot’s account of his colloquy with the ‘ghost’ is modelled upon Dante’s interviews with the souls in Hell and Purgatory.134 In answer to the poet’s questions the shade discloses to him ‘the gifts reserved for age’: the loss of sensation, the ‘impotence of

---

131 The ‘other places’ which Eliot identifies as ‘also the world’s end’ are also associated with important spiritual figures. The ‘sea jaws’ refer to Iona (home of St Colomba) and Lindisfarne (St Cuthbert); the ‘dark lake’ is Glendalough and St Kevin’s hermitage in County Wicklow; the ‘desert’ reminds us of the hermits of Thebaid and St Antony (see Appendix I, p.205); and the ‘city’ refers to Padua, the home of the other St Antony. (The information was contained in a letter from Eliot to his brother, which is quoted by Hugh Kenner in The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot (London: W.H. Allen, 1960), p.272.)

132 David Ward suggests an allusion to Paradiso, XXXIII, ll.70–2, where Dante requests that he might remember something of Heaven: ‘give my tongue such power that it may leave only a single sparkle of thy glory unto the folk to come’ (T.S. Eliot: Between Two Worlds (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p.287).

133 Eliot will elaborate upon this image in Part IV.

134 Specific allusions to Dante are listed in Appendix IV, section II.
rage/ At human folly', and the 're-enactment/ Of all that you have done, and been'. All these will increase, he concludes, unless the poet is 'restored by that refining fire/ Where you must move in measure, like a dancer'. The line refers to the 'superb verses of Arnaut Daniel' from Purgatorio XXVI which conclude 'Then dived he back into that fire which refines them'. Eliot quoted the lines in his 1929 essay on Dante to illustrate 'how the flame of purgatory differs from that of hell' (SE, pp.255–56):

In hell, the torment issues from the very nature of the damned themselves, expresses their essence; they writhe in the torment of their own perpetually perverted nature. In purgatory the torment of the flame is deliberately and consciously accepted by the penitent . . . . The souls in purgatory suffer because they wish to suffer, for purgation. And observe that they suffer more actively and keenly, being souls preparing for blessedness, than Virgil suffers in eternal limbo. In their suffering is hope.

Eliot had used Daniel’s words as one of the ‘fragments’ which he shored against his ruins at the end of The Waste Land. The same advice which was offered at the end of the earlier poem is given here; the crucial difference being that what was formerly a distant hope, a straw to be clutched at, has now become a tangible prospect. The poet of Little Gidding now has effective purgation within his grasp.

(iii) ‘Little Gidding’ III: Detachment and History

The third part of Little Gidding deals with the mental attitude which is the first prerequisite of efficacious purgation:

There are three conditions which often look alike
Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:
Attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment
From self and from things and from persons; and, growing between them, indifference.

The phrasing of this passage suggests Henry Clarke Warren’s translation of the Aṅguttara–Nikāya in his chapter on fruitful and barren karma:

135 This last ‘gift’ bears a striking similarity to the idea of karma, the cumulative effect of past deeds upon present and future action.

136 Eliot is also echoing Yeats’ plea to the ‘sages standing in God’s holy fire’ in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ to gather him ‘Into the artifice of eternity’, and his later description of that ‘holy fire’ in ‘Byzantium’:

Dying into a dance,
An agony of trance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

Yeats is, of course, one of the major components of the ‘compound ghost’. See Appendix IV, section II.

137 Eliot commented upon the final advice of the ‘ghost’ in a letter to John Hayward: ‘The active co–operation is, I think, sound theology and is certainly sound Dante, because the people who talk to him at that point are represented as not wanting to waste time in conversation but wishing to dive back into the fire to accomplish their expiation’ (Gardner, p.65).

138 Buddhism in Translations; Passages Selected from the Buddhist Sacred Books and Translated from the Original Pali into English, Harvard Oriental Series, vol.3 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press,
There are three conditions, O priests, under which deeds are produced. And what are the three? Covetousness is a condition under which deeds are produced; hatred is a condition under which deeds are produced; infatuation is a condition under which deeds are produced.

There are three conditions, O priests, under which deeds are produced. And what are these three? Freedom from covetousness... freedom from infatuation.

Eliot's 'three conditions' differ in detail from these, but share the fundamental dichotomy between 'attachment' and 'detachment'. The latter is, in a sense, the perfection of mystical virtue. The cutting of the ties which bind us to the realm of matter has always been seen as a characteristic of psychological wholeness; it is only when we know ourselves as separate 'souls' that we can seek out the Soul which is our Ground. For Meister Eckhart, detachment is 'the best and highest virtue', superior even to humility and love.

Such motionless detachment makes a man superlatively Godlike. For that God is God is due to his motionless detachment, and it is from this detachment that He gets his purity and his simplicity and his immutability. If then a man is going to be like God, so far as any creature can resemble God, it will be by detachment...

What, then, I ask, is the object of this absolute detachment? I answer, that the object of absolute detachment is neither this nor that. It is absolutely nothing, for it is the culminating point where God can do precisely as he will.

Some mystics distinguish, as Eliot does here, between detachment and indifference, the latter being a perversion of the former. Although in its early stages detachment may involve actively shunning the physical world—the kind of retreat described in Burnt Norton III and East Coker III, for instance—its goal is involvement in quotidian realities without any form of personal investment in them. St John of the Cross makes this clear in Ascent of Mount Carmel (Bk.I, ch.3, 4, p.23):

We are not treating here of the lack of things, since this implies no detachment on the part of the soul if it has a desire for them; but we are treating of the detachment from them of the taste and desire, for it is this that leaves the soul free and void of them, although it may have them.

This notion is, of course, central to the teaching of the Gitā, which advocates a Middle Path—not unlike Buddha's—between selfish action and barren abstinence from action. Indeed, Eliot's terms 'attachment', 'detachment', and 'indifference' suggest the triad of elemental qualities known as guṇas, which feature in the Sāṃkhya school of philosophy which formed the background to the Upaniṣads and the Gitā. Rajas (attachment, desire, force, activity), tāmas (inertia, negativity, passive indifference) and satvā (serene knowledge, light, intellect, detachment) were principles of both material nature and psychology. Neither the limp indifference of tāmas, nor the self-centred action of rajās could produce growth of character;
only the \textit{sattvic} quality of unattached action could. In the second chapter of the \textit{Gita} Krishna links the \textit{sattvaguña} to the principle of \textit{yoga}. He enjoins Arjuna to stand free of the dualities and pairs of opposites and to adopt an attitude of perfect detachment (\textit{nityasattva}).\footnote{See \textit{the Gita}, ch.2, 45–50 (pp.258–59)—the passage from which Eliot had quoted in \textit{The Dry Salvages} III. Commentators and translators are divided over Krishna’s precise meaning: he is advocating that Arjuna adopt either the \textit{sattvic} stance itself or a heightened form of it. See S. Radhakrishnan’s translation of the \textit{Gita} (London: Allen & Unwin, 1970), p.118.}

That Eliot may have had the \textit{Gita} in mind is further suggested by an allusion in the following lines:

\begin{quote}
Thus, love of country
\begin{align*}
&\text{Begins as attachment to our own field of action} \\
&\text{And comes to find that action of little importance} \\
&\text{Though never indifferent.}
\end{align*}
\end{quote}

‘Field of action’ is a translation of the Sanskrit name \textit{Kurukṣetra}—the plain where the forces of Arjuna and his enemies are drawn up for battle, and the scene of his instruction by Krishna.\footnote{See Neuhaus, p.52.} It is thus paradoxically a holy place and a battleground (\textit{Gita} ch.1, 1). The remainder of \textit{Little Gidding} III (and indeed, much of \textit{Little Gidding} as a whole) is characterized by a juxtaposition of religious and martial experience. Eliot applies the \textit{sattvic} principle to the Civil War, the conflict into which Nicholas Ferrar’s Christian community was drawn. It is a religious meditation upon history, which, like any action, may be for us ‘servitude’ or ‘freedom’, according to the ‘condition’ of mind we adopt.

The poet reviews the personalities and factions which played out their parts in the struggle which engulfed Little Gidding: the king, Charles I, taking refuge at nightfall after the battle of Naseby, others who met their deaths on the scaffold or ‘forgotten’ in exile,\footnote{Eliot seems to be referring to Archbishop Laud and Strafford, who were executed by Cromwell, and perhaps to Richard Crashaw, a friend of Ferrar’s, who died in exile at Lorette. By his phrase, ‘three men, and more’, Eliot may also have intended a pun upon the name of an earlier martyr, Sir Thomas More.} and John Milton, who died ‘blind and quiet’. To the detached mind, however, all have been ‘renewed, transfigured, in another pattern’; they have been ‘united in the strife which divided them’.\footnote{Eliot describes this unity with a reworking of Hamlet’s ‘A little more than kin and less than kind’ (\textit{Hamlet}, I, ii, 65). The factions of the war are spiritually united even though physically they are ‘Of no immediate kin or kindness’.} What remains is not their ‘policies’, but the ‘common genius’, a spiritual legacy which has been imprinted upon the landscape of Little Gidding as a ‘symbol perfected in death’.\footnote{This latter phrase alerts us to a second level of allusion; for Christ, the ‘king’, died as one of ‘three men’, ‘on the scaffold’ at ‘nightfall’, having been ‘forgotten’ by his father, and with his last words (‘\textit{consummatum est}’) became the archetypal ‘symbol perfected in death’.}

In his lecture ‘Types of Religious Verse’ Eliot spoke of the particular ‘genius’ of the seventeenth century as ‘a new religious self-consciousness generated by the religious warfare both physical and intellectual’. He noted also that the era saw a resurgence of interest in the works of Richard Rolle, Juliana of Norwich and the author of \textit{The Cloud of Unknowing}, ‘the body of religious prose composed during the great period of English mysticism, the fourteenth
century'. In *Little Gidding* III, Eliot frames his account of the religious wars of the seventeenth century with the wisdom of the great period of English mysticism. The 'symbol' which was perfected by their deaths is, he suggests, a mystical and religious truth which is incarnated in the affairs of men.

Eliot prefaces his reflections upon the history of Little Gidding with a quotation from Dame Juliana of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*:

> Sin is Behovely, but  
> All shall be well, and  
> All manner of thing shall be well.

Juliana of Norwich was an anchorite nun and recluse who was an enthusiastic apologist for the Affirmative Way. While apophatic mystics like St John of the Cross spoke of faith as a dark abyss, she described it without qualification as 'a light by nature coming of our endless Day, that is our Father, God' (*Revelations*, ch.83, p.199).

Nevertheless, Dame Juliana did not shrink from rigorous asceticism. She spent much of her life secluded in a cell built against the wall of the Church of St Julian at Camisford, Norwich, and in her writings she insisted that a godly attitude of positivity can only be achieved through the painful purgative experience of being 'noughted' (ch.27, p.56):

> we be all partly noughted, and we shall be noughted following our Master, Jesus,  
> till we be fully purged, that is to say, till we be fully noughted of our deadly flesh  
> and of all our inward affections which are not very good.

And in the thirteenth revelation, Christ himself speaks to her the words which Eliot quotes (ch.27, p.56):

> *It behoved that there should be sin; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and  
> all manner of thing shall be well.*  

Sin is 'behovely', a word which means 'inescapable' but also invites the sense of 'proper', 'to be expected'. The passage continues (pp.56–57):

---

146 Quoted in Bush, pp.273–74, n.48. Eliot himself possessed one of the fruits of this resurgence, a reprint of a 1670 edition of Juliana of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* by Serenus de Cressy, who features as one of the major characters in J.H. Shorthouse's *John Inglesant* (Gardner, p.71, n.84).

147 Helen Gardner suggests that Eliot's mind may also have turned to the English mystics 'on account of the death of Evelyn Underhill in June 1941' (Gardner, p.69). During the 1930s Eliot had met with her several times to discuss her reviewing for the *Criterion* and his contribution to a series she was editing for *The Spectator*. After her death, Eliot eulogized her in a letter to a journal as a guide of souls, possessing 'a consciousness of the grievous need of the contemplative element in the modern world' (Gardner, pp.69–70).

148 Warrack also quotes the original text: 'Synne is behovabil, but al shal de wel & al shal be wel & al manner of thyng shal be wele'.
for I believe it hath no manner of substance nor no part of being, nor could it be known but by the pain it is cause of. And [this] pain, it is something, as to my sight, for a time; for it purgeth, and maketh us to know ourselves and to ask mercy . . . . [God says] It is sooth that sin is cause of all this pain; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner [of] thing shall be well.

Sin has, therefore, no substantial part in the cosmos; it remains only as the residue of the spiritual forces which were defeated in Christ's death and resurrection, and it is indicated only by the pain it causes. Moreover, even that pain has been redeemed by God in order to bring us to himself. Everything, Juliana sees, is ordered for good.

The sentence Eliot quotes is repeated several times in the *Revelations* almost as a refrain or chant. Juliana claims that although this assertion does not appear to be correct, we must live in the assurance that God has a secret plan by which it will be brought to pass (ch.32, pp.64–65):

One time our good Lord said: *All thing shall be well*; and another time he said: *Thou shalt see thyself that all manner [of] thing shall be well . . . .* there be deeds evil done in our sight, and so great harms taken, that it seemeth to us that it were impossible that ever it should come to good end. And upon this we look, sorrowing and mourning therefor, so that we cannot resign us unto the blissful beholding of God as we should do . . . . He said: *Take now heed faithfully and trustingly, and at the last end thou shalt verily see it in fullness of joy.*

The phrase is a kind of confession of faith in God's ultimate sovereignty;¹⁴⁹ and it is within the context of this affirmation that Eliot places the strife of the Civil War. Whatever sin was present in the actions of the opposing parties, whatever evil was done, has been annihilated, and—like Dante's passion—transformed into something 'universal and impersonal' in the purgative fire of God's love.

*Little Gidding* III concludes with a repetition of the refrain from Juliana to which Eliot adds:

By the purification of the motive  
In the ground of our beseeching.

The last line is another quotation from Juliana of Norwich (one which, like 'all shall be well', is repeated several times in the *Revelations*) taken from a passage which affirms a total faith in a God who is constantly available to those who have undergone purification (ch.41, p.84):

And all this brought our Lord suddenly to my mind, and shewed these words, and said: *I am the Ground of thy beseeching: first it is my will that thou have it; and after, I make thee to will it; and after, I make thee to beseech it and thou beseechest it. How should it then be that thou shouldst not have thy beseeching?*

¹⁴⁹ Juliana's words are echoed in Charles Williams' novel *The Greater Trumps*, which Eliot cited as the immediate source for the dance-image in *Burnt Norton* I (see Chapter 6, p.180). As the world teeters on the brink of chaos, one of the characters assures another: 'All is well; all is most well' (*The Greater Trumps* (London: Faber & Faber, 1932), p.162).
(iv) ‘Little Gidding’ IV: ‘The Unfamiliar Name

The lyric section of Little Gidding continues the theme of purgation and the symbolism of fire which was explored in Part II. Here, however, the horror and pain of the fire are allayed by a mystical insight through which it can be contemplated with equanimity:

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.

The first image hints at the resolution to follow. The German dive-bomber is again transformed into the ‘dark dove’ of the Holy Spirit, and its deadly descent is compared with the descent of the Holy Spirit, both at the baptism of Christ, where the Spirit is said to descend and rest upon Christ ‘in the form of a dove’ and at Pentecost, where it is evidenced by the ‘tongues of fire’. Eliot echoes a hymn commonly sung at Pentecost (Hymns Ancient and Modern, no.129):

The Holy Ghost on all
Is mightily outpour’d
Who straight in divers tongues declare
The wonders of the Lord.

The Holy Spirit brings ‘discharge from sin’ and redemption ‘from fire by fire’. What would for others be a funeral ‘pyre’ (and perhaps the fire of Hell), will become a martyr’s pyre, for those who have placed their hope in God.

The second stanza of the lyric in Little Gidding begins:

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.

The allusion is to the death of Hercules, who died after his wife, Deianira, had given him a shirt to wear which, she believed, would guarantee the continuation of his love for her. When Hercules put the shirt on, however, it clung to him and burnt into his flesh so that he could not remove it. Deianira had in fact been deceived by Nessus, whom Hercules had recently slain. To escape his agony Hercules burnt himself on a funeral pyre and ascended to Olympus to

150 John the Baptist, in Matthew’s Gospel, brings the two events together. Immediately before the account of Christ’s baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit, John prophesies that Christ will baptize ‘with the Holy Ghost and with fire’ (Matthew 3. 11). Helen Gardner also suggests an allusion to Mallarmé’s ‘Le Cantique de Saint Jean’, which describes the descent of the ‘incandescent’ sun upon John the Baptist (Gardner, p.215). The subject of the poem is John’s martyrdom, a theme which bears some resemblance to Eliot’s, although Mallarmé’s focus upon the severing of John’s head betrays a less than serious attitude towards religious sacrifice.

151 As well as a legal term used to describe release from an obligation or debt, the word ‘discharge’ is commonly used of an emission of gunfire or of the dropping of bombs.
become a god. Thus, the shirt preserved Hercules' love only by tormenting him to a premature
death.152

Eliot's lines also echo a number of Christian sources. 'The Burning Babe', a poem by
the Jesuit martyr Robert Southwell, which Eliot quoted in 'Types of Religious Verse' as an
example of the religious sensibility of the seventeenth century,153 describes a vision of the
infant Christ:

My faultless breast the furnace is, the fuel wounding thorns,
Love is the fire, and sighs the smoke, the ashes shame and scorns;
The fuel justice layeth on, and mercy blows the coals,
The metal is this furnace wrought are men's defiled souls,
For which, as now on fire I am to work them to their good,
So will I melt into a bath to wash them in my blood.

Christ's torment in the flames of sin is reflected in the purgative suffering which the be­
liever must undergo. Eliot's 'intolerable shirt of flame' echoes the General Confession from
the Service of the Communion: 'We do earnestly repent, and are heartily sorry for these our
misdoings; the remembrance of them is grievous unto us; the burden of them is intolerable'.
Another possible influence is the final chapter of Juliana of Norwich's Revelations (ch.86,
pp.202-03):

I desired oftentimes to learn what was our Lord's meaning [in suffering]. And
fifteen years after, and more, I was answered in ghostly understanding, saying
thus: Wouldst thou learn thy Lord's meaning in this thing? Learn it well: Love
was His meaning. Who shewed it thee? Love. What shewed He thee? Love.
Wherefore shewed He thee? For Love . . . . Thus was I learned that Love was
our Lord's meaning. And I saw full surely that ere God made us He loved us;
which love was never slacked, nor ever shall be. And in this love He hath done
all His works; and in this love He hath made all things profitable to us; and in
this love our life is everlasting. In our making we had beginning; but the love
wherein He made us was in Him from without beginning; in which love we have
our beginning. And all this shall we see in God, without end.

Earlier in the same revelation Juliana claims that the cause of all suffering and pain is 'un­
knowing of Love' (ch.73, p.179):

For some of us believe that God is Almighty and may do all, and that He is All–
Wisdom and can do all; but that He is All–Love and will do all, there we stop
short.

Moreover, Eliot's phrase, 'the unfamiliar name' may refer to the early Jewish belief that the
name of God (Yahweh, or the tetragrammaton YHWH) was too awful and holy to be uttered.

152 Eliot had the best of precedents for the inclusion of a classical allusion into the culminating spiritual vision of
the Quartets. In 1929 he wrote of Dante's final canto, 'I do not know anywhere in poetry more authentic sign
of greatness than the power of association which could in the last line, when the poet is speaking of the Divine
vision, yet introduce the Argo passing over the head of wondering Neptune' (SE, p.268).

One aspect of the Incarnation was the ‘naming’ of God in Christ. God had become ‘familiar’; Christian writers were much less reluctant to name God, and the apostle John even employed metonymy to describe the Almighty: ‘God is Love’ (I John 4. 8). This familiarity gives to the penitent of *Little Gidding* IV a sense of security in God’s providence which was lacking in the ‘frigid purgatorial fires’ of *East Coker* IV. The suffering remains in all its intensity, but the sense of distance, even of alienation, which characterized the relationship between the poet and ‘Christ the surgeon’ has been replaced by the assurance of the presence of a Divine lover. For those who have experienced the Incarnation through the Holy Spirit and through contemplation of the ‘significant soil’, the ‘shirt of flame’ has become the *Incendium Amoris*, the ‘Fire of Love’ which ultimately brings about the mystic transformation and union with God.

(v) ‘Little Gidding’ V: ‘The fire and the rose’

The fifth and final part of *Little Gidding* returns once more to the landscape of Little Gidding, and to the spiritual realm which is there made accessible. Eliot begins by postulating the achievement of a perfect order in language (‘The complete consort dancing together’) and then transposes the notion of semantic unity and interdependence into the realm of human action, past and present:

A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails
On a winter’s afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England.

Just as each sublime poetic artifice implies, and in a sense contains, the whole of the language, so the scene at Little Gidding, at the particular time of the poet’s visit, contains all of history, and every ‘timeless moment’ that has preceded it.

This is the ‘pattern’ which the poet had described at the end of *Burnt Norton* V, the pattern which revealed itself as a direct creation of Love, ‘the cause and end of movement’. Here, however, at the ‘secluded chapel’ of Little Gidding the pattern is incarnated at a specific point in time and space, the moment in which ‘time is conquered’. Eliot here echoes a recurrent theme of mystical thought: the Eternal Now. Writers from St Augustine onwards have envisaged God as existing in an eternal present outside of time, and have recorded that their visions and intimations of God are accompanied by the feeling that past and future have somehow been gathered into one present moment. Jan van Ruysbroeck declares, ‘His coming consists, outside all Time, in an *Eternal Now*’, and Meister Eckhart, speaks of the mystical faculty of the soul as:

a power so high and noble it is able to see God face to face in his own self. This power . . . knows no yesterday or day before, no morrow or day after . . . therein it is the present now; the happenings of a thousand years ago, a thousand years to come, are there in the present and the antipodes the same as here.

154 See Chapter 3, p.33.

155 *Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage*, Bk.III, ch.3; quoted in *Underhill*, p.412.

156 ‘Sermon XC’, Pfeiffer, I, p.228.
At this point in the poem a significant break occurs; we experience a sudden movement from the contemplation of a 'point of intersection', a place and time which constitute a consubstantial form of the Incarnation, to a vision of a return to paradisical innocence which culminates in a celebration of the eventual union of the fire and the rose. This final vision is complex in character; as was noted in Chapter 4, it is a resolution of the personal themes which lay behind the rose-garden theme, intertwined with other motifs and images, and overlaid with the imagery of Dante's *Commedia*. Nevertheless, it identifies itself also as the experience which initiates the final stage of the mystic pilgrimage.

Eliot introduces this last stanza with a single line drawn from *The Cloud of Unknowing* which acts as a kind of introit to the revelation of the final lines: 'With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling'. The anonymous author of this work represented the cataphatic tradition of mysticism; Eliot described him and Dame Juliana as 'pretty well the two mystical extremes or, one might say, the male and female of this literature' (*Gardner*, p.70). The phrase he borrows for *Little Gidding* V is from chapter two, where the author is challenging his readers to respond to the call of God to the holy life:

> Look up now, thou weak wretch, and see what thou art. What art thou, and how hast thou merited thus to be called by our Lord? What weary wretched heart and sleeping in sloth is that, the which is not wakened with the drawing of this love and the voice of this calling?

Eliot's truncated version of this passage appears to drain it of its accusatory tone. As it stands, the statement resembles the refrain from Juliana of Norwich; it is an affirmation of God's availability and eagerness to be found. Once the original context is identified, however, the allusion takes on the Pentecostal authority: it is both a declaration of God's personal interest in the soul, and a serious call to the devout life.

From the vantage point of the Eternal Now, and having accepted his 'calling', the poet-pilgrim surveys the territory he has traversed, and sees in it a foreshadowing of the future:

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.
> Through the unknown, remembered gate
> When the last of earth left to discover
> Is that which was the beginning.

The vision of the rose-garden is a memory of childhood happiness which inspires a nostalgia which can be satisfied only by the discovery of its final cause. Although it is past, it beckons us onwards towards the eschatological return to paradisical innocence. The gate which now lies before us is that by which our first parents left the presence of God and entered the world of the knowledge of Good and Evil, and that by which we followed them.

This theme is common to Dante's *Purgatorio* and to many other accounts of the mystic way. Many mystics describe their journey as a full circle which returns them to the state of

---

157 The quotation is taken from Dom Justin McCann's edition (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1924; rpt. 1943), p.4. This was the edition that Eliot said he used (*Gardner*, p.71).
childhood (Underhill, p.530). Lancelot Andrewes, for instance, comments in ‘Sermon 10 On the Nativity’.158

Leading He feeds us, and feeding He leads us 'till He bring us whither? Even to a principio, back again to where we were at the beginning; and at the beginning we were in Paradise. That our beginning shall be our end. Thither He will bring us—nay, to a better estate than so; to that whereunto, even from Paradise, we should have been translated, to the state of eternity.

Once he has reached 'the beginning', the poet-pilgrim can set out upon the last stage of his journey, the stage characterized by Elevation: 'the exalted or ecstatic form of consciousness . . . which allows the traveller to see the spiritual city towards which he goes' (Underhill, p.156). This last stage is not marked by ecstatic visions or racked by the fires of purgation. Rather, it is described in terms similar to those which Eliot uses here: 'A condition of complete simplicity'. Jan van Ruysbroeck speaks perfect contemplation as ‘the Ineffable Simplicity, the Absence of image and of knowledge. For in this limitless Abyss of Simplicity, all things are embraced in the bliss of fruition' (Underhill, p.412). Nevertheless, as Eliot reminds us, this condition costs us 'not less than everything'.159

The final image looks forward to the fulfillment of Dame Juliana’s vision of the perfection of God’s sovereignty:

And all shall be well and
And all manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

Eliot’s primary model for this culminating vision is the ‘genuine mystical statement [which] is to be found in the last canto of the Paradiso’,160 where the paradoxes of God’s simultaneous unity and trinity, Christ’s simultaneous deity and humanity, and the ultimate union of all things in Divine Love are laid before the poet. There are hints of the wider mystical tradition, however, and especially of the English mystics who have been the poet’s guides through this last Quartet. The image of the 'crowned knot' suggests not only Dante’s nodo (see Chapter 4, p.97) but also Dame Juliana and The Cloud of Unknowing, for whom the knot was an image of the union of the soul with God:

[The] knot is so subtle and so mighty that . . . [man’s soul] is oned into God: in which oneing it is made endlessly holy. Furthermore He would have us know that all the souls that shall be saved in Heaven without end, are knit and oned in this oneing and made holy in this holiness (Revelations, ch.53, pp.129–30).

I would . . . at the last help thee to knit the ghostly knot of burning love betwixt thee and thy God, in ghostly onehead and accordance of will (The Cloud ch.47, p.60).161

158 Seventeen Sermons on the Nativity, pp.171–72.
159 Richard of St Victor says that ‘self–simplification’ is ‘the essence of purgation’ (Underhill, p.246).
160 See above, p.105.
161 The passage is quoted as the epigraph to McCann’s edition.
Eliot's knot gathers up these connotations, adds to them the Pentecostal tongues of flame, and merges all into the single knot in which the fire of purgatory and the rose of Divine union and fruition are revealed as identical in substance and essence, as manifestations of God's love. All opposites are reconciled and all multiplicity resolved into unity.

At this point the poet can take us no further: the vision is still a future hope, both for the poet and for those readers who are prepared to kneel 'where prayer has been valid'. It could be argued, however, that in 'imposing' the order of mystical intuition upon reality, 'and thereby eliciting some perception of an order in reality', the Quartets have achieved the purpose of art, in bringing us 'to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation; and then [leaving] us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a region where that guide can avail us no farther' (*OPP*, p.87). It is perhaps not surprising that the point to which poetry can take us coincides with the limits of mystical expression: 'the idea of stillness, unity and peace', wrote Evelyn Underhill, 'is and has ever been humanity's best translation of its final intuitive perception of God' (*Underhill*, p.45).
Chapter 6

The Cosmological Imagery of 'Four Quartets'

Previous chapters have sought to describe the particular philosophical, poetic and theological traditions which have informed the primary 'topoi' of Four Quartets. Within the 'landscape' of the poem, however, these networks of resonant ideas and words are themselves located within an imagined cosmos, a pattern behind the patterns which gives to 'that world of poetry which we have entered' a physical aspect. The parallel with the Commedia is germaine for more reasons than one; for, like Dante's poem, Four Quartets assumes a universe whose structure constitutes a skeleton upon which abstract ideas are hung. Metaphysics is reflected in physics; indeed, the cosmological structures are often found to be inseparable from the ideas which the poet expresses through them, as body is inseparable from soul.

Once again we find in the Quartets an orientation towards the deepest of symbolic reservoirs. Eliot looks to earlier traditions and systems of thought to supply his images of order. The result is that while the sequence itself is set in the England of the 1930s and '40s, and, to a lesser extent, the United States of the 1890s, its cosmos is that of a much earlier period. It is a cosmos delineated by images which originated with the Greek and Indian philosophers—Heraclitus, the Vedas, the Upaniṣads, Plato, and Aristotle—and which were subsequently overlaid with the connotations assigned to them by later systems of thought, especially the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus and the Christian philosophy of Augustine and the Schoolmen.

As one might infer from this, it is not a seamless cosmological system which is invoked by the Quartets. Unlike Dante, Eliot did not have the benefit of a philosophy—or, at least, a mythology—which had undergone an almost complete 'absorption into life' (SW, p.163). Nevertheless, while the various images of universal movement and structure exist in a dialectical relationship, complementing, repudiating and modifying each other just as the elements of the traditions previously discussed have done, a definite burden of value in the Quartets is placed upon certain images which can be said to contain the others. Foremost among these is the 'still point'; and foremost among the sources of Eliot's conception of the 'still point' is Dante's Commedia. Among the cosmological models entertained in Four Quartets, the one which is the best analogue for the universe of meaning implied in the sequence is that of the supreme poet of Christendom.

My account of the cosmology of the Quartets will begin with the pre–Socratic philosopher Heraclitus whose notions of the Logos and the cycle of the elements are suggested in the
epigraphs with which Eliot prefaced Burnt Norton (and, by implication, the rest of the Quar­
tets). This will lead on to a consideration of the wider traditions of meaning assigned to the
imagery of circles and wheels, and to the images associated with the governing principle of the
wheel, first the axle, and then the still point itself. Finally, I will consider the dance and music,
images which symbolize that orchestrated movement which, Eliot suggests, is made possible
only through the influence of the still point.

I Heraclitus

The first set of co-ordinates for the cosmology of the Quartets is provided in the epigraphs to
Burnt Norton:¹

τοῦ λόγου δεύοντος ξυνόβ ζώουσιν οἱ πολλοὶ ὃς ἰδίᾳν ἐχοντες φρόνησιν.
(l.p.77.Fr.2)

(ἢ ὁ πόλος τὰ τεῦχα μία καὶ ωνήθη
(l.p.89.Fr.60)

In a note to Raymond Preston, Eliot said that he chose the fragments for their ‘poetic
suggestiveness’;² for Heraclitus was one of a number of early Greek thinkers who expressed
their physical and metaphysical theories in images, puns, repetitions, and paradoxes. His in-
tuitive fusion of science and poetry had a profound influence upon other thinkers and writers
closer to Eliot’s day, notably Nietzsche, Hopkins, Spengler, and Lawrence.³ Eliot used the
original Greek text, he told E.M. Stephenson, because ‘No one translation ... can be consid­
ered as anything more than a limited interpretation since the meanings of key words in Greek
philosophy can never be completely rendered in a modern language’⁴.

(i) The ‘Logos’

The key word in the first of the epigraphs is ‘Logos’, whose literal meaning is ‘Word’, but
and ‘Counsel’. In his letter to E.M. Stephenson, Eliot quoted Diels’ German translation, ‘Aber
obschon das Wort allein gemein ist, leben die meisten doch so, als ob sie eine eigene Einsicht
haetten’, and added, ‘I should say that Herakleitos meant a great deal more than simply “the
word is in common use”. I think he meant rather that the reason, the Logos, or the rational

¹Eliot quotes the Greek text of Herman Diels’ Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buch-
handlung, 1903), which, as he wrote to E.M. Stephenson, ‘is, I believe, still considered the standard text of
the pre–Socratic philosophers; at any rate it was when I was a student of these matters’ (T.S. Eliot and the Lay
²Raymond Preston, ‘Four Quartets’ Rehearsed: a Commentary on T.S. Eliot’s Cycle of Poems (New York:
³In his early essay on Dante, Eliot placed Heraclitus above the other ancient ‘philosophical poets’—Parmenides,
Empedocles, Zeno, Anaxagoras and Democritus—but below Lucretius and Dante (SW, p.161).
⁴Stephenson, p.80; subsequent references will be included in the text. In ‘Virgil and the Christian World’ (1951),
Eliot confessed to a lifelong preference for Greek over Latin. Greek, he said, ‘has never been surpassed as a
vehicle for the fullest range and the finest shades of thought and feeling’ (OPP, p.124).
understanding of the nature of things is common or available to all men. "Most people live as if they had a peculiar and individual insight" (Stephenson, p.80).

The concept of Logos was central to Heraclitus' approach to the problem of the One and the Many, which was one of the fundamental concerns of pre-Socratic philosophy. The early Greek philosophers were divided between the pluralistic Pythagorean world-view, which saw number and change as foundational to an understanding of 'what is', and the monistic world-view of Thales and the Eleatic school, which stressed the unity of all material and psychological phenomena. Parmenides, a contemporary of Heraclitus, took the notion of unity to the extreme of reductionism, and dismissed motion, time, and number as illogical. For him there was in fact no Many, only the One. His position was challenged by Empedocles (among others) who posited two opposing forces in the world, Love and Strife, which between them determined all material phenomena.

A similar divergence of opinion can be discerned in Eastern thought, which, from its earliest stages, distinguished between the material world and the world of the soul. Some of the major schools of thought, Śāṅkara's advaita system, for instance, denied materiality altogether, ascribing it to māyā (illusion), and stressing instead the hidden unity of all souls in Brahman. Others, however, among them the Sāṃkhya school, held consciousness and materiality to be opposed but equally 'real' cosmic principles. Value was nevertheless confined to the non-material world.

In response to the problem, Heraclitus proposed a series of paradoxes. He described the universe as a constantly changing flux of discrete phenomena, depicting it as a fire or a river, and simultaneously posited the existence of a single unifying order or pattern which enclosed all. This cosmic principle, upon which all matter and all change was predicated, he called the Logos. He states (fragments 41 and 50):5

Wisdom is one thing. It is to know the thought by which all things are steered through all things;

It is wise to hearken, not to me, but to my Word, and to confess that all things are one.

Heraclitus affirmed the existence of the One within the Many, rather than over against it. He was reluctant to attribute to the Logos either a material or a spiritual existence; instead, it was a principle which straddled the two and which defied final identification with either (fragment 32; Burnet (65), p.138): 'The wise is one only. It is unwilling and willing to be called by the name of Zeus'.

This Heraclitean notion is of immense importance to the Quartets, first of all because of its obvious affinities with the Christian concept of the Word (Logos), as enunciated in the prologue to John's Gospel, the basis of orthodox Christology (John 1. 1): 'ἐν αὐτῷ ἦν καὶ ἦν τὸ λόγος, καὶ τὸ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν Θεόν, καὶ Θεός ἦν ὁ λόγος' ('In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'). John goes on: 'All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing that was made' (v.3). John also echoes Heraclitus' stress upon the inability (or unwillingness) of the many to acknowledge the

---

5The translation is John Burnet's, Early Greek Philosophy, pp.132, 134. Burnet follows an arrangement which differs from Diels, and refers to these fragments as numbers 19 and 1 respectively. References will include Burnet's pagination and his numbering will be given in parenthesis.
presence of the Logos (vs 10–12): ‘He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God’.  

Eliot had referred to the Johannine notion of the Logos on several previous occasions, each time stressing the difficulty inherent in the attempt to discern it. In ‘Gerontion’ he described ‘The word within a word, unable to speak a word’, and in Ash Wednesday V he declared:

If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent
If the unheard, unspoken
Word is unspoken, unheard;
Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,
The Word without a word, the Word within
The world and for the world.

Again, in Chorus I from The Rock we read (CPP, p.147):

The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.

In Four Quartets Eliot attempts a synthesis of the Christian doctrine with the physical–metaphysical concept of Heraclitus. The search for a secret wisdom, a unity to be discerned with great difficulty within multiplicity, is a recurring theme throughout the sequence.  

Both men stress that only a very few minds attain an understanding of this unity, and that its nature is so foreign to our natural disposition that our ordinary level of awareness appears as mere insentience in comparison. Heraclitus describes our normal consciousness as a state of sleep: ‘The waking have one common world, but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own’ (Fragment 89; Burnet (95), p.140). To be ‘conscious’, Eliot says, ‘is not to be in time’.

There are, of course, vital distinctions to be made between the Heraclitean Logos and its Johannine counterpart. The Christian Word entered time and space at a specific point in history before which it was not available in its fullness to the human mind. It came, moreover, in human form (John 1. 14): ‘And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us’. This distinction was crucial to the poet whose Christian faith was founded upon the doctrine of the Incarnation. Nevertheless, Eliot seemed to regard the Heraclitean Logos as a prefiguration of the Incarnation. In 1928 he noted, ‘to the Greek there was something inexplicable about λόγος so that it

---

6It is unlikely that John had any direct contact with the pre–Socratic tradition. However, his notion of the word λόγος was derived not only from the Hebrew wisdom literature, but also from the popularized versions of Stoic and Alexandrian philosophy through which some pre–Socratic influence may have reached him.

7In various other ways, Eliot identified himself with the effort to discern unity within multiplicity. One could consider his early studies in the philosophy of F.H. Bradley and Leibniz, his rejection of Bergson’s concept of the flux because of its lack of a final unifying force like the Heraclitean Logos, or his early critical theories of literary ‘tradition’, ‘unification of sensibility’, and the ‘surrender’ of the poet’s ‘personality’ to ‘the mind of Europe’, which, quoting Aristotle, he described as ἵσως θειότερον τι καὶ ἀπαθές (‘perhaps something more divine and impassible’), SE, p.21.
was a participation of man in the divine'. The notion that the divine truth is somehow implicit within the cosmological structure of the universe is important in the *Quartets* as a perception which prepares the mind to accept the incarnate Word. This fusion of a cosmological with a theological principle is the perfect example of how images of cosmic structure will function in *Four Quartets*.

(ii) The Cycle of the Elements

The second epigraph to *Burnt Norton*, Heraclitus' fragment 89, elaborates upon the theme announced in the first. The eternal truth which underpins all the movements of the universe is an unchanging unity in diversity:

\[ \delta\delta\delta\, \alpha\nu\omega\, \kappa\alpha\tau\omega\, \mu\iota\alpha\, \kappa\alpha\iota\, \omega\nu\tau\eta \]

('The way up and the way down is one and the same'; Burnet (69), p.138.)

In its original context the statement refers to the theory of the transmutative cycle of the elements, according to which the physical universe can be described as a constant cyclical motion of the four elements. The downward progression is from fire through air (vapour) and liquid, to earth; the upward from earth, through liquid and air, and back to fire. Thus, fragment 76 (Burnet (25), p.135) reads:

Fire lives the death of air, and air lives the death of fire; water lives the death of earth, earth that of water.

Fire is the primary manifestation of the unity of the Logos, since it remains the same even though its substance undergoes continual change. It is the principle of strife which motivates the whole cycle. Indeed, according to Heraclitus (fr.30; Burnet (20), p.134) the other elements are merely variant forms of fire:

This world, which is the same for all, no one of gods or men has made; but it was ever, is now, and ever shall be an ever-living Fire, with measures of its kindling, and measures going out.

Heraclitus' theory is more than merely an account of the physical universe, for implicit within his formulation is a theory of politics, sociology and psychology (fr.80; Burnet (62), p.137):

We must know that war is common to all and strife is justice, and that all things come into being and pass away through strife.

---

8 'Second Thoughts about Humanism', *SE*, p.485, n.1; Eliot continued after *Four Quartets* to expound the Logos; in 'Goethe as the Sage' (1955) he described it as the 'spiritual wisdom' that 'transcends place and time, and is capable of arousing a direct response as of man to man, in readers of any place and any time', wisdom that is 'greater than any sum of wise sayings' and 'greater than the actualization of wisdom in any human soul ... [the] λόγος τῆς ὀνομασίας, the same for all men everywhere' (OPP, pp.219-21, 226).

9 Strictly speaking, Heraclitus postulated only three elements, since fire was for him a manifestation of the Logos itself, and therefore of a higher order than earth, air and water. Nevertheless, many fragments—the one quoted below, for instance—are ambivalent on this point.
All things—both spiritual and physical—take part in this constant flux, for all are units composed paradoxically of warring opposites, some of them elements in the process of downwards mutation and others in the process of upwards mutation. As Heraclitus states in fragment 88 (Burnet (78), p.139):

And it is the same thing in us that is quick and dead, awake and asleep, young and old; the former are shifted and become the latter, and the latter in turn are shifted and become the former.

Although the four elements are by nature antithetical, together they are harmonious parts of a single cosmic design. Each comes into being through the death of the others and in dying itself creates the others once again. This harmony of opposites is the ultimate structural principle of the cosmos and is the most obvious expression of the hidden Logos: 10

Men do not know how what is at variance agrees with itself. It is an attunement of opposite tensions, like that of the bow and the lyre;

Men would not have known the name of justice, if these things [injustices] were not.

That which is in opposition is in concert, and from things that differ comes the most beautiful harmony.

As his choice of epigraphs suggests, Eliot went on to incorporate key aspects of the cosmological framework of Heraclitus into the cosmos of the Quartets through a web of allusions and parallels. The most obvious of these is the quadripartite structure of the sequence. Eliot himself admitted that it was only ‘during the writing of East Coker that the whole sequence began to emerge, with the symbolism of the four seasons and the four elements’. 11 Thus, Burnt Norton, which was originally designed to stand alone, had now to be assimilated into the larger structure, although this was achieved with relative ease. With its images of suspended dust and mirages formed out of tricks of light and shadow, the poem became identified with Air. East Coker’s rituals of the soil, its ‘dung and death’, mark it as the Earth–quartet; while the images of river and sea identify The Dry Salvages with Water. The culminating poem of the sequence, with its Pentecostal allusions and purgatorial theme, is associated with Fire, the supreme Heraclitean element. Moreover, part II of Little Gidding celebrates the whole cycle of the elements in an elaborate paraphrase of Heraclitus’ fragment 76 (quoted above), and the final lines of the poem affirm the union of the fire with the symbol of Divine love, the rose.

Eliot superimposes upon this scheme the pattern of the four seasons. He conceded that, in this scheme, Burnt Norton ‘had to stand for spring . . . though its imagery was perhaps more

10 Fragments 51 and 23; Burnet (45 and 60), pp.136–137. Burnet does not include the last of these fragments (Diels, no.8); the translation is Kathleen Freeman’s, Ancilla to the Pre–Socratic Philosophers (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1948), p.25.

11 Quoted from a personal conversation by Kristian Smidt, in The Importance of Recognition: Six Chapters on T.S. Eliot (Tromsø, Trykk: A.S Peder Norbye, 1973), p.34. See also Eliot’s interview with John Lehmann, p.5. It was, moreover, towards the end of the composition of East Coker, which, as Helen Gardner notes, was originally set in May (Gardner, p.99). It was also during the writing of East Coker that he conceived of the epithet ‘quartets’; see his letter to John Hayward, quoted below (p.190).
summery', although there are hints in the poem of a late spring or early summer setting. East Coker is set more definitely in the 'warm haze' of a summer's day, and describes a rustic dance of the kind traditionally performed at the summer solstice. In The Dry Salvages, the river is associated with 'the smell of grapes on the autumn table', and the sea with the 'silent withering of autumn flowers'. Finally, in Little Gidding the poet finds himself in a snowbound landscape where the reflected radiance of the sun on frost creates a paradoxical 'midwinter spring' which—like the Heraclitean fire—envelops the entire system.

Eliot also incorporated the Greek philosopher's notion of the harmony of opposites into his description of religious experience. The account in Burnt Norton II of the meaning of the rose-garden experience, for instance, is full of the kind of dialectical thought-patterns which Heraclitus uses to describe the hidden 'atunement'. Eliot uses the second epigraph to Burnt Norton, 'the way up and the way down is one and the same', as an analogue for the paradox of the two (apparently opposed) paths open to the mystic quester, the Way of Negation and the Way of Affirmation. He alludes to this epigraph twice in the Quartets; first in Burnt Norton III as part of a description of the Negative Way of John of the Cross, and again in The Dry Salvages III in his account of the wisdom of Krishna. East Coker III features a passage which, although taken from John of the Cross, mimics the paradoxical method of Heraclitus; and Little Gidding III resolves the theme with its exposition of the two opposing conditions of mind, attachment and indifference, which result in slavery, and the middle path, detachment, which frees us from bondage to the flux of experience, just as an understanding of the Logos leads us to liberating wisdom.

For much of the Quartets, however, the perception of the Logos is obscured by the importunity of the Heraclitean flux. East Coker I describes the endless rhythm of change, as houses, trees, animals and people are created and subsequently destroyed. Part III of the same poem continues the theme, recording the 'silent funeral' of humanity as myriads of lives are swallowed up by death. Eliot is also indebted to Heraclitus for the river-imagery of The Dry Salvages. The Greek philosopher had used the image of the river to cast doubt upon our sense of our own permanence. 'You cannot step twice into the same river', he stated (fr.91; Burnet (41), p.136), since neither the river nor we ourselves are the same in any two moments. Similarly, in the opening passage of The Dry Salvages Eliot describes the river as a constant reminder to those who live beside it of their own impermanence, a fact many of them would much rather forget. Eliot echoes this fragment again in The Dry Salvages III, when he questions the unity of the individual soul in time:

You are not the same people who left that station
Or who will arrive at any terminus.

12 Smidt, p.34. Eliot's first visit to the garden at Burnt Norton occurred at the height of summer (Ackroyd, p.229).
13 The sap in the trees in Part II, for instance, is ascending 'to summer', and the 'deception' of the thrush may refer to the behaviour of the water-thrush of the Mississippi at nesting time (see Chapter 4, p.81n.).
14 See the note to Frazer's The Golden Bough, below, p.182.
15 Various other four-part systems can be discerned in Four Quartets; the separation of the human personality into intellectual, physical, volitional and spiritual aspects, for instance, or even the four points of the compass.
16 See also fragment 49a (Burnet (81), p.139): 'We step and do not step into the same rivers; we are and are not'.
17 Eliot had assigned a similar role to the river in The Waste Land. In 'The Fire Sermon' the Thames represents the flow of the sensual life which carries along in its current the detritus of human civilization.
II  The Circle and The Wheel

The most important symbol of the flux in *Four Quartets*, however, is the symbol of the circle. The Heraclitean system combined constant change with constant repetition, and constant differentiation with constant unity; the image Heraclitus found most appropriate to express this paradox was the circle, which connotes movement and change but also equivalence and limitation. The central image of the first section of *Burnt Norton* II is a circle similar to that of Heraclitus:

The dance along the artery
The circulation of the lymph
Are figured in the drift of stars.

Eliot is making use of another Heraclitean notion, that which held the universe to be composed of microcosmic processes which enact in miniature the cyclic action which encompasses the macrocosm. The universe is thus a system of wheels within wheels, in which opposites ('the boarhound and the boar') are 'reconciled' inasmuch as they mimic the celestial order seen in the stars.

The Heraclitean circle is also central to *East Coker*’s vision of the cycles of birth, death and rebirth. The poem is introduced by the phrase ‘In my beginning is my end’, and concluded by its inversion, ‘In my end is my beginning’. The immediate allusion is to Mary Stuart’s motto, ‘En ma fin est ma commencement’, but Eliot’s word-play also recalls fragment 103 (*Burnet* (70), p.138): ‘In the circumference of the circle the beginning and end are common’. Nevertheless, with regards to circular imagery, Heraclitus was merely an early exponent of a complex symbolism which has been established in virtually every major Oriental and Occidental culture. In *Four Quartets* Eliot incorporates the cosmic circle of Heraclitus into a sensitive awareness of that larger tradition.

Circular imagery has, since its earliest roots, had a dual significance. It has been for some a symbol of fate, or *karma*; of the tragedy of human lives controlled by brutal external forces. It has affirmed the Many over the One, the flux over the Logos. For others, however, the circle has represented wholeness and completion, at once a goal to be achieved and an icon to assure them that the truth is within their grasp. They have affirmed the One over the Many. Neither view appears to have pre-dated the other significantly, but as a rule the former has been more importunate, since it confirms as real the sufferings of humanity, whereas the latter has had to deny the reality of pain, or to present it as in some way good.

This dichotomy is seen clearly in the use of the circle in Eastern religion, with which Eliot had become familiar through his studies at Harvard. The circle—usually in the form of a wheel—is one of the principal symbols of Eastern spirituality. The iconography of all major

---

18 Eliot used the idea previously in *Murder in the Cathedral* (CPP, p.270): ‘What is woven on the loom of fate... / Is woven also in our veins, our brains’. Eliot’s line ‘In light upon the figured leaf’, echoes Tennyson’s treatment of the microcosm idea in ‘In Memoriam’, stanza 43:

So that still garden of the souls
In many a figured leaf enrolls
The total world since life began.

19 See Appendix II, p.207.
Indian religions feature the *bhavachakra*, the Wheel of Becoming, or of Death and Rebirth (*samsāra*), within which the unenlightened soul is trapped. In this cycle of transmigration, a universe of souls, impelled by their selfish desires, is repeatedly incarnated into the world of suffering.\(^{20}\)

The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (1. 6) links the wheel with Brahman, the supreme universal principle: \(^{21}\)

This vast universe is a wheel. Upon it are all creatures that are subject to birth, death and rebirth. Round and round it turns and never stops. It is the wheel of Brahman. As long as the individual self thinks it is separate from Brahman, it revolves upon the wheel in bondage to the laws of birth, death and rebirth. But when through the grace of Brahman it realizes its identity with him, it revolves upon the wheel no longer. It achieves immortality.

Buddhist thought, also, pictures the human predicament in the midst of ubiquitous change and suffering as a wheel of Existence, often imaged as a closed chain. In a passage from the *Visuddhi-Magga* the Buddha explains: \(^{22}\)

it is to be understood that this Wheel of Existence constantly and continuously rolls onward, without known beginning, without a personal cause or passive recipient and empty with a twelfe fold emptiness . . . continuing to exist by virtue of a concatenation of cause and effect . . . . Respecting this Wheel of Existence it is to be understood that the two factors *ignorance and desire* are its root.

Similarly, Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia*, a poetic account of the life of Gautama Buddha which Eliot read and enjoyed as a child, reiterates this view of the human condition: \(^{23}\)

*If ye lay bound upon the wheel of change,*  
*And no way of breaking from the chain . . . .*  
*Ye suffer from yourselves. None else compels,*  
*None other holds you that ye live and die,*  
*And whirl upon the wheel, and hug and kiss*  
*Its spokes in agony.*

T.E. Hulme, whose theories of literary and religious classicism may have influenced Eliot, summarizes the significance of the wheel (*Speculations*, p.34):

*It is the closing of all the roads, this realisation of the *tragic* significance of life, which makes it legitimate to call all other attitudes shallow. Such a realisation has*

---

\(^{20}\) The various Eastern doctrines of reincarnation differ in detail only. For the Hindu and the Jain, an unchanging soul inhabits successive bodies, whereas the Buddhist doctrine denies the existence of a substantial soul, but holds to a belief in the transmigration of the *karma* of a soul at the moment of death to a child in the womb.

\(^{21}\) This translation is quoted by P.S. Sri, *T.S. Eliot, Vedanta and Buddhism*, p.35.


formed the basis of all the great religions, and is most conveniently remembered by the symbol of the wheel. This symbol of the futility of existence is absolutely lost to the modern world, nor can it be recovered without great difficulty.

In Western culture, a parallel pessimistic tradition of circle-imagery can be discerned in the Hebrew wisdom of Ecclesiastes, the Platonic doctrine of metempsychosis—a theory of reincarnation substantially the same as its Eastern counterpart—and in the familiar icon of the Wheel of Fortune. Eliot’s debt to the first of these is illustrated by his use of a quotation from Ecclesiastes to expound the Heraclitean cycle of birth and death described in East Coker 1.

The Wheel of Fortune, and, to a lesser degree, the idea of metempsychosis, are used in Murder in the Cathedral and The Family Reunion, the plays which Eliot wrote immediately before Burnt Norton and East Coker respectively.

Both plays rely heavily upon the thematic conventions of classical Greek and Roman tragedy, foremost among which is the activity of the goddess Fortuna, whose wheel so orchestrates human life that the fall of one individual, be it through death, loss of favour or of political power, coincides with the rise of another, who will eventually fall like the first. Eliot also incorporates aspects of the Eastern bhāvachakra into the plays. In the opening scene of Murder in the Cathedral, the Third Priest expresses a longing for any change in fortune to take place (CPP, p.243):

For good or ill, let the wheel turn.
The wheel has been still, these seven years, and no good.
For ill or good, let the wheel turn.

Becket, when he enters, offers a wider perspective, in language reminiscent of the East (p.245):

They know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer
They know and do not know, that action is suffering
And suffering is action. Neither does the agent suffer
Nor the patient act. Both are fixed
In an eternal action, an eternal patience
To which all must consent that it may be willed
And which all must suffer that they may will it,
That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is the action
And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and still
Be forever still.

Becket sees the cycle of life as an unending round of strife, and seeks release through an understanding of the principle which powers it. Thus when the first Tempter suggests that the wheel may be manipulated, Becket retorts (p.247):

Only
The fool, fixed in his folly, may think
He can turn the wheel on which he turns.

Reincarnation in the West was derived from the Orphic mysteries and early Egyptian religion, whose doctrines and rituals bear a strong resemblance towards early Hindu worship, although the nature of the original link remains obscure. The doctrine was held by Pythagoras, Plato, Manichaeism and continued into early forms of Gnosticism.

The relevant passage is quoted in Chapter 3, p.48.
The same strand of imagery appears in *The Family Reunion*; Harry says of the night when he murdered his wife (*CPP*, p.294):

It was only reversing the senseless direction  
For a momentary rest on the burning wheel  
That cloudless night in the mid-Atlantic  
When I pushed her over.\(^{26}\)

Mary laments the continuous cycle of pain (p.310):

I believe the moment of birth  
Is when we have knowledge of death . . .  
And what of the terrified spirit  
Compelled to be reborn . . . ?

Harry’s movement towards release from the wheel begins with his discovery of a soul-mate in Agatha (p.331):

I have thought of you as the completely strong,  
The liberated from the human wheel.  
So I looked to you for strength. Now I think it is  
A common pursuit of liberation.

Together they recall their journey through ‘a circular desert’ and recreate imaginatively a moment in the past which provides a glimpse of that liberation; but it is fleeting, like the vision in *Burnt Norton I*, because it involves merely an interruption of the progress of the wheel rather than a complete transcendence (p.335):

The chain breaks,  
The wheel stops, and the noise of machinery,  
And the desert is cleared, under the judicial sun  
Of the final eye, and the awful evacuation  
Cleanses.  
I was not there, you were not there, only our phantasms  
And what did not happen is as true as what did happen  
O my dear, and you walked through the little door  
And I ran to meet you in the rose-garden.

Here the images of the wheel and the chain form part of a nexus of Eliot’s favourite images—the wasteland, the rose-garden and the imagined vision of what might have been.

In both Eastern and Western philosophy, the pessimistic tradition of wheel-symbolism was from an early stage countered and qualified by doctrines which promised liberation from the wheel through disciplines and mystical insights which were themselves expressed in circular imagery. Buddhism, for instance, introduced the *dhammachakra*, the Wheel of the Law (*dhamma*) as a resolution to the *bhāvachakra*. This ‘way of wisdom’ was represented iconographically as a wheel consisting of eight spokes—signifying the Eightfold Noble Path, a strict

\(^{26}\)Eliot is alluding also to Ixion who, in classical mythology, was punished for lust by being tied to a fiery, revolving wheel, and perhaps also to Lear's ‘wheel of fire’. 
code of meditation and personal discipline—which were in fact rays of sacred light emanating from the Buddha, who occupied the hub.

In the West also the analytic mind of Greek philosophy saw a profound ambivalence in the symbol of the circle. On the one hand, it was the most appropriate symbol for the flux of life and time: Plato's theory of metempsychosis, for instance, or the elemental cycles of Heraclitus and Empedocles. Simultaneously, however, the circle was seen as the supreme, and paradoxically the most simple, manifestation of ultimate order and unity. Empedocles held that only circular movement can produce knowledge of the divine, and Pythagoras argued that the circle was the perfect form, since it could encompass all other shapes (Burnet, p.294). Plato extrapolated from these earlier doctrines his notion of a spherical cosmos, rotating evenly on its axis (Laws 893, 33b, 34a). Similarly, Aristotle in Physics (264, b27) argued that infinity could best be defined as circular, since motion other than that of a complete circle cannot be continuous, for it does not join the end to the beginning. Thus, the circle became emblematic of perfection, eternity, and—especially for later thinkers like Dionysius, Boethius, Aquinas, and Pascal who adapted Aristotelian ideas for their specifically Christian theories of the cosmos—of Divinity.

The positive symbolic tradition also associated the wheel with the individual soul's salvation through escape from history to transcendent union with God or the Self. This is evidenced in devotional iconography: the prayer-wheel of Tibetan Buddhism, the elaborate mandala patterns of Tantric Hinduism and Buddhism, and the rosary-chain of Roman Catholicism. Such icons sought to focus the mind upon the unity of the circle, rather than its multiplicity, and although they acknowledged the importance of the circumference, their aim was to draw the mind to the centre of the circle, where the heart of the Law or the Logos was found. T.E. Hulme expresses this notion in the passage cited above (Speculations, p.34):

The effect of this necessary preparation is to force the mind back on the centre, by the closing of all the roads on the plane...the result is...an infinite straight line perpendicular to the plane.

In the first chorus to The Rock, written the year before Burnt Norton, Eliot explored the perennial symbolism of the wheel. He had done so before in 'The Burial of the Dead', with Mme Sosotris' vision of 'crowds of people, walking round in a ring', but here he points towards a resolution to be found in the discovery of the Word (CPP, p.147):

The Eagle soars in the summit of Heaven,
The Hunter with his dogs pursues his circuit.
O perpetual revolution of configured stars,
O perpetual recurrence of determined seasons,
O world of spring and autumn, birth and dying!
The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;

27 The primary motion of Love, he claimed, is circular, whereas that of Strife is straight; see Lynn Ballew Straight and Circular: A Study of Imagery in Greek Philosophy (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1979), p.59.
28 See Chapter 5, p.110.
29 The original manuscripts of The Waste Land contain an even more explicit use of the symbolism: 'London, your people is bound upon the wheel'; see Facs, p.31.
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word . . . .
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from GOD and nearer to the Dust.

Burnt Norton II continues this exploration (at times alluding directly to this earlier passage), examining the symbolic associations of the centre of the circle first through the image of the axle-tree and then through the image of the ‘still point’.

III The Axle-tree

In the second section of Burnt Norton Eliot pictures the universe as a wheel spinning upon ‘the bedded axle-tree’. The ‘axle-tree’ (literally ‘a wooden axle’) was a common Elizabethan term for the mechanism on which the universe turns; however, the idea of an axis mundi, a pivot which extends vertically from the pole star through the earth to some undefined point in the abyss, is an ancient one, and was common to many early theories of the cosmos.30 Aristotle and Plato, like many of the pre–Socratic philosophers, located the earth in the centre of the spinning universe, and expounded the geocentric model of the heavens which was codified by Ptolemy.31 Other theories, such as the Pythagorean notion of the central Fire, or the heliocentric system of Copernicus, did not alter the basic circular imagery. Traditional art and mythology—especially that of the East—represented the axis mundi variously as a mountain, a stairway, a ladder, or a pole. The most common symbol for the axle of the cosmos, however, was the tree.32

Trees, because of their shape, height and strength, have traditionally symbolized wholeness of life.33 Eliot would have been familiar with Yggdrasil, the mythological ‘world–tree’ of the Old Norse The Poetic Edda, which connects heaven, earth and hell. A similar axis–tree is described in the Bhagavad–Gita; it is the inverted asvattha tree, the fig–tree of Transmigration (or ‘flux’) (Chapter 15, 1–3; Zaehner, pp.309–10):

With roots above and boughs beneath,
They say, the undying fig tree stands: . . .

Below, above, its branches straggle out,
Well nourished by the constituents; sense–objects are it twigs.
Below, its roots proliferate
Inseparably linked with works in the world of men.

No form of it can here be comprehended,
No end and no beginning, no sure abiding-place:

30 Mircea Eliade, in the opening chapter of Images and Symbols (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), gives a concise account of the axis mundi in world mythology. Subsequent references to this work will be included in the text.
31 Aristotle, De Caelo, II, 14; Plato, Republic, 616–17.
32 Joseph Campbell, The Mythic Image, pp.190–96. Subsequent references will be included in the text.
This fig-tree with its roots so fatly nourished—
Take the stout axe of detachment and cut it down!  

The wise man is exhorted to free himself from the branches and to find refuge with ‘that Primeval Person/ From whom flowed forth primordial creativity’ (ch.15, 4; p.310).

In the *Kāṭha Upaniṣad* (6. 1) the root is explicitly identified as Brahma and as the axial point of the universe (*Hume*, p.358):

Its root is above, its branches below—
This eternal fig-tree!
That (root) indeed is the Pure. That is Brahma.
That indeed is called the Immortal.
On it all the worlds do rest,
And no one soever goes beyond it.  

Also, according to Eastern myth, Buddha is said to have received enlightenment and opened to mankind the way of release from desire and fear under the *Bodhi* tree, the ‘Tree of Wisdom’ or ‘Tree of the Waking to Omniscience’.  

The obvious parallel is with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life in Biblical myth. In both traditions humanity is exiled from the Tree and seeks to regain the central perspective it offered. In Christian doctrine this is achieved through Christ’s sacrificial death on the Cross (often referred to as ‘the Tree’), through which humankind may receive Atonement, or reunion (‘at-one-ment’) with its Creator. According to apocryphal tradition the city of Jerusalem was built upon the original site of the Garden of Eden. Moreover, Christ was crucified on a hill named Calvary, or, in Greek, *Golgotha*, ‘the place of the skull’, so called because it was believed to be the burial place of Adam’s skull. Thus ‘Christ’s blood baptized the patriarch and “head” of the whole human race and thereby redeemed mankind by driving an axis backward to the dawn of time as well as forward to the promise of an end’ (Campbell, p.207).

Although Eliot was obviously conscious of the whole tradition of the *axis mundi*, his specific allusion in *Burnt Norton* II is to a Jacobean source, Chapman’s *Bussy D’Ambois*. Eliot commented thrice upon the following passage from Act V, iii, 149–53:

Fly where the evening from the Iberian vales
Takes on her swarthy shoulders Hecate

---

34 The confusion with respect to the position of the roots is acknowledged by numerous translators and commentators.
35 Plato, in the *Timaeus* 90A, speaks of the divine part of the soul as being like a plant whose roots are not in earth but in the heavens where it first came into being and to which it is drawn by its memory of its pre-existent bliss. A similar inverted ‘world–tree’ appears in Jan van Ruysbroeck’s *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage*, tr. Dom C.A. Wyncshek (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1916; reissued, London: John Watkins, 1951), p.47.
36 Campbell, p.195. In some Buddhist art the seat of Buddha under the tree is described as the Immovable Spot.
37 Eliade, pp.161–62. Eliot may have been familiar with the revolving cross in the anonymous early English poem ‘The Dream of the Rood’.
Crowned with a grove of oaks; fly where men feel
The burning axle-tree, and those that suffer
Beneath the chariot of the snowy Bear.

At this point in the play Bussy is mortally wounded and apostrophizes to his ‘fame’ to ‘live in
despite of murder’ and spread his memory throughout the globe. In ‘Reflections on Contempo­
rary Poetry’ (The Egoist, July 1919) Eliot identified Chapman’s source in Seneca’s Hercules
Furens and cited the allusion as an example of the ‘saturation which sometimes combusts
spontaneously into originality’ (Eliot’s emphasis) when a poet has achieved an ‘intimacy’
with the dead masters of his tradition.38 In ‘Seneca in Elizabethan Translation’ (1927, SE,
p.74), Eliot again cited Hercules Furens as a source for the image of the Bear, but it was not
until the ‘Conclusion’ to The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (p.147) that he pointed
out that Chapman had borrowed the image of the axle-tree from Seneca’s Hercules Oetes
(II.1521–23):39

Declare to th’ Easterlinges whereas the ruddy morne doth ryse,
 Declare unto the Irishmen aloofe at western Skies:
 Make knowne unto the Moores annoyed by flaming axentree.

Eliot explains that the image of the axle-tree had a peculiar fascination for Seneca, Chap­
man and himself; it was an archetypal image which played a seminal role in the imagination
of each man (UPUC, pp.147–48):

There is first the probability that this imagery had some personal saturation value,
so to speak, for Seneca; another for Chapman, and another for myself, who have
borrowed it twice from Chapman. I suggest that what gives it such intensity as it
has in each case is its saturation—I will not say with ‘associations’, . . . —but
with feelings too obscure for the authors even to know quite what they were.40

The obscurity of the feelings Eliot himself associated with the axe-tree is illustrated in
the infamously cryptic images of the opening lines of Burnt Norton II:

Garlic and sapphires in the mud
Clot the bedded axle-tree.

38 The Egoist, 6, no.3 (July 1919), 39–40 (p.39).
39 The translation is Thomas Newton’s (1581), Seneca: His Tenne Tragedies, 2 vols (London: Constable, 1927),
II, p.243. (‘Seneca in Elizabethan Translation’ was originally the introduction to this edition.) It is interesting
to note that it is in Hercules Oetes that Seneca deals with the death of Hercules, another theme to which Eliot
referred in Four Quartets (Little Gidding IV). The lines Eliot quotes are spoken by the chorus as an apostrophe
to the sun to hide its rays behind clouds; it is delivered after Hercules has gone out towards the pyre which has
been prepared for him.

40 Eliot borrowed Chapman’s imagery in ‘Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar’ (‘The horses, under
the axle-tree/ Beat up the dawn from Istria/ With even feet’), and in ‘Gerontion’ (‘whirled/ Beyond the circuit
of the shuddering Bear’). The obscurity of the feelings surrounding the images is reinforced by the uncertainty
with respect to what Chapman actually meant by the ‘burning axle-tree’. According to most commentators,
he refers to the equator, the line where the sun comes nearest to the earth. This could not then be the axis of
the heavens which turn (apparently) from East to West. However, Robert J. Lordi reads the phrase as a reference
Various sources—in Mallarmé and Shakespeare, for instance—have been suggested, and possible interpretations debated. There is general agreement, however, that the poet is referring to the obstruction to the smooth turning of the wheel by elements of discord. A previously unnoted allusion, however, links Eliot’s axle-tree to the heart of Eastern philosophy and points forward to the image of the still point.

One of the most important concepts in Hindu philosophy is duḥkha, or universal suffering. The word duḥkha is derived from du, ‘unpleasant’, and kha, the axle-hole in a wheel, and suggests the grating of a wheel that does not move well. Duḥkha connotes the constant unpleasantness and pain which is the natural condition of all of the physical world. In the same way, Eliot’s axle-tree is the pivot upon which the created order turns, yet it does not intimate any kind of release from the wheel. The system which it governs will neither heal the ‘inveterate scars’ nor save the boar from the boarhound.

Nor would simply a smooth turning of the wheel achieve release. According to Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, those who pursue the false goal of sukha—well-moving, or contentment through pleasure and happiness—reap no less a harvest of disappointment and pain. Like Heraclitus’ fire, the axle-tree is merely the animating force of the physical world, the principle which maintains the harmonious tension of opposite forces; it is not in itself the harmony. The harmony will be achieved only when we discern the Logos within the fire, and the still point within the axle-tree.

IV  The Still Point

It is to this resolution that Eliot turns in the second section of Burnt Norton II. As the opening passage of the first movement, which expounded the inescapable circularity of unredeemed time, is answered by the mystical vision in the rose-garden, so the spinning of the axle-tree is transcended by the experience of the motionless hub:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline.

Eliot had used the image of the still point on four previous occasions: in ‘Triumphal March’ (‘hidden... under the running water /At the still point of the turning world. O hidden’) where the image speaks of the retreat from the world of the city to the tranquility of the contemplative life; with specific reference to the notion of the Logos in Ash Wednesday V and Chorus I from The Rock (both passages are quoted above, p.156), and in Murder in the Cathedral, where the image draws together a series of paradoxes concerning the individual’s free participation in God’s pre-ordained plan (the passage is also quoted above, p.162). On each of these occasions, the image is used to imply what is made explicit in Burnt Norton: a release from the ensnarement of the wheel of life.  

41 These sources are dealt with in the notes to Burnt Norton in Appendix I, section II.
43 In using the image, Eliot may have been privately censuring Aldous Huxley for his treatment of the still point in his poem ‘The Burning Wheel’. Huxley’s poem—which is reproduced in full in the notes to Burnt Norton
Throughout the major cultural and iconographic traditions the image of the hub of a turning wheel, at which point movement and stillness paradoxically co-exist, has been a standard symbol of resolution and unity. It has counterbalanced the negative symbolism of the wheel with its despairing vision of impermanence and suffering, and has been axiomatic to the optimistic strain of circular imagery. Where the circumference connoted the Many, and the rotating axle-tree the way towards the One, the centre connoted the full possession of the One, from which perspective multiplicity and singularity were united. In the words of Dionysius:

> in a centre, all the lines of the circle coexist within one union, and the point holds all the straight lines in itself, uniformly united, both to each other, and to the one source from which they proceeded, and in the centre itself they are completely united.

In the West, the culmination and locus classicus of this tradition is Dante’s Paradiso, and Eliot’s debt to its concept of the Divine Centre in Four Quartets is indisputable. Even so, Eliot could hardly have been ignorant of the vast network of mathematical, philosophical and religious thought which had provided Dante with such a versatile image for cosmic ultimacy.

The still point is fundamentally a mathematical concept arising out of the distinction between the abstract mathematical point, which has position but no dimension, and the material point, which has both position and dimension. The mathematical point at the centre of a turning circle remains perfectly still; it does not even rotate with the movement of the points around it.

Not surprisingly, the centre of the circle came to symbolize the pivotal point of the rotating universe in which all contrary forces are resolved into stasis. For early thinkers, who frequently ranged over the entire field of knowledge from astronomy and physics, to psychology and theology, it represented ‘the way or place of passage from motion to rest, time to eternity, separation to union; but then also, conversely, rest to motion, eternity to time, unity to multiplicity’ (Campbell, p.194). One of the earliest applications of the still point is found in ancient Chinese philosophy. Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, expresses in the Tao–Te–Ching, Chapter 11:

> This, of course, is totally incompatible with Eliot’s concept of the still point.

---

44 The Divine Names, V, 6; Parker, I, p.78.
45 The distinction was enunciated by Aristotle in Physics, II, 2, 193b and was fundamental to the study of ‘pure’ mathematics—that practised by Euclid, for instance.
46 This paradoxical continuity and discontinuity is the perfect image for Eliot’s moments which exist ‘outside of time’ but which nevertheless occur at a definite point ‘in time’.
47 Eliot appears to have been introduced to Chinese thought by Irving Babbitt and Ezra Pound (SE, p.474; UPUC, p.132). The latter, especially, translated a number of the works of Confucius and included Chinese ideograms in many of his poems. Of particular note is the Chieng Jhung, or ‘The Doctrine of the Mean’, which Pound published in 1947—eighteen years after he had hoped—as The Unwobbling Pivot (or, in his Italian version, ‘L’asse [axis] che non vacilla’). See Noel Stock, The Life of Ezra Pound (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp.269, 424.
We put thirty spokes together and call it a wheel; but it is on the space where there is nothing that the utility of the wheel depends . . . . Therefore just as we take advantage of what is, we should recognize the utility of what is not.

Taoist doctrine holds that although the tao, or the Way (sometimes referred to as the One) is responsible for the whole of the created order, it cannot be defined positively in terms of that order. The truest indicator of the nature of the tao is the system of contradictions inherent in creation. It is in the simultaneity and interdependence of contrary principles—in which ultimately the Something and the Nothing are held together—that the tao is to be found.49

Eliot's attention may have been drawn to Lao Tzu's 'hub' by the German theologian Karl Barth, who quoted the passage in his The Epistle to the Romans (1919), a book which took the Christian world by storm, and with which Eliot was almost certainly familiar in Sir Edwyn Hoskyns' 1933 translation.50 Barth's explanatory comments seem relevant to Eliot's treatment of the image:51

May the cavity at the cart-wheel's centre which Lao-Tse perceived long ago, be delimited by a ring of questions! In that central void the answer to our questioning is hidden, but since the void is defined by questions, they must never for one moment cease.

Whereas in Taoist thought the still point expressed a metaphysical concept, in Indian culture it finds a specifically religious application. The image of the hub, or bindu, appears in the Rig Veda (among the earliest known works of literature) in a hymn to the god Varuna, 'in whom all wisdom centres, as the nave is set within the wheel'.52 In the Vedantic writings, especially the Upanisads, the image is used several times to represent key life-principles. The Praśna Upaniṣad, for instance, declares (2. 6; Hume, p.381):

Like the spokes on the hub of a wheel
Everything is established on Life.53

And in the Mūndaka Upaniṣad (2. 2. 6.; Hume, p.373):

Where the channels [of the body] are brought together
Like the spokes in the hub of a wheel—
Therein [Life] moves about,
Becoming manifold.

49 The doctrine of the tao is similar to the Heraclitean concept of the Logos in this respect.

50 Eliot and Barth both contributed essays to a volume of studies on the doctrine of the Incarnation, entitled Revelation, which was published in 1937. Taking into account the period of time needed to compile such a volume and the added factor that each of the contributors was allowed to view the work of the others and to alter his own contribution if he wished, it is likely that Barth had come to Eliot's attention by the time he wrote Burnt Norton. Indeed it is unlikely that Eliot was unacquainted with the work of a major figure in contemporary theology like Barth. See Ian Glenn, 'Karl Barth and T.S. Eliot', Standpunkte, 35, no.157[1](Feb. 1982), 35–42. In a letter to the writer, Dr Glenn noted that Eliot shared a personal acquaintance with Sir Edwin Hoskyns.


53 The word translated 'life' is prāṇa, which means 'breath.'
Here, as in the *Tao-te-ching*, the image expresses a paradox: the body is animated by air, the void by Nothing.

In its highest application the image of the hub is used of the human soul, the ātmā, and finally of the World Soul, Brahman. As was noted in Chapter 5 (p.111), the mystic fusion of the ātmā with Brahman was often represented as a journey to the centre of the *mandala*, a tradition which Eliot seems to have been aware of when writing *Burnt Norton* I. In Indian philosophy, the still point ultimately represents the all-embracing harmony of opposing forces achieved when the conscious and unconscious life of an individual is centred upon the Divine Centre. The motionless hub of the universe is ultimately contained within the perfected human soul.

In the West, the image of the ‘central void’ or ‘still point’ follows a similar pattern of development. It began as a mathematical and scientific model, and was gradually adopted by metaphysics and religion, although it did not occur widely in this context until Plotinus, writing in the third century A.D. Several early theories of cosmology posited a spherical or disc-shaped universe rotating evenly about its centre, although there was little agreement as to the nature of that central point. The Pythagoreans posited a Fire at the mid-point of the universe, the ‘binding-force and measure of Nature’, about which the earth, the sun and the other planets and stars spun. Several early philosophers—among them the Atomists, Leucippus and Democritus—entertained the notion that the earth was a still point formed from the concentration of matter at the centre of the cosmic vortex (Burnet, p.346.) The cosmology of the monist school of Parmenides and Zeno, on the other hand, envisaged a solid, unmoving mass at the centre of the cosmos. This was not ‘the still point of the turning world’, however, for they dismissed the possibility of any movement on the grounds that the notion of a vacuum—an empty ‘space’ into which an object might move—was illogical.

Plato answered the Eleatic arguments against movement by affirming axial rotation as the primary form of motion (*Laws*, 898a). When a top spins upon its axis, he noted in *The Republic* (436), it is simultaneously in motion and at rest. Later in *The Republic* (617b) he adapted the image of the top to describe the celestial spindle, the revolution of the cosmos on its axis. The various circles of the whorl (the orbits of the planets and stars) decrease in speed as they approach their still centre, the earth.

Aristotle, too, held the rotation of a sphere to be the epitome of movement. When a sphere revolves upon its axis, he explained, it remains, in a sense, at rest, since its centre is still, and yet is simultaneously the starting-, mid- and end-point of the movement (*Physics*, VIII, 9, 265a–266a). This was best illustrated, he said, by the circling of the heavens around the motionless earth. Aristotle completed his cosmology with his celebrated doctrine of the *Prime Mobile*, or Unmoved Mover, in which he posited as the source of all movement a substance without magnitude, dimension or parts, which initiates the rotation of the cosmos from a point on the periphery of the universal sphere via an axis which passes through its exact centre (*Physics*, VIII, 10, 267). Aristotle did not, at this point, attempt to define the Unmoved

---

54In Sir Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia*, the Buddha contrasts the ensnarement of the wheel to ‘The Heart of Being’ which ‘is celestial rest’ (p.267).

55Burnet, pp.296–99. This central Fire was apparently in opposition to the Pythagorean Void, whose function was to keep things apart and to allow movement (Burnet, pp.109, 179). Heraclitus, as we have seen, also held Fire to be the primary force but entertained no concept of a still centre as a spatial image either for Fire, or for his harmonizing life-principle, the Logos.
Mover.\textsuperscript{56} In *Metaphysics*, however, he identified the motive principle more specifically, although still tentatively. 'The final cause', he said, 'produces motion as being loved'.\textsuperscript{57} Motion is thus associated with love, the reflexive response of matter to the perfection of the *Primum Mobile*.

For almost all of the classical Greek philosophers, the order of the cosmos was reflected in human psychology and ethics, providing a macrocosmic diagram for individual psychic wholeness. In *De Anima* I, 2, 406b–408b, Aristotle describes Plato's account in the *Timaeus* of the revolutions within the soul which mimic those of the heavens.\textsuperscript{58} Aristotle discounts the literal nature of the theories—the soul cannot be said truly to 'revolve', he says—but in his own theory of the soul he uses the image of the centre of a turning wheel which he describes as the energizing point of the body (*De Anima*, III, 10, 433b, 27). In his ethical theory too he declares that the noblest human activity is an imitation of the Unmoved Mover's perfect stasis. As Lynn Ballew notes (p.132):

> Both Plato and Aristotle . . . in their concern that the world should be intelligently ordered, attribute the highest degree of reality to what does not move, the lowest . . . to that which is characterized by rectilinear motion, and an intermediate degree of reality to what moves in a circle.

Through their theories of movement, Plato and Aristotle brought ancient Greek cosmology to maturity. Indeed, the Platonic–Aristotelian understanding of the cosmos, as codified by Ptolemy, was not significantly altered for the next two millenia. The principle of cosmic motion which informs Dante's *Commedia* (and through it Eliot's *Quartets*) is largely theirs, and the metaphysical and theological principles which influenced the Italian poet are largely those formulated by later thinkers upon an Aristotelian or Platonic basis. Both, we shall see, focus upon the image of the still centre of the circle.

Various expansions and embellishments were made to the traditional imagery of the still point during the first Christian millennium. These were primarily philosophical and theological applications. Boethius used the image of the centre of the circle, with its all–encompassing 'simplicity' as an analogue of the relationship between time and eternity, and between fate and providence (*The Consolations of Philosophy*, IV, 6); and Augustine described God himself as 'the supreme hub of causes' (*summus causarum cardo: De Trinitate* III, 9, 16).\textsuperscript{59} However, no exponents of the still point as a metaphysical symbol were as influential as Plotinus and his Christian interpreter Dionysius.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{56} Later, however, in *De Caelo* I, 9, 279a, he commented that any beings which exist outside of the heavens would possess perfect happiness since they would not be subject to place, time, or change. Indeed, he remarked, it is by dependence upon this unmodified realm that other things have their existence.


\textsuperscript{58} Plato also links circular motion to reason in *Laws* 897c.


\textsuperscript{60} Various traditions peripheral to Western thought, but possibly known to Eliot, used the image also. The intersection of worlds in a minute point is celebrated by the Sufi poet Shabistari in *The Mystic Rose Garden*:

> On that cheek the point of His mole is single,
> It is a centre which is the basis of the circling circumference.
Plotinus claimed circular imagery to expound his heavily mystical brand of Platonism. Circular images abound in his metaphysical treatises, as the noted Plotinian scholar, Dean Inge, explains:61

Plotinus assumes that the sublime reconciliation of change and permanence, which is found in the spiritual world, must have its reflexion in the phenomenal world. No better symbol of this rest-in-motion could be found than a body revolving around a fixed centre.

Plotinus’ account of the movement of the heavens in Enneads, II, 2, illustrates the degree to which his mode of thought was infused with circular imagery (and the degree to which he held the sensible world a mere reflection of Reality). The celestial bodies, he says, rotate upon their axes, and move in a circle as an imitation of the Intellect, the invisible realm of forms from which all visible substances emanated. In turn, the Intellect itself circles the One (the Good) from which it emanated. Similarly, each living body moves around its own centre, the soul, and each soul circles lovingly around its Divine source (II, 2, 2).

The image of the central point is used frequently of the eternal One, and of the relation between It and individual souls (Enneads, V, 1, 11):62

thus a centre is an independent unity; everything within the circle has its term at the centre; and to the centre the radii bring each of their own. Within our nature is such a centre by which we grasp and are linked and held; and those of us are firmly in the Supreme whose being is concentrated There.

What Dante inherited, then, was a cosmology whose perceived regular structure was in perfect harmony with a superstructure of religious and mystical symbolism. The focus of both—as it were the point of intersection between the human sphere and the Divine—was the still centre, and it is not surprising that Dante found this multifaceted image—complex to be the most appropriate for his synoptic view of creation and its creator. Though mediated through Ptolemy and Aquinas and embellished with elements of Dante’s allegory, the cosmos of the Commedia is essentially that of Aristotle—a system of concentric spheres rotated from a motionless axial point in the Primum Mobile. Thus, in his ascent of the Mount of Purgatory From that centre is drawn the circle of the two worlds, From that centre Adam’s heart and soul [issued].

The translation is by E.H. Whinfield, The Mystic Rose Garden, Iran Pakistan Institute of Persian Studies (Samanabad, Lahore: Islamic Book Foundation, 1880), p.77. Kabbalistic cosmology also focussed upon the positive manifestation of light at the centre of the spherical negative void. See A Kabbalistic Universe, Z’er ben Shimon Halevi, (London: Rider & Co., 1977), pp.10–11. Ironically, it was this particular use of the still point which inspired Eliot’s first (disapproving) comment upon the image. In ‘The Development of Leibniz’s Monadism’ (published in The Monist in 1916) Eliot noted that Leibniz was struck in 1687 by finding in the Jewish Kabbala the theory that the universe is an ‘emanation from an infinite being which consists in an indivisible point’. Eliot described this as an illustration of Leibniz’ ‘insatiable curiosity toward every sort of theological hocus–pocus’ (KE p.179).

61 W.R. Inge, The Philosophy of Plotinus, third edition, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1941), I, p.188. Eliot was familiar with Dean Inge’s work through his reading in mysticism at Harvard (see Gordon, Appendix I, p.141).

62 The translation is Stephen MacKenna’s, Plotinus: ‘The Enneads’, second edition, revised by B.S. Page (London: Faber & Faber, 1956), p.379. See also IV, 2, 1; and VI, 8, 18.
(Purgatorio, VIII, ll.85–87) Dante catches his first glimpse of the point in heaven, ‘where the stars are slowest, like a wheel nearest the axle’. Later, in the Paradiso, as he passes through the circling spheres of heaven, Dante’s attention is drawn again and again to that point. In canto XIII, ll.11–12, for instance, he refers to ‘the axle round which the primal circling goeth’, and in canto XVII, l.17, he perceives God as a point of light ‘whereto all times are present’.

When finally Dante reaches the Primum Mobile, Beatrice explains its function to Dante in words which recall Aristotle’s tentative account of the Divine first cause (XXVII, ll.106–114):63

The nature of the universe which stilleth the centre and moveth all the rest around, hence doth begin as from its starting point. And this heaven hath no other where than the divine mind wherein is kindled the love which rolleth it and the power which it sheddeth. Light and love grasp it in one circle, as doth it the others, and this engirdment he only who doth gird it understandeth.

Dante sees the Light of God as an infinitessimal yet dazzling point (XXVIII, ll.16–18, 40–42):

a point I saw which rayed forth light so keen, needs must be the vision that it flameth on be closed because of its strong poignancy . . . My lady, who beheld me in toil of deep suspense, said, ‘From that point doth hang the heaven and all nature’.64

In the following canto Beatrice contemplates the point herself, and then unfolds the mystery of God’s creative purpose (XXIX, ll.7–21):

so long, with a smile traced on her countenance, did Beatrice hold her peace, gazing fixedly on the point which had o’ermastered me; then she began: ‘I tell, not ask, that which thou fain wouldst hear; for I have seen it where every where and every when is focussed. Not to have gain of any good unto himself, which may not be, but that his splendour might, as it glowed, declare, I am. In his eternity beyond time, beyond all other comprehension, as was his pleasure, the eternal love revealed him into new loves.

At this point in Dante’s narrative, the Aristotelian notion of the still point, which culminated in the recognition of Love as the motive force of the universe, is, as it were, fulfilled. In the cantos that follow, Dante leaves creation and enters the Empyrean, the realm of the Divine Mind, where accordingly it is the mystical aspect of the still point, that described by Plotinus

63 Dante had made previous use of this idea in La Vita Nuova, XII, where the God of Love says to Dante: ‘Ego tamquam centrum circuli, cui similis modo se habent circumferencia partes; tu autem non sic’ (‘I am like the centre of a circle, to which the parts of the circumference are related in similar manner; you, however, are not’). The translation is Thomas Okey’s, The Temple Classics (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1906; rpt. with alterations, 1911), p.31).

64 Meister Eckhart, the German mystic, also describes the world as a circle centered upon God: ‘This is the circle that the soul runs round, all that the Holy Trinity hath ever wrought . . . When I found it ever endless, then I cast myself into the centre of the round . . . That point is the power of the Trinity’ (Quoted by Ananda Coomaraswamy in Time and Eternity (Ascona, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae, 1947), p.118). The Sufi poet Jami expresses this notion in similar terms: ‘The vast orb of Heaven, with its myriad incomings and outgoings, was concealed in a single point’ (F.C. Happold, Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology, p.252).
and the other contemplatives, which comes to the fore. As *Paradiso* XXX begins, Dante is contemplating the Divine Point and the rings of angels which circle it. Beatrice, transfigured by celestial beauty, explains that they are entering ‘the heaven which is pure light’ (XXX, 1.39). Suddenly, Dante is swathed in light, and watches as the Divine Point is transformed first into a river of light (in which he bathes his eyes as preparation for the vision to follow), and then into a vast circular sea of light whose ‘circumference would be too loose a girdle for the sun’ (II.104-05). This is the primal Light in which God is manifested to creation. Dante’s imagery here recalls the Plotinian notion of God as a single unified Point which enlarges Itself concentrically and infinitely into a circle which encompasses all creation. That Point, Plotinus says, is ‘the father of the circle’ (κύκλον ... πατέρα; *Enneads*, VI, 8, 18).

Dante then sees that the sea of light is in fact the base of the Celestial Rose, and after St Bernard has acquainted him with the saints who are arranged in the petals of the rose, he prays to the Virgin for Dante to receive the Beatific Vision of God. Now Dante gazes into the very centre of the Supreme Light (XXXIII, II.85–90):

Within its depths I saw ingathered, bound by love in one volume, the scattered leaves of all the universe; substance and accidents and their relations, as though together fused, after such fashion that what I tell of is one simple flame.

This first part of Dante’s vision reveals the ‘simple flame’ (or ‘light’, *lume*), the One in which all the multiplicity of the universe is contained. For Dante, as for Plotinus and the exponents of the mystical doctrine of the ‘synteresis’, the Divine centre is not simply the pivot around which all things turn; it is also the point where all events, past and future, and all ‘substances and accidents and their relations’ converge and are united in the perfect consciousness of God. In the second part of his vision, Dante is shown the paradoxical plurality of the Divine One in the three persons of the Trinity, a notion which is of course a radical departure from Plotinus (XXXIII, II.115–17): ‘In the profound and shining being of the deep light appeared to me three circles, of three colours and one magnitude’. It is the second circle, however, upon which Dante’s gaze is rivetted, for in it he sees a human image, Christ. It is the mystery of the Incarnation that the God who encompasses all has placed at the centre of the universe a human being, who is, in Pascal’s phrase, ‘the end of all, the centre to which all tends’. Like Augustine before him, it is when Dante affirms this central Christian doctrine that he parts company with Neo-Platonism.

---

65 Dante’s principal exposure to Plotinian thought was second-hand, through writers like Augustine, Boethius, Aquinas, and Johannes Scotus Eriigena. It was Dionysius, however, who provided much of the Neo-Platonic influence in the *Commedia*; Dante’s Paradise owes its structure to Dionysius’ theory of the angelic hierarchies, which was derived from the Plotinian notion of emanation from the One. See E.G. Gardner, *Dante and the Mystics* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1913), pp.81–87.

66 The same imagery appears in the work of Dame Juliana of Norwich, who was also influenced by Neo-Platonism through Dionysius. She writes (*Revelations*, ch.11; Warrack, pp.26–27):

And after this I saw God in a Point: . . . by which sight I saw that He is in all things . . . . For in this time the working of creatures was not shewed, but [the working] of our Lord God in the creature: for He is in the Mid–point of all thing, and all He doeth.

67 *Pensees*, no.555; Trotter, p.153. Pascal also utilizes the notions of the infinite sphere and the indivisible point, which inspire that awe in the imagination which ‘is the greatest sensible mark of the almighty power of God’ (no.72, p.16).
Dante strives to understand how this union of Divine and human could be, how the centre of the circle could be one with the circumference which emanated from it. At this point a ray of divine light floods his mind with the incommunicable truth which brings him to a state of rest, like the Plotinian soul which has reached the Divine Point, ‘rolled—even as a wheel that moveth equally—by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars’ (XXXIII, II.144–45).

When in *Burnt Norton* II Eliot resolves his image of the axle-tree in the midst of the wheel of existence into ‘the still point of the turning world’, he is invoking the key term of an ancient symbolic system, and in particular the source which was for him the apex of that tradition, the final cantos of Dante’s *Paradiso*—‘the highest point that poetry has ever reached’. Yet Dante’s beatific vision is a much more sustained and satisfying experience than Eliot’s fleeting ‘moment in the rose-garden’, and the rest of *Burnt Norton* and the three quartets which followed it describe the attempt to recover the fleeting intimation of the still point.

*Burnt Norton* III is set in a world of incessant activity whose ‘slow rotation’ merely ‘suggests’ permanence; and in Part IV the poet begins to doubt whether the experience of the still point can survive that of human mortality. Hope is re-established in the final section, however, when the poet perceives the possibility of an approach to stillness through studying the pattern of life. This does not restore the still point of mystic vision, but it does affirm the natural wisdom which led Aristotle towards an understanding of the paradoxical nature of God:

> Love is itself unmoving,
> Only the cause and end of movement.

Similarly, in both *East Coker* and *The Dry Salvages* the poet is haunted by a sense of alienation from the still point, which is mitigated by the tentative affirmations of the final movements of each poem. The circularity of life dominates the vision of *East Coker*, but out of the despair of entropy the poet asserts our need to be paradoxically ‘still and still moving’. The images which offer to redeem *The Dry Salvages* from servitude to the flux at the circumference of life are even more positive. Here the poet is led finally to consider the Incarnation, the ‘point of intersection’, where ‘spheres of existence’ are united, and movement reconciled into an ‘impossible’ actuality.

It is this ‘actuality’, impossible though it may seem, which is explored in *Little Gidding*. The still point, the ‘point of intersection’, is available as a continuing experience in a number of places ‘where prayer has been valid’. The poet in *Little Gidding* achieves something of Dante’s final assurance as he learns to perceive this ‘point’ in the pattern of history, in present suffering, and ultimately in the hope of an eventual manifestation of cosmic unity, when opposite forces, ‘the fire and the rose’, shall be made one.

## V The Dance

A perception of order in the universe gives to the whole of creation, from plants and animals to stars and planets, a sense of special purpose and harmony. No movement, however great or small, can be said to be fortuitous; rather, each occurs according to unseen rules and contributes to the universal pattern which, to sublunary minds, is imponderable. The most common image with which this co-ordinated activity is associated in *Four Quartets* is that of the dance. Dance is significant movement; it is the outworking and expression of a cosmic principle in time, space and matter. This is the case whether that principle connotes spiritual or purely mundane
truths; whether it declares the eternal meaning of human life, or its futility. Both principles are represented in *Four Quartets* and both are expressed in images of dance.

The first allusion to dance is found in *Burnt Norton* I, when, in the vision of the rose-garden, the poet finds himself moving 'in a formal pattern' with the mysterious 'they'. This dignified movement forms a part of the preliminary perception of mystic vision, and has about it the sense of a semi-voluntary ritual like that of religious ceremony. Eliot had noted the similarity between liturgy and dance in an essay entitled, 'The Ballet'; 'is not the High Mass', he wrote, 'one of the highest developments of dancing?'

The ethereal dance-steps of the mystical vision are immediately set off in *Burnt Norton* II by the circling of the natural world around the axle-tree, in what Eliot calls 'The dance along the artery'. This dance is in itself quite involuntary, and its significance is obscured in ambiguity. It appeases 'long forgotten wars', yet cannot heal 'inveterate scars'. As the poem progresses, Eliot will explore this ambivalence in the dance of nature, observing it as it is informed by two very different kinds of consciousness.

The first of these perspectives views the moving cosmos as a celebratory dance around 'the still point of the turning world':

\[\text{at the still point, there the dance is,}\\\text{But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,}\\\text{Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,}\\\text{Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,}\\\text{There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.}\]

Eliot could not have been unaware of the numerous literary sources which his imagery suggests. Most prominent among these, given the unmistakable presence of Dante behind the image of the still point, is the celestial dance in the *Paradiso*. As Dante is guided through the spheres of Heaven he hears constantly the beautiful music created by the movement of the heavenly bodies, and is treated again and again to displays of dancing stars and lights. His final vision is of the Divine Point around which first nine rings of angels, and then all the Universe dances. The movement of all things, he discovers, is guided and inspired by Love, since all movement springs from the longing of created things to return to a state of union with God.

Dante's dance-imagery echoes earlier usages, especially those found in mystical writings from the Christian Neo-Platonist tradition. In *Mysticism* Evelyn Underhill quotes from Plotinus' *Enneads* VI, 9, what was perhaps a source-passage for this tradition (p.281):

\[\text{as a chorus about its choragus, so do we all perpetually revolve about the Principle of all Things . . . . But when we do behold Him, then we obtain the end of our wishes, and rest. Then also we are no longer discordant, but form a truly divine}\]

---

68 *The Criterion*, 3, no.11(Apr. 1925), 441–43 (p.441). Eliot’s allusion to the Mass with his elaborate pun on the elevation of the lotus (see Chapter 4, p.87) strengthens the parallel between *Burnt Norton* I and the liturgical dance.

69 Eliot also argues in the article cited above that anyone who would understand dance ‘should track down the secrets of rhythm in the (still undeveloped) science of neurology’ (p.442).

70 See, for example, *Paradiso*, X, II.64–78, where Dante sees souls as lights dancing in a ring. See also VII, I.7; XIII, II.1–24; XXIV, I.17. An example which was possibly in Eliot’s mind already is the dance of lights in canto XII (II.1–30); the dance culminates with a voice which speaks ‘out of the heart of one of the new lights’.
dance about Him; in the which dance the soul beholds the Fountain of life, the Fountain of intellect, the Principle of Being, the cause of good, the root of the soul.

She also quotes a portion of the Gnostic ‘Hymn of Jesus’, in which Christ is pictured as the centre of the dance: ‘I am the Word who did play and dance all things’. ‘Now answer to my dancing’. ‘Understand by dancing what I do’. ‘Who danceth not knoweth not what is being done’. ‘All whose Nature is to dance, doth dance!’ (p.281, n.1).

Eliot was also aware of the Eastern tradition of religious dance-imagery. In Hindu mythology the dance often represents the phenomenal world and the still point the heart of one experiencing a moment of mystical joy through communion with the divine. One example with which Eliot was familiar is the Dance of Śiva, a member of the Hindu Trinity of supreme Gods. One of the manifestations of Śiva is Nāṭarāja, the ‘Lord of the dance’. Nāṭarāja symbolizes the activity of the Divine, and is portrayed as eternally dancing throughout the cosmos. He is, moreover, the source of all movement within the cosmos, and yet paradoxically his dance takes place in Chidambaram which is equally the centre of the universe and the heart of man. The dance is enacted in the world of illusion (māyā), but experienced in its fullness in the stillness and peace of the devotee’s soul.

There are several references to the dance of Śiva in The Criterion. Vasudeo B. Mehta, for instance, in ‘In Defence of the East’, contrasts Indian and Western art:  

> Look at the dancing Śiva of India. It is full of meaning; it is bursting with an exalted message for the soul of man. It symbolizes the triumph of Spirit over Matter, the purification of Man’s Inner Self by right thoughts and right deeds. It is the Flute of the Infinite calling away man from the ephemeral joys of the Finite.

The cosmic dance is also a central metaphor of Sir John Davies’ poem ‘Orchestra’, which Eliot praised in his 1926 article on Davies. Subtitled ‘a poeme on dauncing’, ‘Orchestra’ pictures the Universe as a cosmic dance in which all of creation moves in harmony, governed by the ubiquitous principle of Love. The God of Love creates the dance out of the four elements of the universe (stanza 17):

> Dancing . . . began to bee,  
> When the first seeds whereof the World did spring,  
> The fire, ayre, earth, and water—did agree,  
> By Loue’s perswasion,—Nature’s mighty King,—  
> To leaue their first disordred combating;  
> And in a daunce such measure to observer,  
> As all the world their motion should preserue.

72 In the pages immediately following is a review of Ananda Coomaraswamy’s *The Dance of Śiva*. See also C.T. Thomas, ‘Eliot’s *Burnt Norton*, II, 16–23’, *The Explicator*, 38, no.3 (Spring 1980), 14–15.
73 Davies was in all probability familiar with Dante’s work, and definitely adapted his imagery from sources which Dante also used—Cicero’s *Somnium Scipionis*, for instance.
He arranges the dance, moreover, around an axle-tree (stanza 64, p.185):

Thus when at first Loue had them marshalled,
As earst he did the shapeless masse of things,
He taught them rounds and winding heyes to tread,
And about trees to cast themselues in rings:
As the two Beares, whom the First Mouer flings
With a short turn about heauen's axeltree,
In a round dance for ever wheeling bee.

And, in order to maintain the order of the dance, God enters it at its centre (stanza 31, p.172):

Then did he rarifie the element,
And in the center of the ring appeare;
The beams that from his forehead spreading went,
Begot an horrour, and religious feare
In all soules that round about him weare.

The dance is not an endless cycle, however, nor will its all-embracing harmony become apparent until it is consummated in the completion of 'That great long yeare' of six millenia (stanza 36, p.174):

What if to you these sparkes disordered seeme
As if by chaunce they had bee scattered there?
The gods a solemn measure doe it deeme,
And see a iust proportion euery where,
And know the points whence first their mouings were;
To which first points when all returne againe,
The axel–tree of Heau'n shall break in twaine.

The similarities between Davies' dance and Eliot's may be convincing, but, according to Eliot himself, the immediate suggestion for the image of the dance at the still point came from Charles Williams' novel The Greater Trumps, which was published by Faber

A similar account of the apparent confusion of the celestial dance is given by Milton in Paradise Lost, V, (l.620–24.):

Mystical dance, which yonder starry sphere
Of planets and of fixed in all her wheels
Resembles nearest, mazes intricate,
Eccentric, interwoven, yet regular
Then most, when most irregular they seem,
And in their motions harmony divine
So smooths her charming tones, that God's own ear
Listens delighted.

The link is strengthened by Davies' play on the word 'still' in stanza 52 (p.181)—'And still their daunce begets a murmur sweet,/ And still the murmure with the daunce doth meet'—and also a source in stanza 34 (p.173) for Eliot's play on the words 'world' and 'whirled' in Ash Wednesday, V ('Behold the World, how it is whirled round./ And for it is so whirl'd, is named so').
(presumably under own Eliot's supervision)\textsuperscript{77} in 1932 (Gardner, p.85). The novel is set in a remote country house in England where a group of guests is shown by their host a table upon which a model of the universe is set. What is special about this model is not merely that the heavenly bodies are represented by miniature figurines of the characters of the Tarot pack, but also that the model actually works: the figures enact their allotted cycles without any apparent means of propulsion.

The host, a mysterious old man, explains that the figures move by ‘the secret of perpetual motion’ around the figure in the middle, the Fool.\textsuperscript{78}

It was still: it alone in the middle of all that curious dance did not move, though it stood as if poised for running... all about [it], sliding, stepping, leaping, rolling, the complex dance went on.\textsuperscript{79}

The dance represents, and in a mysterious sense is, the universe (pp.94–95):

Imagine that everything which exists takes part in the movement of a great dance—everything, the electrons, all growing and decaying things, all that seems alive and all that doesn’t seem alive, men and beasts, trees and stones, everything that changes, and there is nothing anywhere that does not change... there is nothing at all anywhere but the dance. Imagine it—imagine it, see it all at once and in one!

The story hinges upon the fact that one of the guests, a Mr Coningsby, has (unbeknown to himself) discovered the original pack of Tarot cards. This pack contains not only the usual four suits—which represent the four elements—but what are called ‘the Greater Trumps’, which, ‘it’s said, are the meaning of all process and the measure of the everlasting dance’ (p.21). The old man’s son covets these cards, since with them he could foretell the future; but Mr Coningsby will not part with them. Finally, the son conjures up a terrifying storm in an attempt to kill him, but in doing so he unleashes the dark powers of the Tarot, shadowy destructive figures who surround the house in their dance of chaos and threaten to destroy not only it and its inhabitants, but the whole world.

The situation is saved by the wise woman of the novel—appropriately named Sybil—who, from the outset, recognized the secret of the dancing figures when she alone saw that the Fool at the centre was not merely stationary, but simultaneously danced with the rest of the figures, completing their movements with his, ‘as if it were always arranging itself in some place which was empty for it’ (p.74).\textsuperscript{80} Throughout the storm, she remains calm in the knowledge—which she communicates to the other characters—that ‘It was not a struggle but a harmony, yet a harmony that might at any moment have become a chaos’ (p.194). She recognizes that the Fool is in fact a redemptive Christ-figure, being so called ‘because mankind finds it folly till it is known. It is sovereign or it is nothing, and if it is nothing then man was born dead’ (p.196). The final restoration of order comes miraculously through Sybil’s own body (p.228):

\textsuperscript{77}Eliot was responsible for most of Faber’s literary and theological titles.

\textsuperscript{78}The Greater Trumps, second edition (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), pp.72, 30. Subsequent references will be included in the text.

\textsuperscript{79}Later the Fool is described as standing still under the Wheel of Fortune (p.99).

\textsuperscript{80}At the height of the storm, another character sees among the figures of destruction ‘the motionless and yet moving figure of the Fool’ (p.140).
For an infinitesimal fraction of time the immortal dance stood still to receive the recollection of that ever-moving and never-broken repose of sovereign being. Then suddenly [the menacing figures] were gone, and everywhere, breaking from Sybil's erect figure, shone a golden light, as of the fullness of the sun in his glory, expanding in a rich fruition.

Even without Eliot's acknowledgement of the novel as his immediate source, numerous parallels can be discerned: the emphasis upon the four elements, the paradoxes of motion and stillness, the centrality of the redemptive figure and the universality of the dance. Perhaps the most important parallel, however, is the dual nature of the dance: the universal movement is equally an apotheosis and a dance of death. Similarly, Eliot turns from the dance at the still point in *Burnt Norton II*, to the dance of mortality in the remainder of *Burnt Norton* and in *East Coker*.

In stark contrast to the dance of *Burnt Norton II* is the movement described in the 'place of disaffection' in Part III. Here men are 'whirled by the cold wind' along with 'bits of paper'. Instead of 'Erhebung without motion, concentration/ Without elimination', we find 'Tumid apathy with no concentration'. In the final part of *Burnt Norton* this inertia of decay is identified as 'the funeral dance' which oppresses the Word, the principle of order, and prevents it from taking effect in the world.

In *East Coker* the 'funeral dance' is presented in more detail. Eliot describes a ghostly apparition of long dead peasants dancing in the ancient dancing-circle at East Coker:

In that open field
If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close,
On a summer midnight, you can hear the music
Of the weak pipe and the little drum
And see them dancing around the bonfire
The association of man and woman
In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie—
A dignified and commodious sacrament.
Two and two, necessaery coniunction,
Holding eche other by the hand or the arm
Whiche betokeneth concorde.

The shadowy figures of these dancers are perhaps reminiscent of Williams' ghostly mediaeval figures and their dance of chaos, but the direct allusion is to Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Boke of the Governour*. In a letter to John Hayward, Eliot quotes the relevant section:

And for as moche as by the association of a man and a woman in daunsinge may be signified matrimonie, I could in declarynge the dignitie and commoditie of that sacrament make intiere volumes, if it were nat so commonly known to all men,

---

81 It is more than likely that Williams based his imagery to some extent upon the same sources as were noted above for Eliot's. Steffan Bergsten, *Time and Eternity* (p.178) claims that the dance of Šiva may also have influenced Williams.

82 The reference to the 'centre' in the repeated word seems deliberate. Many of the details in this passage point to the description in *The Waste Land* of London's 'crowds of people, walking round in a ring'.
that almoste euery frere lymitour carieth it writen in his bosome.83

In his treatise, Elyot took issue with the traditional Christian disdain towards dancing. He admitted the sinful purposes to which dancing had often been put, but argued in favour of the kind of dancing which enacts social harmony (ch.21):84

In euery daunse, of a moste auncient custome, there daunseth to gether a man and a woman, holding eche other by the hande or the arme, whiche betokeneth concorde.

An aspect of this 'concorde', he goes on to say, is the harmonizing of the male and female natures as both submit to the discipline of the dance. The true end of dancing is the attainment of the virtues of 'prudence', 'the knowledge of thinges whiche oughte to be desired and folowed, and also of them whiche oughte to be fledde from or excexelsd', and 'maturitie', in which one will 'do neyther to moche ne to litle, to soone ne to late, to swyftely nor slowely, but in due tyme and measure' (ch.22, pp.96, 98).85

Eliot's dancers in *East Coker* are not, however, those of his ancestor, and his allusion is almost certainly ironic.86 The dance Elyot had in mind was the pursuit of the gentle classes; a pavan or a galliard performed in a banquet hall. Indeed, he makes every effort to distinguish his preferred form of dance from that which is associated with the fertility of the soil and pagan feast-days. The rustic dance of *East Coker* is exactly that: a celebration of sexuality and a rite of fertility, a symbol of the oneness of man and woman and animal and corn and dust, 'Eating and drinking. Dung and death'. Indeed, Eliot's description of the dancers' movements 'Round and round the fire/ Leaping through the flames, or joined in circles', suggests the Midsummer Fire-Festivals which Sir James Frazer described in Chapter 62 of *The Golden Bough*. Such fires were lit on midsummer's night throughout rural Europe; and villagers would dance around the bonfires and perform various rites intended to fertilize the soil, predict the future and secure good fortune for the year ahead. In particular, courting couples would join hands and leap

---

83Eliot continued, 'The public intention is to give an early Tudor setting, the private, that the author of The Governour sprang from E. Coker' (Gardner, p.99).


85Sir John Davies appears to echo Elyot in stanza 110 of 'Orchestra' (p.203):

Concord's true picture shineth in this art,  
Where diuers men and women rank'd be,  
And every one doth daunce a severall part,  
Yet all as one, in measure doe agree,  
Observing perfect vniformitie;  
All turne together, all together trace,  
And all together honour and embrace.


through the flames as a means of invoking a blessing upon their impending marriage.  

Eliot’s intention in his subtle parody of *The Boke of the Governour* can be inferred from his frequently expressed reluctance to admit final value to a ‘humanist’ view of life. Elyot’s dance, noble as it may be, remains merely human; it is no more a dance around the still point than the roundel of the peasants is, and its end, Eliot suggests, is the same dissolution in the chaotic cycle of death and rebirth. At the Archbishop of York’s Conference in 1941, Eliot described his misgivings towards the humanist outlook:

Humanistic wisdom can provide a helpful, if in the end joyless nourishment for the intelligent educated individual—on another level, there is a comparable wisdom of the countryman rooted in village tradition and the life of the countryside and the procession of the seasons—but it cannot sustain an entire society.

The best efforts of mankind will not recover the vision of the still point. The ‘wisdom’ of ‘the quiet–voiced elders’ (among them, no doubt, the poet’s own forebear) is merely a receipt for deceit. The dancers, both Elyot’s ‘gentlemen’ and Eliot’s peasants, ‘are all gone under the hill’; and in the face of ineluctable mortality, true wisdom is not that offered by humanism, but is ‘the wisdom of humility’.

*Four Quartets* does, however, indicate the means whereby the human dance, which subjects the dancer to the natural world, can be re–orientated towards the still centre. The answer is to be found in a purgative dance, a dance which partakes of religious ritual and becomes, in a sense, an act of devotion. Like the dance of the High Mass which Eliot described, this dance culminates in a transubstantiation of the corporeal into the spiritual; also like the Mass, it involves intense suffering. In *East Coker III*, the poet is invited to enter ‘the darkness of God’ and to renounce all physical sensation and even moral virtue in pursuit of the Divine stillness. When this discipline has been fulfilled, he is promised, ‘the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing’. The dance around the still point will be rediscovered not through an ecstatic vision like that in the rose–garden, but through the pain of self–renunciation.

Eliot returns to this theme in the colloquy with the ‘compound ghost’ in *Little Gidding*. The ghost concludes his advice to the poet:

> From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit

---

87 J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, pp.622–32. Another analogue to the passage can be found in A.E. Housman’s poem ‘Fancy’s Knell’ which was read as part of a BBC programme which featured an interview with Eliot (‘The Writer as Artist: A Discussion between T.S. Eliot and Desmond Hawkins’, *The Listener*, 24, no.620 (28 Nov. 1940), 773–74). The poem describes a rustic summer dance at ‘Abdon under Clee’, and ends:

> To–morrow, more’s the pity,
> Away we both must hie,
> To air the ditty,
> And to earth I.

> Among the other items read was the passage from Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* (IV, ii, 259–282) which concludes, ‘All lovers young, all lovers must/ Consign to thee and come to dust’.


89 The images of dance, fire and suffering are found together in an early unpublished poem, ‘The Dance of St. Narcissus’, which describes the martyrdom by ‘burning arrows’ of Narcissus, whose one desire is to be ‘a dancer before God’ (*Facs*, p.95.).
Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.

The imagery here points first of all to Dante's *Purgatorio* and in particular to his meeting in canto XXVI with a former poetic mentor, Arnaut Daniel. Little Gidding II combines the Dantean 'refining fire' with a clear echo of the dance-imagery of Eliot's Arnaut Daniel, William Yeats. It is difficult to read Eliot's lines without recalling the human spirits eager to achieve immortality in 'Byzantium':

- blood–begotten spirits come
- And all complexities of fury leave,
- Dying into a dance,
- An agony of trance,
- An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

Or the final image of transcendence of the body in 'Among School Children':

- O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
- How can we know the dancer from the dance?

For Yeats, the dance was not simply a symbol of the fusion of body with soul, but a literal example of it. For the duration of the dance the dancer's physical being is merged with the form or pattern it enacts; this, moreover, presages the transformation which will take place after death. In *The Dry Salvages* V Eliot alludes to this idea in terms of music (although he refers to one listening to music rather than one playing)—'you are the music/ While the music lasts'. Some years earlier, however, he had expressed exactly Yeats' point ('Four Elizabethan Dramatists', *SE*, p.113):

- Anyone who has observed one of the great dancers of the Russian school will have observed that the man or the woman whom we admire is a being who exists only during the performances, that it is a personality, a vital flame which appears from nowhere, disappears into nothing and is complete and sufficient in its appearance.

It is that vital flame which, as it burns, draws the dancer into harmony with the still point of the universe.

Paul Valéry, a contemporary in whose work Eliot showed a keen interest, uses the same imagery in 'L'Ame et la danse' (1923). Valéry's character Socrates and his friends respond enthusiastically to a dancer from whom 'Dance seems to issue . . . like a flame!' The movement of the dance, Socrates says, is life itself transformed into a dancing girl, 'making what is divine in a mortal woman shine before our eyes' (p.55). As she spins (p.60):

---

90 Davies' 'Orchestra' offers a subsidiary source: 'Where Time the Measure of all moving is,/ And Dancing is a mooing all in measure' (stanza 23, p.169).
91 As well as by the poet's own testimony, the association of the ghost with Yeats is attested by a number of unmistakable allusions and references, the details of which are included in Appendix IV, part ii.
92 See, for instance, his introduction to Valéry's *The Art of Poetry* (1958), or his obituary, 'Leçon de Valéry', in *The Listener*, 37, no.939(9 Jan. 1947), 72.
all that is visible detaches itself from her soul; all the slime of her soul is separated at the last from its most pure; men and things will form around her a shapeless whirl. . . . She would rest motionless in the very center of her movement. Alone, alone to herself, like the axis of the world.

The image of the dancer, refined and perfected in the act of the dance, striving to gain that equilibrium which partakes of the harmony of the created order, is Eliot’s penultimate metaphor for the cosmos of the *Quartets*. It unites the images of the wheel, the axle–tree and the still point in a physical and artistic nexus which points towards the supreme structural principle of the implied universe of the poems. In *Little Gidding* V, Eliot considers the achievement of the still point in terms of his own art:

> And every phrase  
> And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,  
> Taking its place to support the others,  
> The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,  
> An easy commerce of the old and the new,  
> The common word exact without vulgarity,  
> The formal word precise but not pedantic,  
> The complete consort dancing together).

The poet here translates into another form of art and of human endeavour the sacramental implications of the dance—its ability, when performed in an attitude of self-renunciation, to absorb the dancer into its pattern of movement and return her to a state of perfect equilibrium within the cosmos.  

Poetry, Eliot says in *Little Gidding*, is the dance of words; it condenses the macrocosm of universal movement, whose patterns are imitated by the dance, into a microcosm of ordered language. Thus *Four Quartets* is finally an incarnation of its imagined cosmos. It words are the building–blocks of ‘that world of poetry which we have entered’—the world of Heraclitus, Lao Tzü, the Upaniṣads, Aristotle and ultimately of Dante. And as the ‘substances and accidents and their relations’ of Dante’s universe centre their dance upon the one motionless point, so also the individual words of the *Quartets* are consciously arranged in such a way as to focus upon the eternal Word, the Logos.

## VI  Music

The supreme metaphor for the poetic cosmos of *Four Quartets*, however, is music, which exists prior to the dance, as the Logos exists prior to the fire, and the still point to the axle–tree. Eliot’s epithet ‘quartets’ and the body of allusions to and parallels with music found within the sequence itself attest to the centrality of the musical analogy, an analogy which appropriates for the universe of the *Quartets* one of the most fertile traditions of imagery in Western culture.

---

94 The word ‘consort’ here (which can mean ‘harmony’ or ‘agreement’ but also ‘husband or wife’) links this dance with the one in *East Coker* I.

95 Paul Valéry also maintained a direct affinity between dance and poetry. See Eliot’s introduction to *The Art of Poetry*, pp.xiv–xv.
To its first theorists, music was the key to all of the structures of matter and soul. The universe was, in a sense, a single musical performance. The Pythagoreans linked mathematical form to music, through the numerical basis of harmonic structure, to the theory of movement, through its synonymity with vibration; and ultimately to the position and movement of the heavenly bodies, what came to be known as the 'harmony of the spheres'. This notion, which held that, as they revolved in their respective courses, the heavenly bodies produced musical notes which were attuned to a perfect scale, was widely held among early Greek philosophers and scientists. It is no surprise that Heraclitus associates the Logos itself with the 'attunement' of the lyre. The concept of music entertained by the ancients was much broader than mere entertainment or even aesthetic purity. For them, music contained the secret of harmonia, the principle by which the disparate elements of the cosmos were held together in fluid unity.

Plato and Aristotle developed further the notion of music as a principle of soul. For both, music was an important factor in the creation and maintenance of personal, social and political ethos. In the Republic III, 398c–400c, Plato prescribed instruction in music as an essential part of his educational regimen; and Aristotle, in Politics VIII, described music as beneficial for building character, morals, and social concord. The two thinkers differed, however, upon the 'music of the spheres'; whereas Plato provided the standard description of the phenomenon in Republic 617b, Aristotle viewed the theory as attractive but manifestly absurd (De Caelo II, 9, 290b).

Aristotle's disparagement did little to detract from the popular appeal of the music of the spheres, however. As Henry Chadwick notes, 'The poetic qualities of the idea, added to the reassurance it offered to humanity that the universe has principles of order, ensured a long career for the notion of planetary music' (Chadwick, p.79). Cicero revived the idea in his Somnium Scipionis, and the early Christian philosophers developed and Christianized the speculative conceptions of world harmony associated with music by the classical philosophers.

Among Augustine's earliest works is a short treatise entitled 'On Music', which summarizes and espouses Plato's moral theory of music and Pythagorean number theory. By far the best known early Christian treatment of music, however, was Boethius' De Institutione Musica, a work which had a 'potent literary influence' in the Middle Ages (Chadwick, p.81). In this treatise Boethius explored in great detail the numerological theories of music enunciated by Pythagoras and Ptolemy. His particular contribution was to propose a three-fold division. The lowest form of music, he argued, was musica instrumentalis—sounds produced by physical vibrations in imitation of the highest form of music, musica mundana, the 'music of the worlds'. Between these two extremes, Boethius posited musica humana, a human music which was not so much an audible phenomenon as the state of well-being created through 'the blending of incorporeal soul and the physical body' (Chadwick, p.82). The diligent practice of philosophy, theology, logic and exact science was necessary in order to attain this state, but

---

96 To the Pythagoreans, of course, number was the principle of concrete matter, rather than merely an abstract concept.

97 My understanding of the relationship between the 'harmony of the spheres' and Four Quartets has been greatly helped by John Gatta Jr's 'Spheric and Silent Music in Eliot's Four Quartets', Renascence, 33(Summer 1980), 194–213.

98 See fragment 51; quoted above, p.158.


100 Chadwick gives a full account of these on pp.78–101.
it was ultimately music—both instrumental (which, for Boethius, was physically and spiritually therapeutic) and spherical—that expressed, and in its highest forms manifested, that order which leads us to understand what God is and how we may approach him.

Throughout the Middle Ages music continued to be used as a metaphor for the perfection of God’s creation. In particular the harmony of the spheres became ingrained as a myth which had attained almost the status of dogma. St Isidore of Seville, for instance, included the notion in the *Etymologiae*, his influential encyclopaedia of mediaeval Christian knowledge: ‘Nothing exists without music; for the universe itself is said to have been framed by a kind of harmony of sounds, and the heaven itself revolves under the tones of that harmony’.  

It is used conspicuously in Dante’s *Commedia* when, in the first canto of the *Paradiso*, Dante is awakened to the fact that he and Beatrice have been transported to the heavenly realm from the summit of Purgatory by a simultaneous perception of the Divine Light and the Divinely-orchestrated music of the spheres (*Paradiso* I, 11.76-78).

The theme was commonplace in later European literature, and can be found throughout English letters. Chaucer describes the spherical harmonies in *The House of Fame*, and they appear in Sir John Davies ‘Orchestra’ and Sir Thomas Elyot’s *The Boke Named the Governour* as well as in the work of later poets and writers like Shakespeare, Milton, Sir Thomas Browne, and Dryden.  

Browne’s comments in *Religio Medici* illustrate the enduring nature of the ancient Greek and Boethian formulations:

> For there is a musick where ever there is a harmony, order, or proportion: and thus far we may maintain the music of the Spheres; for those well-ordered motions, and regular paces, though they give no sound unto the ear, yet to the understanding they strike a note most full of harmony . . . for even that vulgar and Tavern-Musick . . . strikes in me a deep fit of devotion, and a profound contemplation of the First Composer. There is something in it of Divinity more than the ear discovers; it is an Hieroglyphical and shadowed lesson of the whole World . . . such a melody to the ear, as the whole World, well understood, would afford the understanding. In brief, it is a sensible fit of that harmony which intellectually sounds in the ears of God.

The scientific credibility of spherical music did not survive the Enlightenment. As a result, it was, for the Romantic era, a notion belonging to the ‘other world’ of the Neo-Platonic ideal. While the poets of the early nineteenth century certainly made use of the ‘music’ of the natural world—indeed, among the other literary echoes of Eliot’s ‘unheard music’ is Keats’ ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’—they laid stress also upon the poet himself as ‘bard’, as singer–musician to

---


102 Elyot speaks in his chapters on dancing of the ‘ordre of the celestial bodies . . . and their motions harmonical’ (ch.20, p.89), and earlier instructs the teacher of gentlemen to ‘commende the perfecte understandinge of musicke, declaringe howe necessary it is for the better attaynyng the knowledge of a publike weale: whiche . . . conteneth in it a perfect harmony: whiche he shall afterwarde more perfectly understande, whan he shall happen to rede the bokes of Plato, and Aristotle, of publike weales’ (ch.7, p.28).

103 Shakespeare’s Lorenzo expresses the doctrine in *The Merchant of Venice* V, i, 60–65; Milton wrote a treatise entitled ‘On the Music of the Spheres’, and treated the concept poetically in ‘Comus’, ‘At a Solemn Music’, and *Paradise Lost* Bk.V, 1.625; and Dryden’s ‘Saint Cecilia’s Day’ opens with an extended celebration of the ‘heavenly harmony’.

104 *The Religio Medici and Other Writings*, pp.79–80.
the general populace. Their 'odes', 'ballads' and 'hymns' established a tradition of poetry which was self-consciously evocative of musical themes and forms. It was at this time that the concept of poetry as a 'music of words' gained currency.

This notion was adopted, experimented with and practised in a much less impressionistic fashion by the French Symbolist poets. According to Mallarmé, one of the founders of the Symbolist movement, the purpose of art was to express 'la musicalité de tout', and the function of poetry in particular was to release the music inherent within language. Poetry for Mallarmé was 'language retempered and purified by the flight of song'. The Symbolists found in music an art in which form and idea were perfectly joined, indeed, in which they were identical. Such a fusion was the goal of their aesthetic; thus, in the words of Pater's much-quoted dictum:

All art constantly aspires toward the condition of music. For while in all other forms of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form... it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it.

Eliot himself acknowledged on several occasions that it was his exposure to the French Symbolist poets that gave the impetus to much of his early work. As a result, the parallel between poetry and music is kept to the fore in his first volume of poetry. Titles such as 'Preludes', 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', and 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night', indicate a conscious attempt to render musical ideas in verse. Moreover, music appears as a key poetic image on numerous occasions. Prufrock's contact with other human beings, for instance, is limited to voices heard 'Beneath the music from a farther room'; and the progress of the painful relationship described in 'Portrait of a Lady' is punctuated with references to Chopin, the 'attenuated tones of violins', and the 'worn-out common song' of a street-piano.

Eliot's tendency in his early work to designate musical epithets to his poems lapsed as the Symbolist influence was eclipsed by other interests. The influence of music in The Waste Land is thus somewhat more diffuse. No musical model is suggested by the title or the form of the poem, but Eliot uses lines from a variety of songs to help define the consciousness which the poem explores. Usually, only snatches of these songs are heard: 'Oed und leer das Meer', 'O O O O that Shakespeherian rag', 'Weialala leia/ Wallala leialala'; however, these fragments elucidate important aspects of the predicament of the inhabitants of the waste-land. The 'music' of The Waste Land consists of a chorus of dissonant voices; it is a 'composition' of fragments which belies the sense of pattern and form normally associated with music.

The musical analogy was even more subdued in the poems which followed The Waste Land. While it is true that 'The Hollow Men' includes parodies of nursery rhymes, and that Eliot continued to experiment with a variety of meters in the 'Ariel Poems' and Ash Wednesday, it was not until Four Quartets—if we exclude the minor works, 'Five Finger Exercises' (1933)

---

109 Eliot's enthusiasm for the music of avant-garde composers like Igor Stravinsky indicates the kind of musical effects he was attempting to reproduce in The Waste Land. See Chapter 1, p.3.
and Words for Music (1935)—that Eliot again used music as a metaphor for poetry. Once more, the concept of 'word–music' which Eliot applies owes much to the Symbolist aesthetic. It seems inconceivable that Eliot would have thought to adopt music as a structural metaphor for the Quartets had it not been for its influence. Nevertheless, it will become clear that in his treatment of music as a theme in itself Eliot is calling upon more ancient sources. The music of Four Quartets is both an analogue and an allusion to the perfected cosmological order of the mediaeval European mind.

As the Quartets were nearing completion Eliot gave an address entitled 'The Music of Poetry', which set out in some detail a theory of the synthesis of musical and linguistic form which was possible in poetry. The music of poetry, he said, 'is not something which exists apart from the meaning. Otherwise we could have poetry of great musical beauty which made no sense'; rather, it is that quality in poetry which enables it to surpass the limits of purely verbal meaning, to operate at 'frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist' (OPP, pp.29–30).

A musical poem, Eliot continued, 'is a poem which has a musical pattern of sound and a musical pattern of the secondary meanings of the words which compose it, and . . . these two patterns are indissoluble and one' (p.33). Individual words function as musical notes or phrases, each having its own musical value as part of the series of words which is the poem. 'The music of a word is, so to speak, at a point of intersection: it arises from its relation first to the words immediately preceding and following it, and indefinitely to the rest of its context; and from another relation, that of its immediate meaning in that context to all the other meanings which it has had in other contexts, to its greater or less wealth of association' (p.32–33).

Eliot here echoes an important critical statement which he had made in a lecture on Matthew Arnold two years before writing Burnt Norton. After criticizing Arnold for lacking sensitivity to 'the musical qualities of verse', Eliot went to explain what he called the 'auditory imagination'; it is, he said (UPUC, pp.118–19):

> the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end. It works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the current, and the new and surprising, the most ancient and the most civilised mentality.

Through this natural allusiveness of words, Eliot would add some years later, a single word 'can be made to insinuate the whole history of a language and a civilization' (OPP, p.33). This is precisely what we find in Four Quartets; like a composer, Eliot invokes and manipulates well-known themes and traditions, using words ('axle-tree', 'lotos') and phrases ('a world of speculation', 'the figure of the ten stairs') like stock cadences, juxtaposing allusions to different traditions, incorporating the new into the old, reinterpreting and at times satirizing themes from his own previous work. Out of this synthesis he forms a distinctive new pattern

---


11 Eliot's notion is remarkably similar to Mallarmé's, who, in 'Crise de vers', describes the music of poetry as not 'the elemental sound of brasses, strings, or wood–winds, but the intellectual and written word in all its glory—music of perfect fulness and clarity, the totality of universal relationships' (Cook, p.42).
designed to take his medium beyond its former boundaries to express new thoughts and new emotions.

Nevertheless, as ‘The Music of Poetry’ goes on to explain, larger units of a poem can also have a ‘musical’ function. Indeed, ‘the properties in which music concerns the poet most nearly, are the sense of rhythm and the sense of structure . . . I know that a poem, or a passage of a poem, may tend to realize itself first as a particular rhythm before it reaches expression in words, and that this rhythm may bring to birth the idea and the image’ (p.38). In particular, Eliot discusses ‘recurrent themes’, the use of which (p.38):

is as natural to poetry as to music. There are possibilities for verse which bear some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments; there are possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or a quartet; there are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject–matter.

The five–part structure which Eliot chose for the Quartets gives ample scope for such transitions and arrangements, and in particular, for those Eliot specified earlier in the essay: ‘transitions between passages of greater and less intensity, to give a rhythm of fluctuating emotion essential to the musical structure of the whole; . . . the passages of less intensity will be, in relation to the level on which the total poem operates, prosaic’ (p.32). Obvious examples of this kind of conscious ‘fluctuation’ of intensity are to be found in each of the second movements of the Quartets, in the transition from the lyric of East Coker II, for instance (‘What is the late November doing . . . ?), to the colloquial passage which follows (‘That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory’).

The Quartets are built upon the devices of theme and variation, contrast, inversion, augmentation and diminution. Each poem is composed of distinct ‘movements’, many of which are, in turn, divided variously into sections of rhetorical discourse, lyric, colloquial monologue or liturgical pronunciation. The poet weaves his philosophical, personal, literary and religious topoi into each of these distinct modes of discourse, creating the sense of a number of separate ‘voices’ or ‘instruments’.112 As Eliot explained to John Hayward, the title of the sequence was intended:113


to indicate that these poems are all in a particular set form which I have elaborated, and the word ‘quartet’ does seem to me to start people on the right tack for understanding them . . . . It suggests to me the notion of making a poem by weaving in together three or four superficially unrelated themes: the ‘poem’ being the degree of success in making a new whole out of them.

This form and method of organization bears a strong resemblance to the ‘sonata form’ which, in the course of the eighteenth century, established itself as the major mode used in chamber music and in classical symphonies. The sonata is a ternary form: it involves an initial Exposition, which introduces two contrasting themes or subjects; a Development, which

---


explores variations, extensions, inversions, and counterpointing of those themes; and finally a Recapitulation, in which the two themes are restated and reconciled.

Sonata form became the central principle in the music of the classical era, that in which Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven flourished. It was primarily a mode of expressing and reconciling opposites in experience and feeling, as J.B. Trend, the music critic for The Criterion explained in 1932.114

A sonata is like a suite in that it is in several ‘movements’; but the movements are fewer (usually four), and not all in the same key, while the first, and sometimes the last, is constructed on a curious plan which has the effect of arousing the hearer’s expectation and then satisfying it. The first movement of a sonata has a pattern like a pattern on a carpet, a pattern in which the different sections are distinct in appearance and contrast with one another, though finally the pattern comes back again to the place where it started. The sonata—movement has two chief melodies or ‘subjects’ which are stated, contrasted, varied, broken up into short phrases and finally stated again near to the end, so that the movement ends in something like conviction or triumph.

The first movement of Burnt Norton illustrates Eliot’s sonata form in its purity. The opening lines of the poem state the first theme or ‘melody’—the ‘unredeemable’ nature of all time—and explore it from various perspectives. This theme is then answered by the ‘speculation’ upon ‘what might have been’, which leads into the description of the vision in the rose-garden. The transition is reflected also in the development of syntax and meter. These elements of language are used by the poet in ways comparable to the use of measure and harmony by the composer—to emphasize, delay and sometimes even to undermine aspects of the propositional content of the medium.115 Initially the syntactical form, with its regularized sentence pattern, its subordinations, precise conjunctions, and homogeneous verb—placements, creates, along with the insistent repetitions of individual words and the constant four-stress rhythm, a slow, ponderous tone. The second ‘theme’ is heralded by changes in the syntax: the former pattern evaporates as the poetry describes the free ‘speculations’ of the poet’s mind. As we enter the rose—garden of the imagination, sentences begin to lengthen, verbs become active, and clauses tumble one after another with little sense of metrical pause or measure.

The second theme ends abruptly, with the poet ushered out of the world of ‘reality’ and back to the world of time. The movement ends with what is ostensibly a restatement of the first theme, but it is phrased in such a way as to undermine the original statement and to qualify its meaning. As has been noted previously, the repetition of the lines ‘What might have been and what has been/ Point to one end, which is always present’ serves to highlight the ambiguities which were latent in the first statement of the theme, chief among them the polysemy of the word ‘present’. The subtle shift in meaning constitutes the particular ‘triumph’ achieved in Burnt Norton I.

That Eliot had sonata form in mind is also suggested by the programme notes which he co-authored for a recording of *Four Quartets* made in 1957.\(^{116}\) The first sections of the poems, he wrote, present ‘two or more subjects which are to be interwoven and eventually resolved’. They contain statement and counter-statement or juxtapose two contrasted but related themes. Such patterns can be discerned in the first movements of the other *Quartets* where the central tension of each poem is set out. *East Coker* modifies the sonata form somewhat in its juxtaposition of the rhythm of birth and death—described in the opening passage and in the account of the rustic dancers—with the sense of withdrawal and stasis in the description of the ‘hypnotic’ heat and ‘empty silence’ of the village itself. The final short stanza draws together images from both themes, and repeats the first half of the opening line in such a way as to suggest a moderating of the initial pessimism.

*The Dry Salvages* also alters the form of *Burnt Norton* I in postponing the restatement and resolution of the images of the river and the sea until the end of the second movement. The delay of the recapitulation serves to emphasize the sense of desolation and inconclusiveness with which the opening movement ends. *Little Gidding* I returns to the classic sonata form with conviction. The movement begins with the description of a timeless moment experienced in the present; the poet moves on to consider the existence of such moments in the past and in different places, before linking and reconciling them in the final lines:

Here, the intersection of the timeless moment  

The second section of Eliot's quartet form, the programme notes continue, treats one of the subjects in ‘two contrasting ways, and the ideas set forth are expanded and developed’. This takes the form of a lyric followed by a passage in a more colloquial, conversational style: in *Burnt Norton*, the ‘axle-tree’ lyric and the discursive passage on the ‘still point in the turning world’; in *East Coker* the stylized account of the ‘disturbance’ of the natural order whose style is debunked in the passage which follows; and in *The Dry Salvages*, the rigid rhyme-pattern of the sestina followed by a passage of relaxed meditative verse. *Little Gidding* differs slightly in that its colloquial passage is in an imitation of Dante’s *terza rima*, a metre which is, however, traditionally associated with narrative verse.

The third sections represent ‘the heart of the poem, taking ideas from the first two movements and exploring them further’. It is out of this section that reconciliation grows. In the midst of each exploration there is a crucial twist of ideas which heralds the resolution to be achieved later. *East Coker* III, for example, continues the opening theme of Part I (mortality) and then changes to the meditative tone (‘I said to my soul, be still!’) which prepares for the incantatory declaration of the *via negativa* with which the section ends.\(^{117}\) *Little Gidding* III begins with an expository account of the virtue of detachment and changes abruptly, shortening its meter, to consider the legacy of the various factions of the Civil War.

The fourth movements are a ‘purely lyrical’ development of one of the subjects. This is not to say that they are without weight, however: the prayer to Mary in *The Dry Salvages* and the hymn to the fiery dove in *Little Gidding* are perhaps the most cogent statements of the

---

\(^{116}\) *Four Quartets* (Angel Records, ANG. 45012, EMI (US)Ltd., 1957).

\(^{117}\) See Dame Helen Gardner's *The Art of T.S. Eliot*, p.41. *The Dry Salvages*, she admits, does not fit the pattern exactly.
viewpoint expressed in their respective poems. Moreover, the developments in theme and tone which are made across the Quartets are best reflected in a comparison of these sections. The poet moves from a search for hope within the darkness of mortality, to an assertion of Christian dogma which is rather too categorical to appear as genuinely felt, to a humble prayer on the behalf of others, and finally to the relative assurance of a guaranteed purgation.

The final movement of each poem ‘recapitulates the earlier themes and resolves the contradiction propounded in the first movement’. Like the second movement, the fifth has two parts, a colloquial section, which this time comes first, and a more structured, formal note upon which the poem ends. Three of the colloquial sections deal with the poet’s vocations, the struggle with words and meanings. Burnt Norton speaks of the ‘imprecision’ and ‘decay’ of words under the burden of meaning assigned to them, a theme to which Eliot returns in East Coker V with his account of his failed raids ‘on the inarticulate’ in the attempt to ‘get the better of words’. The same tone is found when the poet discusses the matter once more in the second movement of Little Gidding, but in the final movement Eliot looks forward to the perfection of language when words and meanings form a ‘complete consort dancing together’.

In the final stanza of each Quartet Eliot attempts to bring together the elements of the tension set up and explored in the previous movements, and to point towards some means of synthesis or harmony. In Burnt Norton V the poet explores the apparent dichotomy between eternal realities and the limited forms in which they appear in the temporal world, and closes with a reminder of the experience in the rose-garden which offers some hope of a redemption of time to be achieved within time itself. East Coker V meditates upon the need to continue the search for clues to the pattern of mortal experience. The final inversion of the opening line—‘In my end is my beginning’—emphasizes this theme of sojourn, while intimating an eventual resolution, although one whose final purpose is by no means clear.

The Dry Salvages ends with an exposition of the Incarnation, the ‘impossible’ event in which ‘past and future’ are ‘reconciled’. In the final lines the poet attempts to derive a personal assurance from this, and struggles towards the hope that the soil to which he will return—the soil of East Coker I—will somehow be made ‘significant’ through the redemptive action of Christ. Little Gidding, as the final poem in the sequence, collects images and ideas from all the previous ‘Quartets’—the ‘exploration’ theme of East Coker, the ‘unknown, remembered gate’ of Burnt Norton, and the ‘longest river’ of The Dry Salvages—and fuses them into a consummating vision of a return to Paradise, where all the tensions of our fallen consciousness will be resolved, just as the ‘fire’—the pain of life—and the ‘rose’—our most intense personal feelings—are joined in the image of the universal ‘knot’ in which all things are brought into harmony.

The task of identifying with which (if any) particular model of sonata form Eliot was working in Four Quartets has been undertaken by a number of critics. Hugh Kenner quotes Eliot—albeit in hearsay—to the effect that ‘he was paying attention chiefly to Bartók’s quartets’.

---

118 Eliot himself described East Coker IV as ‘in a way the heart of the matter’ (Gardner, p.109), a view shared by few critics.

119 This progression is paralleled by an increasing conciseness in the form which the lyrics take. The irregular stanza of Burnt Norton is replaced by the five-line patterns of East Coker and The Dry Salvages and finally by what could be called a sonnet form in Little Gidding.

The parallels between *Four Quartets* and Bartók’s work are not so much in artistic structure as in the use each makes of what Eliot called ‘recurrent themes’. One of the features of Bartók’s quartets is his use of a ‘motto–theme’, a phrase which recurs in each movement of the quartet. This could be compared with the various repeated sub–themes and individual words in the *Quartets*: the rose–garden, the shaft of sunlight, the yew–tree, words and music, journeys, death at sea. The new shades of meaning which these words and phrases take on when repeated in different contexts create an effect analogous to the recurrence of a melody played on different instruments, in a different key or with a different harmony. At times, both Bartók and Eliot use these repetitions to link the end of one movement to the opening of the next.121

A more likely model, however, is to be found in Beethoven’s last and greatest string–quartets, which appear to have been very much on Eliot’s mind when he was developing his own ‘quartet’ form and his general theory of the relation of music to poetry. Eliot wrote to Stephen Spender in March 1931, commending the younger poet for listening to the posthumous quartets:122

> I have the A minor Quartet on the gramophone, and find it quite inexhaustible to study. There is a sort of heavenly or at least more than human gaiety about some of his later things which one imagines might come to oneself as the fruit of reconciliation and relief after immense suffering; I should like to get something of that into verse before I die.

The A minor Quartet (Opus 132) is the only one of the late quartets which has five movements. Although a number of similarities between this quartet and Eliot’s quartet–form could be sustained—notably the short fourth movement—the parallel is by no means consistent.123 An earlier quartet, No.6 (Opus 18), has also been suggested. The restless quest for the melody in its opening movement may offer a parallel for the tension set up in the initial sections of the *Quartets*. Beethoven’s second movement opens with a ‘trilling’ section in some way comparable the lyrical passages in Eliot’s second movements, and the conflicting rhythms of the third movement of the piece, could sustain a comparison with the unsettling images of journeying which recur in the third movements of the *Quartets*.

Such structural comparisons may be illuminating, but it is apparent from Eliot’s note to Spender that it was the spiritual aspect of Beethoven’s work which he hoped to reproduce in poetry. Eliot may have been influenced in this respect by a book by an acquaintance of his, J.W.N. Sullivan, entitled *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development*.125 Sullivan calls the last quartets ‘the greatest of Beethoven’s music . . . different in kind from any other music that

---

121 Elisabeth Schneider (*T.S. Eliot: The Pattern in the Carpet*, p.170) observes this in 4th and 5th quartets and finds various analogues in *Four Quartets*. The motto–theme in Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* is another possible analogue.


123 In *Notes on Some Figures Behind T.S. Eliot* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), pp.278–82, Herbert Howarth attempts a detailed but less than convincing comparison of this quartet and Eliot’s sequence. The inadequacies of Howarth’s comparison are noted by Brian Hatton (p.3).


125 See Howarth, pp.286–89.
he or anybody else ever wrote'. In these works, 'Beethoven is exploring new regions of consciousness . . . a higher degree of consciousness, probably, than is manifested anywhere else in art' (pp.222–23).

Sullivan claims that the states of mind which Beethoven expresses cannot be described in terms of any other human experience, or indeed of any artistic synthesis of such experiences (pp.228–229). Rather, what is represented is the intimation of a 'mystical' truth. Sullivan describes the form which this representation takes using concepts reminiscent of those which Eliot will use in the *Quartets*. The progression in Beethoven's last works is not linear, he notes (pp.230–31); instead:

In these quartets the movements radiate, as it were, from a central experience. They do not represent stages in a journey, each stage being independent and existing in its own right. They represent separate experiences, but the meaning they take on in the quartet is derived from their relation to a dominating, central experience. This is characteristic of the mystic vision, to which everything in the world appears unified in the light of one fundamental experience.

It is an awareness, Sullivan continues, 'in which the apparently opposing elements of life are seen as necessary and no longer in opposition'; in particular, Beethoven came to 'a mystical solution of the problem of evil', an understanding 'that suffering is one of God's greatest gifts' (pp.232–33).

Similarly, the music of the *Quartets* involves a series of parallel reflections upon a 'dominating central experience' which leads the poet to a mystical understanding of the incorporation of suffering and evil into the divine pattern. Eliot gave a further indication of the nature of his debt to Beethoven in a lecture presented in New Haven, Connecticut in 1933. He outlined his ambition to write poetry 'with nothing poetic about it, poetry standing naked in its bare bones, or . . . poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poetry points at, and not on the poetry'. To accomplish this would be 'to get beyond poetry, as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to get beyond music'.

In order to achieve this 'transparency' poetry and music must exceed the limitations of their genre; in particular, they must both overcome the handicap of temporality. Eliot wrote in *Burnt Norton V*:

> Words move, music moves  
> Only in time; but that which is only living  
> Can only die. Words, after speech, reach  
> Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,  
> Can words or music reach  
> The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
> Moves perpetually in its stillness.  
> Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,  
> Not that only, but the co–existence,  
> Or say that the end precedes the beginning.

---


He elaborated upon this notion in his introduction to Paul Valéry’s *The Art of Poetry* (1958; p.xiv):

> For Music itself may be conceived as striving towards an unattainable timelessness; and if the other arts may be thought of as yearning for duration, so Music may be thought of as yearning for the stillness of painting or sculpture. I speak as one with no technical training in music, but I find that I enjoy, and ‘understand’, a piece of music better for knowing it well, simply because I have at any moment during its performance a memory of the part that has preceded and a memory of the part that is still to come. Ideally, I should like to be able to hold the whole of a great symphony in my mind at once.

Music and poetry ‘reach the stillness’ when they transcend the borders of their mode of articulation through the perfection of form and pattern which is perceived in all its complexity only by the most disciplined sensibility.

What this ‘stillness’ actually represented for Eliot is indicated in his use of music as a poetic image in the *Quartets*. In the rose-garden passage of *Burnt Norton*, the poet describes ‘unheard music hidden in the shrubbery’. This phrase has been taken by most commentators as an allusion to Keats’ ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’: ‘Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/Are sweeter’. While the verbal echo is unmistakable—and the possibility of a debt to the ‘Ode’ strengthened by the image of the paradoxically ‘still’ and ‘moving’ jar in *Burnt Norton* V—it would not do justice to Eliot’s theme to limit the image to an echo of Keats. In light of the cosmological imagery which will later be applied to the experience in the rose-garden, the ‘unheard music’ seems to be a deliberate reference to the other-worldly ‘music of the spheres’, which was inaudible, according to the notion’s first proponents, because the soul is itself constructed according to the same musical principle and would therefore be unable to distinguish the celestial harmony from what it experiences as silence. To hear the ‘unheard music’ could of necessity only take place in the context of a supra-rational experience of oneness with the whole of the cosmos, when the music would not so much be ‘heard’ through a physical sensation as experienced as a modification of one’s own being.

When Eliot returns at the end of *The Dry Salvages* to consider the nature of incarnational moments such as that described in *Burnt Norton* I, it is to this notion of passage beyond the physical experience of sound that he returns:

> For most of us, there is only the unattended Moment, the moment in and out of time, The distraction fit, . . . or music heard so deeply That it is not heard at all, but you are the music While the music lasts.

The music would be experienced without its normal temporal limitations; it would have attained the status of Being rather than Becoming. In the terms of *Burnt Norton* II, it would

---

128 See Aristotle *De Caelo* II, 9, 290b; and Chiari, pp.136–37. Within the Platonic psychology, the perception of the spherical music would have been lost as the soul re-enters the world of forms. Eliot’s use of it here could be set alongside the other parallels with Platonic *anamnesis* in *Burnt Norton*. 
represent the mystic 'stillness' at the heart of the universe, where all movement ceases and all tension is resolved into unity.

It is fitting, therefore, that the description of the 'still point' make no mention of sound. While the lyric which precedes it is full of 'trilling' and 'singing', the central point itself is immersed in silence. This is in keeping with the role assigned to the heavenly music in Dante's *Commedia*. Upon his entry into Paradise, Dante hears the music distinctly;¹²⁹ however, as he ascends to the sphere of the contemplatives in canto XXI, the 'sweet symphony of Paradise' (1.59) ceases abruptly. Thereafter the spherical music does not feature in Dante's description of Heaven. Once he enters the Empyrean, the region beyond the material spheres where physical movement—and therefore sounds produced by vibration—are no more, Dante's imagery is almost entirely visual; and as he enters the Celestial Rose, and prepares himself to look upon the Divine Point upon which all accident and substance is hung, he declares, 'my will was to hear naught' (XXXI, 1.42). Dante's final encounter with God himself is soundless, and is conveyed in the images of light, movement and stillness which Eliot so admired and sought to imitate in the *Quartets*.¹³⁰

The purpose of the spherical music—indeed, it could be said, of all music—is to point to the silence beyond it, which is defined, as it were, by the perfect order of that most transparent of media. For Eliot as for the sages of Europe and the East—and especially those of Christendom—the physical 'music' of the universe is expressed in images of symmetry, circularity, and movement, which are brought into harmony and unity as the ultimate spatial 'order' of the cosmos merges with the higher spiritual 'order' which is inhabited by God himself. The temporal and physical are ultimately revealed as aspects of the eternal and the transcendent: the end of our exploring is to find that the Λόγος is ζυνός, that in returning to our Creator we return to our deepest intuitions of the nature of our own self. The 'world' of *Four Quartets* is finally resolved into this one point.

¹²⁹ Evelyn Underhill records that some mystical experiences take the form of music of incredible beauty (*Underhill*, pp.90–93).

¹³⁰ St John of the Cross describes the union with God in terms of music which is 'silent to the senses'; indeed, the soul in rapture 'says that her Beloved is this silent music, because this harmony of spiritual music is known and experienced in Him' (*Spiritual Canticle* stanza 14; Peers, II, p.85).
Appendix: Supplementary Notes

I ‘Burnt Norton’

The poem was written in the late months of 1935. It was first published in April 1936, in Eliot’s *Collected Poems, 1909–1935*. A separate edition was published in February 1941, after the publication of *East Coker* and one week before that of *The Dry Salvages*.

Part I

The major influences upon the opening movement of the poem have been noted already. The meditation upon time draws upon the deterministic tradition in philosophical literature for its thought and expression, and, as has been argued in Chapter 3, in particular upon Augustine’s attempts to resolve the contradictions of the human experience of time. The rose–garden passage which follows brings with it a quite different mood and a set of literary echoes from the tradition of garden–imagery stretching back to early myth. A pervasive debt to Dante and subsidiary allusions to Keats, Donne, Mallarmé, Andrewes and Lawrence have been explored in Chapter 4, section IV, as has the influence—which Eliot himself acknowledged—of three stories concerning the imagined world of children: Lewis Carroll’s ‘Alice’ stories and Rudyard Kipling’s ‘They’.

Several further analogues for the rose–garden passage of *Burnt Norton* could be suggested, however. One of them is D.H. Lawrence’s short story ‘The Shadow in the Rose Garden’ (1914) which Eliot examined in *After Strange Gods* (p.36). The story concerns a woman, bored with a stagnant marriage, who meets a former lover, whom she had thought dead, in a rose–garden. As she enters the garden, the woman is described ‘lingering, like one who has gone back into the past’ (p.125), and feels as if she were ‘no more than a rose, a rose that could not quite come into blossom’ (p.126). This ‘spell’ is dispersed by the passing shadow of her ex–lover, ‘who had come in slippers unheard’. He does not recognize her, however, because he has become a lunatic. The encounter passes, leaving the woman in a state of confusion: ‘It was as if some membrane had been torn in two in her, so that she was not an entity that could think and feel’ (p.128). The experience precipitates an argument with her husband, from whom—it now seems clear—she will separate.

Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911), a children’s story which Eliot probably knew, offers another fruitful line of inquiry. The story concerns Archibald Craven who

---


1The similarity is noted by Christopher Heywood, in ‘Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*: A Possible
has lived away from his Yorkshire manor house for the ten years which have followed the birth of his son and the death of his wife. Both father and son succumb to a nervous, wasting and debilitating loss of will; the son is an invalid—though no disease is diagnosed—and is confined to a wheelchair. Archibald leaves his son in the charge of a housekeeper and travels abroad finally to return and to be restored to health, along with his son, in the rose-garden of his manor.

The restorative process begins with Archibald’s orphaned niece, Mary, being led by a robin to a buried key to the rose-garden, which becomes a secret playground for the children (the garden was locked after Archibald’s wife died in labour induced after she fell from a tree there). In the garden the son, Colin, finds he can run as well as his playmates. A missel thrush becomes for the children a symbol of their secret. Archibald, on his travels, has a vision of his wife calling him back, and returns to find the garden full of playing children. In the ensuing reconciliation, Archibald accepts his past life, and the symbol of it, his son Colin, whom previously he ‘could not bear’. This process of spiritual desolation, rebirth and reconciliation is echoed in Burnt Norton.

A case can also be made for Oscar Wilde’s ‘The Selfish Giant’ (published in The Happy Prince, in 1888), a story known to most readers of Eliot’s age and background. The story tells of a giant who is irritated by children playing among the flowers and peach trees in his garden and erects a wall to keep them out. As a result, spring no longer comes to the garden; the birds nest elsewhere, and the trees remain bare. Many years later the giant hears a linnet singing in the garden; investigating, he finds that children have entered through a hole in the wall are sitting in the branches of the trees, which have blossomed in response. One tree remains barren, and at its base is a small boy trying without success to climb it. Repenting of his former irascibility, the giant lifts the child into the tree, which immediately breaks into bloom. This child does not return until the giant is aged and dying; suddenly the tree in which he sat blooms in the midst of winter. The child appears with nail-marks in his hands and feet, and invites the giant to accompany him to a garden in Paradise.

Similarities with another tale of fantasy, George MacDonald’s novel Lilith (1895), have also been noted in Burnt Norton. In the fourth chapter the major character, Vane, encounters, not a thrush—although one does appear in the opening paragraphs—but a talking raven, which urges him to ‘come into the garden’. Although suspicious, Vane enters the small garden and finds himself transported to another world.

Several details of this ‘world’ correspond to those in Eliot’s rose-garden. According to the raven there is music in the quivering of the petals on a rose-bush which Vane is unable to hear. In a later chapter Vane comes upon a grove of tiny fruit-trees; upon plucking an apple from one of them he hears ‘a sudden shouting of children, mingled with laughter clear and sweet’ (ch.12, p.236). When Vane returns to the grove he finds that the children are now living in the trees. When they are in their hiding-places he can see nothing (ch.32, p.337):


Soon, however, happening to look up into the tree under which my elephants stood, I thought I spied a little motion among the leaves, and looked more keenly. Sudden white spots appeared in the dark foliage, the music died down, a gale of childish laughter rippled the air, and white spots came out in every direction: the trees were full of children!

The collocation of talking bird, music, and hidden children bears a strong resemblance to the imagery of *Burnt Norton*, although the debt to MacDonald’s novel does not seem to extend to thematic similarity.

Grover Smith, in *T.S. Eliot’s Poetry and Plays: a Study in Sources and Meaning* (p.321), notes a general similarity with H.G. Wells’ short story ‘The Door in the Wall’. The story concerns Lionel Wallace, and ‘the thing that was hidden in his life, the haunting memory of a beauty and a happiness that filled his heart with insatiable longings, that made all the interests and spectacle of worldly life seem dull and tedious and vain to him’. The memory was of an incident from Wallace’s childhood, when he came across a green door set in a white wall on a dingy street. Finding the door open, he enters, and ‘came into the garden that has haunted all his life’ (p.147). ‘It was ... an enchanted garden ... And somehow it was just like coming home’ (p.148). The memory of the garden ‘offered him an outlet, a secret and peculiar passage of escape into another more beautiful world’ (p.161).

Throughout the remainder of his life Wallace sees the door again several times, but refuses to enter because of other obligations. As he grows old, however, he begins to long for another opportunity to return to his garden. He is found dead one morning on a building-site, having crawled through a small hole in the surrounding fence.

An echo of Charles Lamb’s essay ‘Dream Children—a Reverie’ is noted by Rajendra Verma. Lamb imagines an interview with children from Alice whom he was never able to marry; these children describe themselves as ‘nothing; less than nothing, and dreams. We are only what might have been, and must wait upon the tedious shores of Lethe millions of ages before we have existence, and a name’. 

Eliot’s use of the symbol of the imaginary garden could also be compared to Conrad’s in the opening paragraphs of *The Shadow Line* (1917). Speaking of ‘moments’ which are given in early youth, Conrad remarks, ‘One closes behind one the little gate of mere boyishness—and enters an enchanted garden. Its very shades glow with promise. Every turn of the path has its seduction. And it isn’t because it is an undiscovered country. One knows well enough that all mankind had streamed that way. It is the charm of universal experience from which one expects an uncommon or personal sensation—a bit of one’s own’. 

---


6 *The Short Stories of H.G. Wells* (London: Ernest Benn, 1927; reset 1948), p.145. Subsequent page numbers will be included in the text.


Part II

Burnt Norton II is dominated by the images of the 'axle-tree' and the 'still point' and the various mythical and religious connotations which have been associated with them (see Chapter 6, sections II–V). Eliot's own perception of the meaning of these symbols is illustrated in his description of the vision in the rose-garden in terms reminiscent of mystical writers (see Chapter 5, section IV). Several other influences and allusions have been noted by critics, however. The opening two lines were originally included in Lines for an Old Man (after the phrase 'the tooth of wit'; line 7) a poem Eliot thought of dedicating to Mallarmé (Gardner, pp.80–81):

Garlic and sapphires in the mud
Clot the bedded axle-tree.

These lines are adapted from two poems by Mallarmé, 'M'introduire dans ton histoire' and 'Le tombeau de Charles Baudelaire'. The relevant lines from the former are:

Dis si je ne suis pas joyeux
Tonnerre et rubis aux moyeux
De voir en l'air que le feu troue
Avec des royaumes épars
Comme mourir pourpre le roue
Du seul vespéral de mes chars.

And from the latter:

Le temple enseveli divulge par sa bouche
Sepulcrale d'égout bavant boue et rubis.

The identification of these sources has not made the explication of these most cryptic of Eliot's lines any easier. Eliot himself commented of the second line of 'M'introduire dans ton histoire', "'Thunder and rubies up to the wheel hub" is just as difficult to figure out as the career of Crashaw's tear'. Elizabeth Drew tentatively cites, 'bedded' and 'tree' as references to the Incarnation and the Passion; Grover Smith (citing Balachandra Rajan) suggests that the first line indicates the human interference (through the mortal sins of gluttony and avarice) with the smooth turning of the wheel. He also suggests a possible sexual connotation in the second line, agreeing with the value of 'blood' in the line which follows (pp.257–8).

The association of the axle-tree with garlic may also have originated in Eliot’s memory of Elizabethan drama. Hotspur, in his rantings (Henry IV, III, i, 131–32, 161–62) vows:

10 See John Hayward's notes to Quatre Quatuors, p.132
11 'Say if I am not joyous/ Thunder and rubies at the axles/ To see in this fire-pierced air/ Amid scattered realms/ As though dying purple the wheel/ Of my sole chariot of evening'. (The translation is by Eliot's friend Roger Fry, and is quoted in Gardner, p.81.) Eliot translated the first of these lines ('Tell me if I am not glad') at the end of 'Lines for an Old Man'.
12 'The buried temple gives forth by the sewer's sepulchral mouth, slobbering mud and rubies'; Hartley's translation, p.91.
13 The comment was made in the third Turnbull Lecture given at Johns Hopkins University in January of 1933, and is quoted from manuscripts held at the Houghton Library by Ronald Bush (p.176).
I had rather hear a brazen canstick turn'd,  
Or a dry wheel grate on the axle-tree . . .  
I had rather live  
With cheese and garlic in a windmill, far.

A further Jacobean flavour is added to the passage with two verbal echoes of Chapman's translation of the second 'Penitential Psalm' of Petrarch. Eliot's 'Sings below inveterate scars' echoes Chapman's 'Raze, lord, my sins' inveterate scars'; and his account of 'the boarhound and the boar' may suggest Chapman's lines:

As clear as silver, seas shall roar  
Descending to that noisome sink  
Where every hour hell's horrid Boar  
Lies plunged, and drown'd, and doth his vomits drink.

A more contemporary analogue for both the lyric section of Burnt Norton II and the description of the 'still point' which follows is Aldous Huxley's poem 'The Burning Wheel', published in 1917, by which time Huxley and Eliot are known to have been acquainted. Huxley's poem reads as follows:

Wearied of its own turning,  
Distressed with its own busy restlessness,  
Yearning to draw the circumferent pain—  
The rim that is dizzy with speed—  
To the motionless centre, there to rest,  
The wheel must strain through agony  
On agony contracting, returning  
Into the core of steel.  
And at last the wheel has rest, is still,  
Shrunk to an adamant core:  
Fulfilling its will in fixity.  
But the yearning atoms as they grind  
Closer and closer, more and more  
Fiercely together, beget  
A flaming fire upward leaping,  
Billowing out in a burning,  
Passionate, fierce desire to find  
The infinite calm of the mother's breast.  
And there the flame is a Christ-child sleeping,  
Bright, tenderly radiant;  
All bitterness lost in the infinite.

---

15 See John Shand, 'Around Little Gidding', Nineteenth Century, 136, no.811(Sept. 1944), 120–32 (p.126).

16 Eliot and Huxley were still corresponding in the 1930s, and Eliot's letters to Huxley in 1936 imply an ongoing discussion between them on the subject of meditation. See Letters of Aldous Huxley, ed. Grover Smith (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), pp.405–6. Huxley was, by this time, notorious for his experiments with drug-induced trance-states.

Peace of the mother’s bosom.
But death comes creeping in a tide
Of slow oblivion, till the flame in fear
Wakes from the sleep of its quiet brightness
And burns with a darkening passion and pain,
Lest, all forgetting in quiet, it perish.
And as it burns and anguishes it quickens,
Begetting once again the wheel that yearns—
Sick with its speed—for the terrible stillness
Of the adamant core and the steel-hard chain.
And so once more
Shall the wheel revolve till its anguish cease
In the iron anguish of fixity;
Till once again
Flame billows out to infinity,
Sinking to a sleep of brightness
In that vast oblivious peace.

The similarities between the two poems are obvious. Both move from a vision of the confused restlessness of the cycle of life to describe at some length the perfect stillness of ‘the still point’ at the centre. Eliot’s understanding of the image contradicts Huxley’s, however. Where the latter sees the centre and the rim of ‘the wheel’ in conflict, the pain generated at each forcing the individual into an endless vacillation between the two, Eliot sees at the centre a paradoxical but complete unity which gives significance to the flux at the circumference as part of ‘the dance’. Indeed, when Eliot says of the still point ‘And do not call it fixity’ it is conceivable that he may in fact be scolding Huxley for his use of a word which does not allow for a paradox of motion and stillness, but insists upon the separateness of rim and centre. Eliot may also be responding to Huxley’s identification of the flame at the core with ‘a Christ—child sleeping’ when he alludes to the idea of Incarnation (‘Neither flesh nor fleshless’) but refuses to identify the still point unequivocally with the historical Christ, ‘for that is to place it in time’.18

Part III

The imagery of the third part of Burnt Norton is taken from two principal sources: Dante’s Inferno, and St John of the Cross’ Ascent of Mount Carmel (see Chapter 3, section IV and Chapter 5, section V, part i). Nevertheless, Eliot told his brother that the initial inspiration for the passage was the London tube-train (Gardner, p.86). This being the case, it is intriguing to speculate upon the potential symbolism of the London underground system, whose core is the ‘Inner Circle’, a line which connects a ring of central stations, and which can be said to have neither beginning nor end. (Its passengers travel ‘round in a ring’ like the people Madame Sosostris sees in the first part of the The Waste Land.) More specifically, Eliot may have had in mind the Gloucester Road Station, near his home in South Kensington, the point of intersection of the Inner Circle and the Piccadilly tube to Russell Square, where Faber & Faber had their offices.19

Part IV

Various sources have been noted for the lyric movement of *Burnt Norton*. The funereal tone and setting suggests analogies with Gray's 'Elegy' (see Chapter 3, section IV), but the poem also carries allusions to Dante and to Christian liturgy (see Chapter 4, section V; Chapter 5, section V, part i). Eliot admitted that some of the phrasing of the lyric came from an anonymous mediaeval lyric:20

Time and the bell have buried the day,
The black cloud carries the sun away.

The anonymous source concludes:

The bailey beareth the bell away:
The lily, the rose, the rose I lay.

The poem also echoes one of the *loci classici* of English graveyard scenes, Tennyson's 'In Memoriam'. Eliot's 'fingers of yew' which may 'be curled/ Down on us' suggest Tennyson's stanzas 2 and 39:

Old Yew, which graspest at the stones
That name the underlying dead,
Thy fibres net the dreamless head,
Thy roots are wrapt about the bones . . . .

Old Warder of these buried bones,
And answering now my random stroke
With fruitful cloud and living smoke,
Dark yew, that graspest at the stones
And dippest toward the dreamless head.

A similarity in stanza–form could be noted between Eliot's lyric and George Herbert's 'Easter Wings'. In both poems the lines grow progressively shorter to emphasize the finality of, in this case, death and, in Herbert's, the fall. As hope is reasserted, the lines are restored to their original length.

Part V

Several influences upon the concluding movement of *Burnt Norton* have been discussed above. Aristotle's doctrines of 'form' and of the 'Unmoved Mover' seem to have contributed to much of the thought of the passage, as has the image of the 'ladder of contemplation' from the writings of St John of the Cross (see Chapter 4, section V; Chapter 5, section V, part i). A number of other images require comment.

Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is an obvious analogue for Eliot's 'Chinese jar', although there is no strong verbal echo:

---

20See Mark Reinsberg, 'A Footnote to *Four Quartets*, American Literature, 21, no.3(Mar. 1950), 342–344.
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
As doth eternity.

The designs on Chinese ceramics—especially pieces from the Ming Dynasty—would com-
monly depict figures ‘captured’ in motion, like those on classical Greek vases. Eliot recalls a friend from his school-days whose grandmother ‘collected Chinese pottery brought home by the Salem clippers’.\(^2\) In a poem full of childhood memories, one more can perhaps be admitted as a speculation.

Because of the decay of the order represented by the Chinese jar, ‘the Word’ is confined to the ‘desert’, and is:

attacked by voices of temptation,

The crying shadow in the funeral dance,

The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera.

The primary allusion is the Biblical account of the temptation of Christ in the desert, as recorded in the early chapters of the first three gospels.\(^2\) Several secondary sources can be discerned, however. John Hayward suggests first of all the opening of Book XXIV of Homer’s *Odyssey* where the spectres of the slain suitors shriek like bats as they are rounded up and taken off to Hades by Hermes (Hayward, p.133).

His second suggestion is Flaubert’s *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, ch.7, where St Antony is tempted by various apparitions, among whom is ‘Chimera’, who changes into the shape of a beautiful woman and tempts Antony with Lust. The original St Antony (c.250–356?) was one of the founders of Christian monasticism. As a young man he abandoned his life of ease in Egypt and took up an ascetic life of solitude in the desert where his strenuous self-denial was matched only by the vigour of the temptations he claimed to suffer from demonic visitations. The parallelism with Flaubert is not very fruitful, however. The traditional figure of the chimera is of a reputedly invincible beast with a lion’s head, a goat’s body and a serpent’s tail. (The word can also refer generally to any wild and fanciful creature of the imagination.) Flaubert’s Chimera barks, yelps and cavorts around the stage. Although not a happy figure, she is hardly ‘disconsolate’. Neither does the rest of the play shed any light upon Eliot’s intentions in *Burnt Norton*.

A more plausible source may be Sir John Davies’s *Nosce Teipsum*, which was the subject of Eliot’s 1926 essay on Davies. In the poem, Davies describes the terrors of self-knowledge using the analogy of a fabled ‘Lady faire’ who, having been turned into a cow as a result of her ‘lust’, refuses to drink at the stream for fear of seeing her reflection, ‘though she for thirst doe die’. Davies concludes (stanzas 31–32; Grosart, I, p.21):


\(^{22}\)Hayward refers without elaboration to John’s Gospel, which does not describe the temptation of Christ, but which does include the famous description of of John the Baptist as the ‘voice crying in the wilderness’ (1. 23; Hayward, p.133). These details reappear (somewhat transmuted) in Harry’s description of his agony in *The Family Reunion* (CPP, p.335):

In and out, in an endless drift  
Of shrieking forms in a circular desert.
Euen so *Man's Soule*, which did God's image beare,
And was at first faire, good, and spotlesse pure;
Since with her *sinnes* her beauties blotted were,
Doth of all sights her owne sight least endure:

For euen at first reflection she espies,
Such strange *chimeraes*, and such monsters there,
Such toyes, such *antikes*, and such vanities,
As she retires, and shrinkes for shame and feare.

The similarity was first noticed by Schneider (p.185), who notes also the auditory and syntactic resemblance between the opening line of Davies' allegory, 'As in the fable of the Lady Faire', and Eliot's line, the next but one after 'chimera', 'As in the figure of the ten stairs'.

A final possibility for the chimera is found in a passage from John Donne concerning the distractions afflicting his spiritual life which Eliot quoted in his essay on Andrewes (*FLA*, p.24): 'A memory of yesterday's pleasures, a feare of to-morrow's dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine eare, a light in mine eye, an anything, a nothing, a fancy, a Chimera in my braine, troubles me in prayer. So certainly is there nothing, nothing in spiritall things, perfect in this world'.
II ‘East Coker’

Eliot wrote the poem quickly in the first months of 1940. It was completed by the end of February and published in an Easter supplement to the *New English Weekly* on March 21 of that year. It was so popular that the supplement had to be reprinted in May and June before the poem was published in pamphlet form on September 12, 1940.

Part I

Eliot acknowledged a number of sources for the first movement of *East Coker*. The passage quotes directly from the book of Ecclesiastes and from Sir Thomas Elyot’s *The Boke of the Governour* (see Chapter 3, section V, and Chapter 6, section V), and there is in Eliot’s account of the midsummer dance a general similarity with Freidrich Gerstäcker’s story ‘Ger­melshausen’ (see Chapter 2, section II).

The stress upon times past which these sources suggest is announced even in the opening line, which is an inversion of the motto embroidered upon the chair of state of the ill-fated Mary Stuart: ‘En rna fin est rna commencement’. 23 When questioned about this source Eliot admitted, ‘Yes, this device was, of course, in my mind, but there was no particular relevance about Mary Stuart except that she had her place in the sixteenth century’. 24 Eliot is perhaps being playfully mendacious here, for the life of Mary Stuart does seem relevant to the poem. Maurice Baring, in his biography of Mary Stuart, *In My End Is My Beginning*, comments on the motto: 25

> there is no doubt that practically and politically the end of the Queen of Scots was her beginning; for at her death her son, James Stuart, became the heir to the crowns of England and Scotland, and he lived to wear both crowns.

Eliot must also have been aware of the pun on the word ‘succession’. The house that rose was the House of Stuart; and it does not seem accidental that in *Little Gidding* Eliot concerns himself with a moment in history when this House fell with Charles I, only to ‘rise’ again with Charles II. Another ‘device’ was also in Eliot’s mind, however. In a letter to his brother Henry, Eliot identified the ‘silent motto’ which is mentioned later in the opening passage as ‘Eliot motto *tace et fac’* (‘Be silent and act’). 26

The major sources for this opening passage are supplemented by a number of echoes of more recent poets. There is a general correspondence with two of Tennyson’s poems, ‘The Deserted House’, ‘The house was builded of the earth,/ And shall fall again to ground’, and

---

26 Drew, p.165, n.17. A variation of this motto was included in the dedication to Eliot’s father, Henry Ware Eliot in *The Sacred Wood*: ‘For H.W.E.: Tacuit et fecit’ (He was silent and acted). The motto originated with Thomas Elyot, and appeared on the frontispiece of *The Bankette of Sapience*, again in an altered form (‘Face aut Tace’—‘Do or be silent’). See *Four Political Treatises*, Facsimile Reproductions with an introduction by Lillian Gottesman (Gainsville, Florida: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1967), p.102.
'Mariana', which describes a decaying house with a 'mouse/ Behind the mouldering wainscot'. Similarly, Eliot's phrase, 'flesh, fur and faeces', echoes (parodically) Hopkins' 'The May Magnificat': 'Flesh and fleece, fur and feather'.

A third Victorian whose presence can be discerned in *East Coker* I is Rudyard Kipling. Eliot published a selection of Kipling's verse in December 1941, and had most probably begun work on it when he was writing *East Coker*. His introduction to it is particularly interesting for its comments on Kipling's treatment of country-life, comments which have a definite bearing on Eliot's evaluation of village-life in this poem. Referring to Kipling's Sussex stories (in which the story *They* is included), Eliot says (OPAP, pp.248, 250):

> The historical imagination may give us an awful awareness of the extent of time, or it may give us a dizzy sense of the nearness of the past. It may do both. Kipling . . . aims I think to give at once a sense of the antiquity of England, of the number of generations and peoples who have laboured the soil and in turn been buried beneath it, and of the contemporaneity of the past.

Kipling's vision of the people of the soil . . . is not a Christian vision, but it is at least a pagan vision—a contradiction of the materialistic view: it is the insight into a harmony with nature which must be re-established if the truly Christian imagination is to be recovered by Christians.

The closing lines of the movement bring a change of scene:

> Dawn points,
> and another day
> Prepares for heat and silence. Out at sea the dawn wind
> Wrinkles and slides.

A possible source is Tennyson's frequently anthologized poem, 'The Eagle' ('The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls'), but the lines also recall Dante's description of the sea as he leaves Hell and crosses to the Mount of Purgatory and the next stage of his journey (*Purgatorio* I, 115–17):

> The dawn was vanquishing the breath of morn which fled before her, so that from afar I recognised the trembling of the sea.

**Part II**

*East Coker* II is concerned with the search for a genuine insight into the significance of the procession of time. The lyric section is reminiscent of many apocalyptic descriptions of the

---

27 Eliot began the poem with the intention of setting it in May (*Gardner*, p.98).

28 Eliot included in his selection 'The Recall', a poem whose persona is the earth who calls human beings back to himself as a father calls his children. The poem was originally published as a companion-piece to one of the Sussex stories, *An Habitation Enforc'd*.

29 Eliot is exploiting a multi-lingual pun on the word 'point'. As well as the obvious English meaning 'to indicate', 'point' is the third person singular form of the French verb 'poindre', 'to break, dawn'.
destruction of the world. Eliot may have been thinking specifically of Christ’s prediction in Luke 21. 25 of ‘signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring’. The poet identifies several celestial ‘signs’:

Scorpion fights against the Sun
Until the Sun and Moon go down
Comets weep and Leonids fly.

‘The Sun is in Scorpio’, Helen Gardner explains, ‘from 24th October to 20th November, when it has begun its declination, which continues while it is in the next sign, Sagittarius, the Archer. Taurus is the zodiacal opposite of Scorpio. The Sun enters it in April when it is moving to its exaltation’ (Gardner, p.101). ‘Leonids’ are meteors in the constellation of Leo which appear sporadically in mid-November, with major showers occurring every thirty–three years. The weeping of the comets presumably refers to the shape of their tail.

Eliot combines these astronomical details with verbal echoes from ‘M’introduire dans ton histoire’, the sonnet by Mallamé from which he had borrowed in the same movement of Burnt Norton. Eliot’s ‘Thunder rolled by the rolling stars/ Simulates triumphal cars’ echoes ‘Tonnerre et rubis aux moyeux’ (‘Thunder and rubies at the axles’) and ‘Du seul vespéral de mes chars’ (‘Of my sole chariot of the evening’). There does not appear to be any significant thematic parallel.

In the second section of East Coker II the poet considers the inadequacy of ‘the wisdom of old men’, and describes himself in terms reminiscent of those with which Dante describes his spiritual state in the opening lines of the Divina Commedia:

In the middle, not only in the middle of the way
But all the way, in a dark wood, in a bramble,
On the edge of a grimpen, where is no secure foothold,
And menaced by monsters, fancy lights,
Risking enchantment.

The initial reference is to Inferno I, ll.1–2:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovi per una selva oscura,
che la diritta via era smarrita.

‘In the middle of the journey or our life I came to myself in a dark wood where the straight way was lost’. Eliot may also have been referring ironically to the ‘middle way’ which epitomized the ‘wisdom’ of Aristotle (see Nicamachean Ethics II) and of Renaissance figures like Sir Thomas Elyot. The cultivation of a disposition which characteristically chooses the way of moderation is an attitude whose validity Eliot is calling into question.

Eliot’s use of the word ‘grimpen’ suggests another source. ‘Grimpen’ is a nonce–word from Arthur Conan Doyle’s The Hound of the Baskervilles (1902), the name of a mire on

30He may even have been responding to the insistence among some Christians that these prophecies were being fulfilled in the unfolding conflict in Europe.
Dartmoor (Gardner, p.103):³¹

'That is the great Grimpen Mire', said he. 'A false step yonder means death to man or beast'... Life has become like that great Grimpen Mire, with little green patches everywhere into which one may sink and with no guide to point the track.

The Mire is where the villain Stapleton keeps his 'hell-hound' and where he meets his death, despite the fact that he has marked his way across it. Eliot was a life-long fan of detective stories, and admired Conan Doyle's in particular.

The phrase 'fancy lights' refers to the phenomenon of ignis fatuus, or 'will-o'-the wisps'—glowing caused by gases emitted from rotting vegetation often seen on the moors at night. Dr Watson describes a similar light—not, however, the ignis fatuus—in chapter 9 of Conan Doyle's novel (pp.112-13):

We stumbled along in the darkness, with the black loom of the craggy hills around us, and the yellow speck of light burning steadily in the front. There is nothing so deceptive as the distance of a light upon a pitch-dark night, and sometimes the glimmer seemed to be far away upon the horizon and sometimes it might have been within a few yards of us... It was strange to see this single candle burning in the middle of the moor with no sign of life near it.³²

The notion that wisdom is to be gained through experience is discounted again in the closing lines of the movement:

Do not let me hear
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,
Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.

Several echoes can be noted here. The phrase 'their fear of fear' is reminiscent of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous words from his Inaugural Address of 1933—'We have nothing to fear but fear itself'. In light of the political situation which had developed by 1939, Eliot is perhaps noting the folly of this 'old man's' wisdom.

The 'fear of frenzy' echoes W.B. Yeats' 'An Acre of Grass':

Grant me an old man's frenzy,
Myself must I remake
Till I am Timon and Lear
Or that William Blake


³²Eliot's description also echoes a statement of John Henry Cardinal Newman's in chapter 4 of An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent; until we attain true assent to Christian doctrine, he claims 'we have no intellectual moorings, and are at the mercy of impulses, fancies, and wandering lights whether as regards personal conduct, social and political action, or religion' (New edition, ed. C.F. Harrold (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1947), p.67). See also Eliot's use of Newman's terminology in his essay on Pascal (SE, p.408).
Who beat upon the wall
Till Truth obeyed his call;

A mind Michel Angelo knew
That can pierce the clouds,
Or inspired by frenzy
Shake the dead in their shrouds;
Forgotten else by mankind,
As old man's eagle mind.

And the fear of 'possession' is reminiscent of Eliot’s own statement in The Waste Land V ("The awful daring of a moment's surrender/ Which an age of prudence can never retract").

The final couplet of East Coker II adapts Robert Louis Stevenson's 'Requiem'. Eliot writes:

The houses are all gone under the sea.
The dancers are all gone under the hill.

And Stevenson:33

Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.34

Part III

The focus of East Coker III is the exposition of the 'via negativa' of St John of the Cross and the poet's attempts to 'still' his soul in order to enter it (see Chapter 5, section V, part ii). The passages which form the prelude to the introduction of this theme contained several important literary echoes. The movement begins:

O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant,


34Eliot had alluded to the same poem in The Waste Land, ll.220–22:
the evening hour that strives
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from the sea,
The typist home at teatime.
The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters.
The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,
Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees,
Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the dark,
And dark the Sun and Moon, and the Almanach de Gotha
And the Stock Exchange Gazette, the Directory of Directors.

The passage adapts Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, ll.80–89:

Scarce half I seem to live, dead more than half.
O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
Without all hope of day! . . .
The Sun to me is dark
And silent as the moon,
When she deserts the night
Hid in her vacant interlunar cave.

Eliot commented on this passage in his 1936 essay on Milton (*OPAP*, pp.140–41):

Even in his most mature work, Milton does not infuse new life into the word, as Shakespeare does . . . . Here *interlunar* is certainly a stroke of genius, but it is merely combined with ‘vacant’ and ‘cave’, rather than giving and receiving life from them. Thus it is not unfair, as it might at first appear, to say that Milton writes English like a dead language.

In his attempt to redeem Milton's passage, Eliot combines it with a variety of ironic personal and literary echoes. Henry Vaughan's 'They are all gone into the world of light' is suggested by the opening line, while Rudyard Kipling's 'The Captains and the Kings depart' (from 'Recessional') seems to have contributed to Eliot's list of departing dignitaries. Also the phrase 'dark the Sun and Moon' echoes Swinburne's 'The Last Oracle': 'Dark the shrine and dumb the fount of song thence swelling'. The lines are also reminiscent of St John's Apocalyptic vision (Revelation 6. 12–15):

and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair . . . And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the rocks of the mountains.

Eliot was himself an 'eminent man of letters' and had worked in a bank for many years. During the time that he was writing *East Coker* he was sitting on numerous committees as part of his 'war–work'. The three publications he mentions gave listings of such 'eminent men'. The *Almanach de Gotha* was an annual almanac published in French sporadically between 1765 and 1944. It was the standard handbook of its kind, comprising a section of genealogies of the ruling and dispossessed houses of Europe, and of the lesser princely houses, and a section giving statistical and descriptive information about the major countries of the world, listing the principal executive, legislative and diplomatic officials of each. The *Stock Exchange Gazette* is a weekly report of financial dealings, which has been published in London since 1901, and the *Directory of Directors* has been published annually since 1878, listing the principal directors in English companies.

---

35 This is noted by Sweeney, in Bergonzi, p.47.
Part IV

Eliot wrote to Anne Ridler concerning this section (Gardner, p.109):

I am glad . . . that you like part IV, which is in a way the heart of the matter. My intention was to avoid a pastiche of George Herbert or Crashaw—it would be folly to try—and to do something in the style of Cleveland or Benlowes, only better; and I liked the use of this so English XVII form with a content so very un-English.

Eliot appears to have succeeded in avoiding Herbert and Crashaw, but the lyric abounds with echoes of the work English poets and writers of the seventeenth century, not to mention influences from other times and languages.36

The 'style of Cleveland or Benlowes' can be illustrated by the introduction to Benlowes' Pneumato-Sarco-Machia, or Theophila's Spiritual Warfare:37

This world is His [Christ's] pitched field; His standard the cross; His colours Blood; His armour Patience; His battle Persecution; His victory Death. And in mystical Divinity His two-handed sword is the Word and the Spirit, which wounds and heals; and what is shed in this holy war is not blood but Love; His trumpeters are Prophets and Preachers; His menaces Mercies; and His arrows Benefits. When He offers Himself to us He invades us; . . . In the cords of love He leads us captives; and kills us into life.

Eliot's passage is punctuated with conceits comparable to these. A number of analogies from religious literature have already been found for the images of the opening stanza:38

The wounded surgeon plies the steel
That questions the distempered part;
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel
The sharp compassion of the healer's art
Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.

Several sources in English poetry offer themselves for consideration as well. Everyman, for instance (ll.744–746):

Thou art the surgeon that cureth sin deadly;
No remedy we find under God
But all only priesthood.

These lines from the so-called 'digression on priesthood' are spoken by Five Wits to Everyman. Earlier he had explained to Everyman (ll.715–20) that even 'the least priest in the world . . . beareth the keys' of the sacraments and:

36 Eliot's use of the notion of a necessary sickness, a conceit common among mystical and religious writers, is discussed in Chapter 5, section V, part ii.
38 See Chapter 5, p.125.
thereof hath the cure
For man's redemption . . .
Which God for our soul's medicine
Gave us out of his heart with great pain. 39

A further parallel with the 'digression' can be discerned in the account of the Eucharist in the last stanza of East Coker IV. Five Wits speaks of 'the sacrament of God's precious flesh and blood (l.724), and notes that a priest 'with five words . . . may consecrate, God's body in flesh and blood to make (l.737-8). (The five words are those spoken at the consecration, 'Hoc est enim corpus meum'.)

The rhythm and figures recall Marvell's 'A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body':

Constrain'd not only to indure
Diseases, but what's worse, the Cure.

And the diction Pope's 'Essay on Man' II, ll.143–6:

Imagination plies her dang'rous art,
And pours it all upon the peccant part.
Nature its mother, Habit its nurse;
Wit, Spirit, Faculties, but make it worse. 40

Also, Sir Walter Scott's The Lady of the Lake has a line, 'That horseman plied the scourge and steel' which shares with Eliot's opening line the verb 'ply' with the object 'steel'. There is moreover a similarity in sound between 'surgeon' and 'scourge', and the rhythm of the two lines is identical. 41

Several sources could be sustained for the image of the earth as a hospital which Eliot had used previously in The Family Reunion (CPP, p.335):

Up and down, through the stone passages
Of an immense and empty hospital
Pervaded by the smell of disinfectant,
Looking straight ahead, passing barred windows.

Mallarmé describes the world as a 'triste hôpital' in one of his better-known poems, 'Les Fenêtres'. The parallel with East Coker IV is strengthened by other details, notably a dying man and large crucifix. John Hayward suggested to Eliot Sir Thomas Browne's Religio Medici, II, 12 (p.83): 'For the World, I count it not an Inn, but an Hospital, and a place, not to live, but to dye in'. Eliot only reluctantly acknowledged it as a source (Gardner, p.108). Goethe's

39The parallels are noted by Frances E. Zapatka, 'East Coker, IV and Everyman', American Notes and Queries, 18, no.1(Sept. 1979), 7–9. (Quotations from Everyman are taken from this article.) In 'Seneca in Elizabethan Translation' (SE, p.83), Eliot referred to Everyman as the 'highest point' of the popular drama which was 'classical in the profounder sense'.

40The order of the highlighted words is almost identical in both poems. The echo is noted by Jae Ho Lee, 'Alexander Pope in Eliot's East Coker', Notes and Queries, New Series, 10, no.10(Oct. 1963), 381.

41See Christopher Williams, 'East Coker and The Lady of the Lake', Notes and Queries, New Series, 27, no.3(June 1980), 238.
statement on romanticism has also been suggested as a possible source: 'All these poets write as though they were ill, and as though the whole world were a hospital'.

This hospital has been 'endowed by the ruined millionaire', whom Eliot identified as Adam. Helen Gardner suggests a more complex—and perhaps more tenuous—source in Gide's story Le Prométhée Mal Enchaîné (from which Eliot quoted in The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, p.69). The story concerns a Zeus-character who bestows, apparently at random, large sums of money and unmerited blows. He is confronted by Prometheus and informs him that the eagle which torments him by eating his liver is in fact another of his gifts (Gardner, pp.44-46). A more direct verbal source for the line is a passage from T.E. Hulme which Eliot quoted at the end of his essay on Baudelaire (SE, p.430):

In the light of these absolute values, man himself is judged to be essentially limited and imperfect. He is endowed with Original Sin. While he can occasionally accomplish acts which partake of perfection, he can never himself be perfect. Certain secondary results in regard to ordinary human action in society follow from this. A man is essentially bad, he can only accomplish anything of value by discipline—ethical and political. Order is thus not merely negative, but creative and liberating.

This radical imperfection is what Eliot calls 'our, and Adam's curse'. The curse is proclaimed by God in Genesis 3, 17-19: 'And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee saying, "Thou shalt not eat of it": cursed is the ground for thy sake: in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground, for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return'.

Apart from the specific echoes and analogues, this passage is characterized by the use of words which resonate with original meanings now obsolete or very rare. A brief etymological survey reveals layers of alternative meanings like those in which the metaphysical poets delighted. The word 'steel', for instance, appears to refer to a scalpel; but in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the word was used commonly for medicinal potions containing iron. Other hidden medical terms are present: 'distempered' originates in medieval physiology in which 'temper' is synonymous with 'humour' and refers to an imbalance among the four primary liquids of the body. Milton, in Paradise Lost XI, 55-56, speaks of 'sin, that first distempered all things'. 'Resolving' means 'to solve an equation', and is in obvious harmony with 'enigma', in the same line; but it can also mean 'to separate into distinguishable parts', and, in medicine, 'to disperse or dissipate'.

There are also concealed legal meanings in Eliot's vocabulary. 'Questions' seems to imply an explorative operation, but also refers to a judicial examination or accusation. 'Prevents' has a general meaning of 'anticipates', and is used in law to refer specifically to precautionary measures undertaken by due process. In Canon Law the word means 'to transact or undertake any affair before an inferior, by right of position'. In theology it has a further meaning in

42 The comment appears in a letter to Eckermann (24 September 1827) and is quoted by Irving Babbit in Rousseau and Romanticism (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1919), p.309. See Smith, p.272. Eliot had in his office a portrait of 'the Goethe of the days of the conversations with Eckermann' ('Goethe as the Sage', OPP, p.207).
43 Raymond Preston, 'Four Quartets' Rehearsed, p.34.
reference to God's grace which is 'held to be given in order to predispose to repentance, faith and good works' (OED).

Other theological resonances can be found. The word 'compassion' has come to mean merely 'sympathy', but means literally 'to suffer along with' and is therefore particularly apt in a description of Christ. 'Restored' is used in theology to describe the placement of mankind into a state of grace, free from sin; and 'absolute', which in common speech is synonymous with 'complete', is linked through its Latin root with the Christian doctrine of 'absolution'.

Lastly, Eliot's phrase 'substantial flesh and blood' taps one of the most widely debated points of Christian doctrine, the nature of Christ's Incarnation. The relationship between Christ's substance and God's was the key issue in the early councils of the church and the search for a precise definition was a major task of the formulators of the creeds.

Part V

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years—
Twenty years largely wasted, the years of l'entre deux guerres—
Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure.

The opening of the final section of East Coker is similar in tone and phrasing to several of the poems of Arthur Hugh Clough. Eliot told John Hayward that 'Blake and Clough keep on getting into [East Coker], and I have been trying to rub them out' (Gardner, p.17). Clough's Blank Misgivings of a Creature Moving in Worlds Not Realized begins:

Here am I yet, another twelvemonth spent,
One-third departed of the mortal span,
Carrying of the child into the man,
Nothing into reality.

The resemblance is little more than verbal, for Eliot's major theme in this passage is the poet's attempt to master his language. Numerous parallels for Eliot's thinking here can be found in his own prose. 'A ceaseless care, a passionate and untiring devotion to language, is the first conscious concern of the poet', Eliot wrote in 'A Commentary: That Poetry is Made with Words': 'it demands study of how his language has been written, in both prose and verse, in the past, and sensitiveness to the merits and shortcomings of the way in which it is spoken and written in his own time'. The military and pioneering metaphors which are used in East Coker V, appear also in this contemporaneous essay:

It is true, I think, that poetry, if it is not to be a lifeless repetition of forms, must be constantly exploring 'the frontiers of the spirit'. But these frontiers are not like the surveys of geographical explorers, conquered once for all and settled.

---

44 Eliot's phrase 'absolute paternal care' carries a verbal echo of King Lear, I, i, 113: 'Here I disclaim all my paternal care'.

45 The parallel with Clough is explored by Paul Murray in 'The Unidentified Ghost: A.H. Clough and T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets', Studies (Ireland), 70(Spring 1981), 35–54. Quotations from Clough are taken from this essay.

46 New English Weekly, 15, no.2(27 April 1939), 27–28.
The frontiers of the spirit are more like the jungle which, unless continuously kept under control, is always ready to encroach and eventually obliterate the cultivated area. Our effort is as much to regain, under very difficult conditions, what was known to men writing at remote time and in alien languages . . . . But emotions themselves are constantly being lost; they can never be merely preserved, but must be always re-discovered; and it is as much this endless battle to regain civilisation, in the midst of continuous outer and inner change of history, as the struggle to conquer the absolutely new, that is the occupation of the poet. Just as history has constantly to be re-written, . . . so also the poet needs an alert consciousness of the past, in order to realise in its particular concreteness the moment at which he lives . . . this is a fresh problem in every generation: for the point of departure is one’s language as it is spoken at one’s own time . . . .

Even if the language is deteriorated, the poet must start from where he is, and not from a point at which he believes the language to have been superior . . . . what would make me most apprehensive about the future of the language—and that implies the future of sensibility, for what we cease to try to find words for, we cease to be able to feel—would be to observe a decreasing level of literacy among poets.

Eliot’s image of the ‘raid on the inarticulate’ seems to owe something to a passage which he quoted from Jacques Rivière in 1933: ‘It is only with the advent of Romanticism that the literary act came to be conceived as a sort of raid on the absolute and its results as a revelation’ (‘The Modern Mind’, UPUC, p.128). The notion of poetry as a ‘revelation’ of absolute truth was one which Eliot disputed on the grounds that it made poetry a substitute for religion. It was not ‘the absolute’ that the poet hoped to plunder, but rather ‘the inarticulate’. Eliot’s comments in his 1950 essay ‘What Dante Means to Me’ are illuminating on this point (TCC, p.134):

the great poet should not only perceive and distinguish more clearly than other men, the colours or sounds within the range of ordinary vision or hearing; he should perceive vibrations beyond the range of ordinary men, and be able to make men see and hear more at each end than they could ever see without his help . . . . It is therefore a constant reminder to the poet, of the obligation to explore, to find words for the inarticulate, to capture those feelings which people can hardly even feel, because they have no words for them; and at the same time, a reminder that the explorer beyond the frontiers of ordinary consciousness will only be able to return and report to his fellow-citizens, if he has all the time a firm grasp upon the realities with which they are already acquainted . . . . The task of the poet, in making people comprehend the incomprehensible, demands immense resources of language; and in developing the language, enriching the meaning of words and showing how much words can do, he is making possible a much greater range of emotion and perception for other men, because he gives them the speech in which more can be expressed.

The attitude which Eliot recommends—not only to the poet, but to those involved in any sphere of endeavour—is not that of the humanist, content to acquire human wisdom. Instead, he says, ‘Old men ought to be explorers’. Eliot may have had in mind the archetypal explorer,
Ulysses, who was not content to die in peace on Ithaca, but followed his questing spirit to the ends of the earth. The story is not told by Homer, but is taken up by Dante in *Inferno* XXVI and by Tennyson in ‘Ulysses’.

Another such ‘explorer’ was W.B. Yeats, whose poetry had a progressively strengthening influence upon Eliot. In the first Yeats memorial lecture, Eliot praised Yeats’ ‘adaptation to the years’, his ability to change and to develop even after middle-age. ‘It requires . . . an exceptional honesty and courage to face the change’, Eliot went on, ‘Most men either cling to the experiences of youth, so that their writing becomes an insincere mimicry of their earlier work, or they leave their passion behind, and write only from the head, with a hollow and wasted virtuosity’ (*OPP*, p.257).

A third explorer could be added to the list, although the link with *East Coker* is not as strong. In *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development*, J.W.N. Sullivan describes the composer ‘chiefly as an explorer’ (p.258).47 This was nowhere as marked as in the last quartets—which the composer wrote in the final months of his life—where Beethoven was ‘exploring new regions of consciousness’ (p.222). It is to this continuing pilgrimage that *East Coker* calls us.

---

47 The possible influence of Sullivan’s work on *Four Quartets* is discussed in Chapter 6, p.194.
III  ‘The Dry Salvages’

The poem was written in the later months of 1940 and was published in the *New English Weekly* on February 27, 1941 and in pamphlet form on September 4 of the same year.

Parts I and II

As was noted in Chapter 2, the description of the river and sea with which the poem opens is derived primarily from Eliot’s own childhood memories. However, in recalling his childhood Eliot inevitably recalls the novels and poetry which contributed to his early impressions. Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* is a pervasive influence, as Eliot’s introduction to the 1950 edition of the novel illustrates. The first two sections of *The Dry Salvages* also contain echoes of Wordsworth, Whitman, Tennyson, Arnold, E.B. Browning, Homer, Yeats and Arthur Hugh Clough.

Eliot’s description of the ‘rhythm’ of the river which ‘was present in the nursery bedroom’ suggests a debt to Wordsworth’s account of the influence of the river Derwent upon his own infancy in *The Prelude* I, ll.270–71:

> That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved  
> To blend his murmurs with my nurse’s song.

The detail of the ‘ailanthus’, however, and the term ‘dooryard’, indicate an American setting for Eliot’s river.48 Whitman’s ‘When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed’ may also have been in the poet’s mind, especially since lilacs would be a feature of an ‘April dooryard’. Eliot’s also echoes Whitman’s ‘the tolling tolling bells’ perpetual clang’ in phrases like ‘The tolling bell’, ‘Clangs/ The bell’, and—later, in Part IV—‘the sea bell’s/ Perpetual angelus’.

Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’ has already been noted as a source for the sea’s ‘many voices’;49 but Eliot’s memory of other Victorians appears also to have contributed to the poem. Eliot’s use of the river and the sea as images of time is analogous to Arnold’s in his poem ‘The Future’, although there does not seem to be any direct allusion. The phrase ‘it tosses up our losses’ recalls the first four lines of E.B. Browning’s ‘The Lost Bower’ which formed part of the complex of allusions in the rose-garden passage of *Burnt Norton*. Eliot himself acknowledged that these lines had ‘always stuck in my head’ (Gardner, p.41):

> In the pleasant orchard-closes,  
> ‘God bless all our gains,’ say we.  
> But ‘May God bless all our losses,’  
> Better suits with our degree.

The influence of A.H. Clough, which Eliot had tried in vain to expunge from the *Quartets*, is to be found in the metre and the wording of Eliot’s ‘Unhonoured, unpropitiated/ By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and waiting’. The lines can be compared with Clough’s *Amours de Voyage* (canto II, xii):

48 The ‘ailanthus’ is a large tree, native of East Asia (where it is known as the ‘tree of heaven’), which is grown throughout the United States for shade and ornament. It has ‘ill-scented staminate flowers’ (Webster).

Ah, let me look, let me watch, let me wait, unhurried, unprompted... Say not, Time flies, and occasion, that never returns, is departing! Drive me not out, ye ill angels with fiery swords, from my Eden, Waiting, and watching, and looking!

The influence of a later 'Victorian' can be discerned in the image of 'the bone's prayer to Death its God'. The phrase is reminiscent of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* which strongly influenced Eliot's early poetry. A more direct source, perhaps, is Yeats' poem 'Three Things' (1929), phrases from which may have lodged in Eliot's mind after his inaugural Yeats memorial lecture in June 1940:

'O cruel Death, give three things back,' 
*Sang a bone upon the shore*; . . . . 
*A bone wave-whitened and dried in the wind.*

Finally, an awareness of classical literature appears to have contributed to *The Dry Salvages.* Eliot recalls Homer's Penelope weaving and unweaving the shroud for Laertes in the *Odyssey* Book II, while she waits, with ever-dwindling hope, for Odysseus to return from his sea-voyage:

time counted by anxious worried women
Lying awake, calculating the future,
Trying to unweave, unwind, unravel
And piece together the past and the future,
Between midnight and dawn.

In light of this reference, the phrase 'the dark throat' which appears in Part IV could be taken as an allusion to the whirlpool of Charybdis which Odysseus braves in the *Odyssey* XII.

Eliot's use of the term 'halcyon day' also recalls a legend which originated in classical literature. 'Halcyon' is the Latin name for 'kingfisher', the bird which offered a brief intimation of the 'still point' in *Burnt Norton* IV. The bird gives its name to the calm days surrounding the winter solstice. According to popular belief halcyon days were calm because no storm may arise while the kingfisher, which was said to build its nest on the surface of the sea, is hatching its eggs. The legend goes back as far as Pliny and Ovid (see, for instance, *Metamorphoses* XI).

Part III

Although it is the *Bhagavad-Gītā* that dominates this section (see Chapter 5, section VI, part i), several secondary influences can be discerned. There is, for instance, a thematic similarity between the images of the train and the passenger ship and Whitman's 'A Passage to India', although it is again Arthur Hugh Clough who provides a source for Eliot's wording:

---

50 Metrically, the poem points to an earlier age as well. In the first part of the second section, Eliot uses what most critics agree is a modified sestina pattern. Stephen J. Adams, prefers to describe the form as 'a Provencal form known as *coblías estrampas* ("isolated stanzas"), which he describes as a favoured form of Arnaut Daniel ('T.S. Eliot's So-Called "Sestina": A Note On The Dry Salvages, II', *English Language Notes*, 15(1978), 203–08). A.D. Moody refers to the form as a *canzoni* and notes that Eliot also imitates Daniel's practice of repeating the rhyme words themselves. See *Thomas Stearns Eliot, Poet*, p.226.
When the train starts, and passengers are settled
To fruit, periodicals and business letters . . . .
You are not the same people who left that station
Or who will arrive at any terminus,
While the narrowing rails slide together behind you.

In *Amours de Voyage* (canto III, vi) Clough also arraigns travellers:

Look you, we travel along in the railway-carriage, or steamer,
And . . .
Lay aside paper or book, to talk with the girl that is next one;
And, pour passer le temps, with the terminus all but in prospect,
Talk of eternal ties and marriages made in heaven . . . .
Ah, did we really believe that the Present indeed is the Only!

Eliot admonishes his readers in words which he himself believed to have been spoken by
the Sibyl to the Visigoth Alaric on his way to attack Rome:

Fare forward, travellers! not escaping from the past . . . .
Not fare well,
But fare forward, voyagers.

The source identified by Eliot seems most obscure. Helen Gardner cites a little–known poem
of Claudian (*De Bello Gothico* II, 164, ll.544–47), but suggests that Eliot was more than likely
remembering some historical novel or poem read in his youth (*Gardner*, p.139). Eliot had in
fact used a very similar phrase in the speech of the Fourth Tempter in *Murder in the Cathedral*
(*CPP*, p.253):

Fare forward to the end.
All other ways are closed to you
Except the way already chosen.

Whitman’s ‘Song of the Open Road’ could also be suggested as an analogue to these
lines. The similarity is in the poet’s general attitude towards the future as something actively
to be grasped. Eliot’s line may also be echoing part 13 of the poem: ‘Forever alive, forever
forward’. A final possibility is ‘Le Voyage’, the last poem in Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*51. Baudelaire speaks of the ‘Amer savoir, celui qu’on tire du voyage!’, the ‘Bitter knowledge, that
which one draws from a voyage!’ The traveller is haunted by the image of himself, ‘Une oasis
d’horrure dans un désert d’ennui!’ which is imprinted upon his mind by the broadening of his
experience of the world. Baudelaire depicts mankind fleeing from this image, and from Time
which can be escaped neither by ‘wagon ni vaisseau’ (‘rail carriage nor boat’). All that we can
do as we sense the approaching doom is to cry, ‘En avant!’, ‘Forward!’52

---


Part IV

The sources of the lyric section of *The Dry Salvages* are primarily liturgical. The prayer to the Virgin, the significance of the Angelus, and the allusions to the Bible, Anglican liturgy and Dante's *Paradiso* are dealt with in full in the Chapter 3, section VI, and Chapter 5, section VI, ii.

Part V

Although in earlier life Eliot had attended séances (*Ackroyd*, p.113), he soon became sceptical about the value of the occult practices and pseudo-scientific divination which he describes in the opening lines of this movement. The satirical portrait of the fortune-teller, Madame Sosostris, in *The Waste Land* illustrates his distrust of such methods of attaining ‘wisdom’. His conversion, as might be expected, strengthened his opposition to the kind of practices he lists here. In ‘The Modern Mind’ (*UPUC*, p.140), while discussing the danger of associating poetry too closely with mysticism, he criticized Yeats’ *Autobiographies* and his earlier poetry for ‘trying to get as a poet something like the exaltation to be obtained, I believe, from hashisch or nitrous oxide’. (In this last detail Eliot was referring also to Aldous Huxley’s celebrated experiments with the inducement of quasi-mystical trances through the use of nitrous oxide and mescaline.)

In 1938, he expressed his contempt for pseudo-science in his response to a questionnaire concerning ‘the Spirit and Language of Night’. He refused to comment on his most recent ‘day-dream, waking-sleeping hallucination, [or] phantasma’ or on ‘any ancestral myths or symbols in [his] collective unconscious’, and said that he found his own ‘night-mind’ ‘quite uninteresting’. This disapprobation is reflected in *The Family Reunion*, which Eliot was writing at the time. The chorus of aunts and uncles laments (*CPP*, p.348):

> We know various spells and enchantments,  
> And minor forms of sorcery,  
> Divination and chiromancy,  
> Specifics against insomnia,  
> Lumbago, and the loss of memory.  
> But the circle of our understanding  
> Is a very limited area.

The list of practices which Eliot gives is nevertheless of some interest, if only as an indicator of the breadth of his knowledge. ‘Haruspication’ is divination by the inspection of the entrails of animals, a practice common among the Etruscans and Romans; while the verb ‘to scry’ means to divine by the use of crystal, water, or other reflective object. Eliot also mentions ‘sortilege’, divination by the casting of lots; the ‘pentagram’, an alchemist’s five-pointed figure (known as ‘the endless knot’) which is often credited with magical values; and ‘barbituric acids’, crystalline acids which were often used as hypnotic drugs.

---

Eliot’s phrase ‘communicate with Mars’ may have been borrowed from Irving Babbitt’s *Democracy and Leadership*:\(^{54}\)

Truth in this sense . . . is less congenial to human nature than error, because it imposes limitations, whereas error does not. Tell the average person that some one is planning to get into wireless communication with Mars, or to shoot a rocket at the moon, and he is all respectful interest and attention at once. Tell him, on the contrary, that he needs, in the interest of his own happiness, to walk in the path of humility and self-control, and he will be indifferent, or even actively resentful.\(^{55}\)

Perhaps the most interesting bogus practice included in the passage is the attempt to ‘Observe disease in signatures’. C.A. Bodelsen asked Eliot if this referred to ‘the attempts to draw conclusions about Shakespeare’s last illness from the signatures on his will’.\(^{56}\) Eliot explained, however, that he:

was not thinking of Shakespeare’s signature or that of anyone else, but was using the word in a much more obscure and possibly not permissible sense. The definition is found in the large Oxford Dictionary as no.4 of the meanings of signature, and I would quote this example which is given there. 1697 ‘Whether men, as they say of plants, have signatures to discover their nature by, is hard to determine’. Another example from 1748, ‘There are some which think herbs the fittest for curing those parts of man’s body, to which they bear some sort of resemblance, commonly called a signature’.

The OED definition reads: ‘A distinctive mark, a peculiarity in form or colouring, etc., on a plant or other natural object, formerly supposed to be an indication of its qualities, esp. for medicinal purposes’. In October 1938, *The Criterion* had reviewed a book entitled *The Doctrine of Signatures* which held that a patient’s ‘symptoms are “signatures”, and the aim of the physician is to fit together the symptoms of his patient in sentences that will “indicate” the necessary treatment’. The reviewer criticized the book’s lack of concrete evidence to support its thesis (*The Criterion* XVIII, no.70, 111–13).

There is somewhat more ‘concrete evidence’ to report in ‘the behaviour of the sea monster’. One such monster was sighted off Cape Ann in June 1818 in an incident which would undoubtedly have become part of the local folk-lore of Eliot’s favourite sailing-haunt.\(^{57}\) Eliot is apparently referring to the attempt to reconstruct the past through studying the survivors of reptile species thought long extinct.

An interest in such phenomena is inevitable, Eliot says, whenever ‘there is distress of nations and perplexity/ Whether on the shores of Asia, or in the Edgware Road’.\(^{58}\) Eliot is


\(^{55}\)The parallel was suggested to the writer by Professor William Harmon of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Eliot did not regard Babbitt as an ally in his opposition to the occult, however. In the introduction to *Revelation*, he criticized Babbitt for indulging in a ‘psychological mysticism’ of a kind ‘which sometimes springs up in cults whose aims are not far removed from those of magic’ (p.23).


\(^{58}\)Edgware Road meets Hyde Park at the Marble Arch, a short distance away from Kensington where Eliot lived while he was writing *Four Quartets*. At the time Eliot was writing the road was ‘a heavily trafficked street with ugly architecture and cheap shops and restaurants’ (Bodelsen, p.101).
alluding to Christ's account of the 'signs' which will precede his second coming (Luke 21. 25, 27):

And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring . . . .
And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

Eliot's point is that the common mind occupies itself with 'pastimes' which distract it from the eternal pattern unfolding in history. What is important, he goes on, is not to search past and future for indications of mankind's significance, but 'to apprehend the point of intersection of the timeless with time', the entry of the Divine into the created world through the Incarnation of Christ (see Chapter 5, section VI, part iii).
IV ‘Little Gidding’

The first drafts of the poem were completed in July 1941—even those for the difficult *terza rima* passage of Part II—but it was not until October of 1942 that it was ready for publishing. Again it was the *New English Weekly* that Eliot chose for the first publication, on 15 October 1942. The separate pamphlet edition appeared on 1 December 1942.

Part I

Dante’s *Paradiso* XXX has already been noted as a possible literary source for the ‘midwinter spring’.59 Another possibility is that Eliot may have borrowed the paradox from Crashaw’s ‘In praise of Lessius his rule of health’ (ll.39–44):

Wouldst see blith lookes, fresh cheeks beguile
Age, wouldst see December smile?
Wouldst see a nest of Roses grow
In a bed of reverend snow?
Warne thoughts free spirits, flattering
Winters selfe into a spring?
In summe, wouldst see a man that can
Live to be old and still a man?

The poem was first printed (without its first fifteen lines) in an English translation of Leonard Lessius’s *Hygiasticcon: Or, The right course of preserving Life and Health unto extream old Age: Together with sound–nesse and integritie of the Senses, Judgement, and Memorie* (published in Cambridge in 1634). Of relevance to Eliot’s poem is the fact that the translation was reputedly the work of Nicholas Ferrar. Although the evidence for this is far from conclusive, the link with the founder of the Little Gidding community is intriguing.60

Part II

The lyric section, Eliot said, came out of his experience of fire–watching on the roof of Faber & Faber: ‘during the Blitz the accumulated debris was suspended in the London air for hours after a bombing. Then it would slowly descend and cover one’s sleeves and coat with a fine white ash. I often experienced this effect during long night hours on the roof’.61

59 See Chapter 4, p.94. A similar scene is described in *Murder in the Cathedral*, by the First Tempter (CPP, p.247):

Spring has come in winter. Snow in the branches
Shall float as sweet as blossoms. Ice along the ditches
Mirror the sunlight. Love in the orchard
Send the sap shooting. Mirth matches melancholy.


The imagery is of course derived principally from Heraclitus’ description of the cyclical mutation of the four elements in fragment 76 (see Chapter 6, p.157). The third stanza does, however, introduce the pre-Reformation setting which will be developed in the third part of the poem. The lines ‘The marred foundations we forgot, / Of sanctuary and choir’ may suggest the abbeys and chapels which were destroyed by Cromwell’s troops. There may also be a reference to Shakespeare’s meditation upon his own mutability in Sonnet 73:

Bare ruin’d choirs where late the sweet birds sang .
In me thou seest the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consum’d with that which it was nourished by.

In his 1950 essay ‘What Dante Means to Me’ Eliot described in some detail the composition of the second section of Little Gidding II (TCTC, p.128):

Twenty years after writing The Waste Land, I wrote, in Little Gidding, a passage which is intended to be the nearest equivalent to a canto of the Inferno of the Purgatorio, in style as well as content, that I could achieve. The intention, of course, was the same as with my allusions to Dante in The Waste Land: to present to the mind of the reader a parallel, by means of contrast, between the Inferno and the Purgatorio, which Dante visited and a hallucinated scene after an air-raid. But the method is different: here I was debarred from quoting or adapting at length—I borrowed and adapted freely only a few phrases—because I was imitating.

Eliot goes on to explain the difficulties of imitating Dante’s style, noting that this section of Little Gidding ‘cost me far more time and trouble and vexation than any passage of the same length that I have ever written’ (p.129). ‘It was not simply that I was limited to the Dantesque type of imagery, simile and figure of speech’, he continued; his problem ‘was chiefly that in this very bare and austere style, in which every word has to be “functional”, the slightest vagueness or imprecision is immediately noticeable’.

62 A more full account of the genesis of the ‘Dantean’ passage is found in Gardner, pp.63–69.

63 This aspect of Eliot’s ‘imitation’ is admirably elucidated by J.M. Reibetanz in A Reading of T.S. Eliot’s ‘Four Quartets’, p.163.

64 This detail is noted by Mario Praz in James Joyce, Thomas Stearns Eliot: due maestri dei moderni (Torino: 1967), p.141; quoted in Reibetanz, p.160.
day ‘la mente nostra peregrina più dalla carna ... alle sue vision quasi è divina’ (‘our mind, more of a wanderer from the flesh ... in its visions is almost prophetic’, II.16–18). Dante does in fact have a dream immediately afterwards. An eagle swoops upon him and carries him up into ‘the fiery sphere’ (I.30) where burns the ‘visionary flame’ (I.32) of Purgatory. Dante wakes to find that he has been transported into Purgatory as he has slept. The dissolution of the boundary between dreaming and waking experience is very much part of Eliot’s intention with this passage. This same canto is echoed later in the passage when the ghost notes that:

the passage now presents no hindrance
To the spirit unappeased and peregrine,
Between two worlds become much like each other.

The word ‘peregrine’ is used in Purgatorio IX (I.16) where Dante describes the soul susceptible to visions as ‘peregrina’.

Several of the allusions to the Commedia refer to Dante’s encounters with poets who had influenced him. One of these episodes, the meeting with Brunetto Latini, is not in the Purgatorio at all, but is found in canto XV of the Inferno. Eliot had deleted a direct quotation from this canto which was included in an earlier draft. The line ‘And heard another’s voice cry: “What! are you here?”’ originally included the phrase ‘Are you here, Ser Brunetto?’, a translation of Dante’s ‘Siete voi qui, ser Brunetto?’ (I.30). Eliot explained to John Hayward that he intended the reference to Inferno XV to be ‘explicit’, but had to drop the phrase in order to retain the specifically purgatorial effect of the passage (Gardner, pp.64–5).

Nevertheless, several echoes of Dante’s encounter with this ‘master’ can be heard:

And as I fixed upon the down-turned face
That pointed scrutiny with which we challenge
The first-met stranger in the waning dusk.

Eliot marked lines 16–21 in his copy of the Inferno (Soldo, p.17):

we met a troop of spirits, who were coming alongside the bank; and each looked at us, as in the evening men are wont to look at one another under a new moon; and towards us sharpened their vision, as an aged tailor does at the eye of his needle.

Eliot’s ‘down-turned face’ imitates Dante’s description of himself as later he walks with Latini (II.44–45): ‘ma il capo chino tenea, come uom che reverente vada’ (‘but [I] kept my head bent down, like one who walks in reverence’). Similarly, the ‘Brown-baked features’ of Eliot’s ghost find a parallel in lines 26–28: ‘ficcai gli occhi per lo cotto aspetto sì che il viso abbruciato non difese la conoscenza sua al mio intelletto’ (‘[I] fixed my eyes on his baked aspect, so that

---

65 The word is used again in canto XIII, 1.96, and in Paradiso VI, 1.135, ‘persona umile e peregrine’, a phrase Eliot used to describe himself in a speech given in 1947 (Moody, p.347). In Eliot’s copy of the Commedia the phrase is marked by a line in the margin. See Soldo, ‘Eliot’s Dantean Vision and his Markings in his Copy of the Divina Commedia’, p.18. Subsequent references will be included in the text.

66 Eliot included this passage in a list of episodes from the Inferno which ‘impress themselves most at the first reading’ (SE, p.247).
the scorching of his visage hindered not my mind from knowing him').

The ghost's advice to Eliot echoes the words of three more of Dante's poetic mentors. The scene returns to the Purgatorio with the ghost's account of the impermanence of language ('last year's words belong to last year's language/ And next year's words await another voice'). John Hayward notes a general debt to Oderisi d'Agobbio's comments upon the fleeting fame of poets (Quatre Quatuors, p.150). 'All Tuscany rang with the sound of [Salvani]', Oderisi declares, 'and now hardly is a whisper of him in Siena' (XI, ll.109–111).

The 'gifts' which the ghost says he will bestow upon Eliot are intended 'To set a crown upon your lifetime's effort'. The phrase suggests the passage in Purgatorio XXVII (ll.139–42) where, upon their entry into the Earthly Paradise at the summit of Purgatory, Dante's guide, the poet Virgil, dismisses his charge, saying, 'No more expect my word, or sign. Your Will is free, straight and whole, and not to follow its direction would be sin: wherefore I crown and mitre you (king and bishop) over yourself'. The last and greatest of these 'gifts' is 'the rending pain of re–enactment/ Of all that you have done, and been'. As Eliot noted in his 1929 essay on Dante, the tortures in Hell and Purgatory are intended primarily as reminders of the soul's own sins. For Dante, this 're–enactment' is to occur in the Earthly Paradise itself when Beatrice rehearses his transgression (Purgatorio XXX).

The final Dantean model for Eliot's canto is Arnaut Daniel, who appears in Purgatorio XXVI. There is a faint echo in Eliot's 'conscious impotence of rage/ At human folly' to Daniel's regret at 'passada folor' ('past folly'; 1.143). However, there is an unmistakeable debt in the 'refining fire' of the conclusion of Little Gidding II of Dante's final glimpse of Daniel: 'Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina', 'Then dived he back into that fire which refines them'.

The ghost of Little Gidding II is also a representative of poets to whom Eliot felt profoundly indebted. Eliot wrote to John Hayward that he hoped to supply in this episode 'some acute personal reminiscence (never to be explicated of course, but to give power from well below the surface)' (Gardner, p.24). Unlike Dante's spirits it was to be a 'compound ghost' whose identity was not fixed. Nevertheless, as the passage develops it becomes increasingly clear that the most prominent features to be discerned in the 'compound' are those of W.B. Yeats. Eliot tried to downplay this association; in a letter to John Hayward he wrote 'the visionary figure has now become somewhat more definite and will no doubt be identified by some readers with Yeats though I do not mean anything so precise as that. However, I do not wish to take the responsibility of putting Yeats or anybody else into Hell' (Gardner, p.64). In answer to a written enquiry by Kristian Smidt, however, the poet admitted that he 'was thinking primarily

67 Steve Ellis itemizes the stylistic parallels between the two passages. He points to a similar frequency of end-stopped lines and lines beginning with conjunctions, and of a correlation of the tercets which involves beginning one with a subordinate clause and delaying the main verb until the following tercet. See Dante and English Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.242.

68 The translation is Eliot's own (SE, p.261). In Quatre Quatuors (p.150) John Hayward suggests that Eliot's 'distant shore' is an allusion to Virgil's Aeneid VI, l.314: 'Tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore'. The souls who still await proper burial 'stretched out their hands in longing for the opposite shore'. A faint echo of the same book of the Aeneid may be discerned in Eliot's 'metal leaves' which could be compared with the golden leaves which Aeneas seeks as a passport to the world of the dead (VI, ll.206–13).

69 Eliot wrote to John Hayward of this line, 'I want to preserve the association of "enact"—to take the part of oneself on a stage for oneself as the audience' (Gardner, p.194).

70 The importance of this source is discussed in Chapter 5, p.142.
of William Yeats, . . . The body on the foreign shore was William Yeats's.\textsuperscript{71}

Yeats died in January 1939 at Cap Martin, Alpes Maritimes in the South of France, and was buried at Roquebrune nearby. It was not until 1948 that his body was reinterred in Ireland.\textsuperscript{72} Eliot was asked to give the first Annual Yeats Lecture in June 1940, and described Yeats as 'a contemporary and not a predecessor', referring specifically to Yeats' later work whose honesty and frequent unpleasantness he praised. He venerated Yeats' 'impersonality', his ability, 'out of intense and personal experience . . . to express a general truth; retaining all the particularity of his experience, to make of it a general symbol' (\textit{OPP}, p.252, 255).\textsuperscript{73}

Some of the more memorable of Yeats' 'general symbols'—and especially those from his late poems—are echoed in the discourse of the 'compound ghost' in \textit{Little Gidding} II:

Second, the conscious impotence of rage
   At human folly, and the laceration
   Of laughter at what ceases to amuse.

Eliot's 'conscious impotence of rage' recalls Yeats' 'The Spur':

\begin{quote}
   You think it horrible that lust and rage
   Should dance attendance upon my old age.
\end{quote}

Eliot quoted these lines in his lecture on Yeats, and asked, 'To what honest man old enough, can these sentiments be entirely alien?' (\textit{OPP}, pp.257–58). Eliot combines the reference to Yeats' 'old age' with Charles Lamb's celebrated description of King Lear in 'On the Tragedies of Shakespeare' (1812):\textsuperscript{74}

\begin{quote}
   So to see Lear acted,—to see an old man tottering about the stage with a walking-stick, turned out of doors by his daughters in a rainy night, has nothing in it but what is painful and disgusting . . . . On the stage we see nothing but corporal infirmities and weakness, the impotence of rage: while we read it, we see not Lear, but we are Lear . . . . we discover a mighty irregular power of reasoning . . . exerts its powers . . . at will upon the corruptions and abuses of mankind.
\end{quote}

Yeats evokes the figure of Lear several times as a symbol of old age: in 'An Acre of Grass', as an example of 'an old man's frenzy' (see above, p.210), and in 'Lapis Lazuli', as one who exemplifies 'tragic joy'.

Another veiled reference to Yeats is found in Eliot's use of the word 'laceration', which was added after the initial drafts (\textit{Gardner}, p.193). Eliot acknowledged that he intended an echo

\textsuperscript{71}Kristian Smidt, \textit{The Importance of Recognition: Six Chapters on T.S. Eliot}, p.81. Helen Gardner points to a deleted reference in the early drafts to Yeats's career as an Irish poet in England. She also notes that some preliminary notes for \textit{Little Gidding} were written on a sheet of paper used earlier for the Yeats memorial lecture (\textit{Gardner}, pp.188, 65).

\textsuperscript{72}His plight is therefore that of Virgil's souls in the vestibule of Hades. See above, p.228n.

\textsuperscript{73}Of Yeats' play \textit{Purgatory}, however, he said, 'I wish he had not given it this title, because I cannot accept a purgatory in which there is no hint, or at least no emphasis upon Purgation' (\textit{OPP}, p.258).

of Jonathon Swift’s epitaph, ‘Ubi saeva indignatio cor ulterius lacerare nequit’, and especially
of Yeats' English versification of it in ‘Swift’s Epitaph’.

Savage indignation there
Cannot lacerate his breast.

The ghost’s last ‘gift’, ‘the shame/ Of motives late revealed, and the awareness/ Of things ill
done and done to others’ harm’, is reminiscent of Yeats’ expression of remorse in ‘Vacillation’:

Things said or done long years ago,
Or things I did not do or say
But thought that I might say or do,
Weigh me down, and not a day
But something is recalled,
My conscience or my vanity appalled.

In the composition of his ‘ghost’ Eliot superimposes as it were a number of other literary
figures upon the portrait of Yeats. Significantly, the strongest of these allusions also involve
homage paid by one poet to a predecessor. The ghost remarks, ‘our concern was speech,
and speech impelled us/ To purify the dialect of the tribe’. Eliot is translating a line from Mal-
larmé’s ‘Le Tombeau d’Edgar Poe’: ‘Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu’. Mallarmé
compares the voice of the poet to ‘un glaive nu’, a naked sword, which simultaneously awak-
ens his generation from the torpor into which it has fallen and strikes terror in the hearts of his
contemporaries. In ‘Note sur Mallarmé et Poe’, Eliot quoted the line he translates here, and
links it to the effort, undertaken by both poets ‘pour restituer la puissance du Mot’ (‘to restore
the power of the Word’). It is the achievement of this goal which assures ‘la fermeté de leur
pas lorsqu’ils passent du monde tangible au monde des fantômes’ (‘the firmness of their steps
when they pass from the tangible world into the world of phantoms’). By such a purification
the poet gains access to that other world.

The presence of William Shakespeare, whose influence upon Eliot was second only to
Dante’s, is also to be felt in Little Gidding II. Indeed, the phrase ‘a familiar compound ghost’
is itself an allusion to Sonnet 86, in which Shakespeare describes a rival poet—traditionally be-
lieved to be Chapman—who is inspired by an ‘affable familiar ghost’. Shakespeare is referring
to Chapman’s claim to have been inspired to translate Homer by a visitation from the Greek
bard himself. The scene which Chapman describes in Euthymica Raptus seems remarkably apt
to Little Gidding II. Affected by a depression of spirits brought on by the drawn-out conflict be-
tween England and the Netherlands, Chapman seeks peace and quiet in the countryside. There
he receives a vision of Homer, who shows to him the Lady Peace by whose influence mankind
can live in harmony. Chapman also recalls the earlier occasion when Homer appeared to him

75The information was contained in a letter to Maurice Johnson in 1947. See ‘The Ghost of Swift in Four
Quartets’, Modern Language Notes, 64, no.4(Apr. 1949), 273. In ‘Andrew Marvell’ Eliot described Swift as
‘the great master of disgust’ (SE, p.293).

76Eliot quoted this stanza in After Strange Gods, p.46.

77La Nouvelle Revue Française, 14, no.158(1 Nov. 1926), 524–26 (p.526). Eliot originally wrote the essay in
English, but only the French translation by Ramon Fernandez has been published. R. Bates suggests a further
connection with Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria Chapter 14. See ‘Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la
tribu’, Notes and Queries, 198, no.11(Nov. 1953), 493–494.
and inspired him to begin his translation (l.86–89). Thus, by a simple phrase, Eliot draws together several accounts of the influence of one poet upon another.

Eliot also makes reference to Shakespeare at the end of the Dantean passage. He told John Hayward that he thought the phrase, 'where you must move in measure, like a dancer' contained an allusion to Mark Anthony (Gardner, p.196). Eliot seems to be referring to Antony and Cleopatra III, xi, 35–6, where Antony says that Caesar 'kept/ His sword e'en like a dancer'. The connection appears merely to be the verbal resemblance, as the tentative nature of Eliot's comment suggests. A more definite evocation of Shakespeare is found in the closing lines of Little Gidding II:

He left me, with a kind of valediction,  
And faded on the blowing of the horn.

The reference is to the ghost of Hamlet's father which 'faded on the crowing of the cock' (Hamlet, I, i, 157). Eliot's reworking achieves an imaginative return to the world of physical reality by combining the supernatural connotations of Shakespeare's line with the mundane detail of the 'horn', the 'all-clear' signal given at the end of an air-raid.

Critics have added many more names to the list of contributors to this passage. Grover Smith suggests Samuel Johnson's 'The Vanity of Human Wishes' as source for Eliot's phrase, 'fool's approval stings': 'Grief aids disease, remember'd folly stings' (l.117). He also notes a general similarity with Borachio's description of dead bodies upon the shore in Cyril Tourneur's Atheist's Tragedy, II, i, 72–93.78

James Joyce had also died abroad, as had T.E. Hulme, a poet and critic whose work was an important early influence upon Eliot. Henry James, another early influence and fellow expatriate American, had ended his life on foreign (English) soil; and a second compatriate, Ezra Pound, although not dead, was sequestered upon a 'distant shore'.

Matthew Arnold has also been suggested on the strength of the clear echo in Eliot's phrase 'between two worlds' of Arnold's 'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse', a poem which Eliot praised as an expression of 'a moment of historic doubt' (OPP, p.229).79 Arnold describes a twilight visit to the monastery at Chartreuse:

Where, ghostlike in the deepening night,  
Cowl'd forms brush by in gleaming white.

He senses an affinity with the monks:

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,  
The other powerless to be born,  
With nowhere yet to rest my head,  
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn.80

78 Grover C. Smith, 'Tourneur and Little Gidding: Corbière and East Coker', Modern Language Notes, 65, no.6 (June 1950), 418–21 (pp.420, 418–19).
80 The debt to Arnold seems more clear in Agatha's words in The Family Reunion (CPP, p.343):
Two other Victorians, Fitzgerald and Browning have also been suggested, although the connections here seem more tenuous. The roll of minor influences such as these could be augmented considerably. There is, however, no possibility of replacing Mallarmé, Shakespeare, Yeats and Dante at the head of the list.

Part III

The third movement of Little Gidding juxtaposes a number of images and allusions which represent varying religious sensibilities. Although the setting is conspicuously seventeenth-century, there are also sources in the Aṅguttara-Nikāya and in the writings of Juliana of Norwich (see Chapter 5, section VII, part iii). The theme which Eliot develops in the passage—the importance of an involvement in earthly affairs which is governed by an attitude of detachment—is common to all three sources.

The opening lines of the third movement of Little Gidding contain a striking image which Eliot uses to describe the three ‘conditions’ under which actions are performed. In a letter to John Hayward Eliot explained the significance of the ‘live and the dead nettle’ as follows (Gardner, p.200):

the dead nettle is the family of flowering plant[s] of which the White Archangel is one of the commonest and closely resembles the stinging nettle and is found in its company. If I wrote ‘the live nettle and the dead’ it would tend to suggest a dead stinging nettle instead of quite a different plant.

Eliot is, therefore, not talking about an unflowering nettle appearing like an intermediary between a live and a dead specimen of the same plant; rather, he is referring to two flowering species which, though opposites (Eliot is exploiting the botanical name, ‘dead nettle’), are equally to be distinguished from an unflowering one. ‘The image is very apt’, Gardner concludes (p.200); ‘indifference, that neither stings nor bears a flower, being between selfish love that stings and unselfish that bears a white flower’.

The focus of the remainder of the passage is the ‘unselfish’ action of those who fought the English Civil War. The result, Eliot admitted, was ‘a certain romantic Bonny Dundee period effect’ which was only countered by the introduction of the fourteenth-century English mystics (Gardner, p.70). Eliot was referring to his allusions to Sir Walter Scott’s dramatic poem, ‘The Doom of Dovorgoil’, which concerned Viscount Dundee’s doomed uprising in support of King James II who had already fled the country after his defeats at the hands of William of Orange. Dundee continued to fight, but was killed in 1689 at the Battle of Killiecrankie which, ironically, was a great victory for his troops. As the battle nears, a song is sung (II, ii): 82

You and I,
My dear, may very likely meet again
In our wanderings in the neutral territory
Between two worlds.


Dundee he is mounted, he rides up the street,
The bells are rung backward, the drums they are beat.

Eliot echoes these lines with:

Why should we celebrate
These dead men more than the dying?
It is not to ring the bell backward . . .
We cannot revive old policies
Or follow an antique drum.

The practice of ringing a peal in reverse, beginning with the bass bell instead of the treble, was a common signal of distress or warning. This does not correspond to the sense Eliot gives to the phrase, however; he appears to use it to indicate the idea of ‘turning back the clock’.

Part IV

Various sources for the short lyric movement of the poem are noted in Chapter 5, section VII, part iv. The key allusions are to the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Christ at his baptism and upon the believers at Pentecost, and to the death and deification of Hercules. Echoes of Robert Southwell and Juliana of Norwich are also considered in Chapter 5.

A more general similarity could be noted between the poem and another well-known religious poem, Gerard Manley Hopkins’ ‘The Windhover’:

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier more dangerous, O my chevalier!

Both poets treat their birds as manifestations of God—in Hopkins’ cases, ‘Christ our Lord’, and in Eliot’s, the Holy Spirit—and both focus upon the co-existence of Divine love and painful fire.

Several parallels could also be sustained between this section and another of Hopkins’ best known poems, ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’. Hopkins refers to the heart of ‘the Host’ joined to his own heart as ‘dove-winged’ (stanza 3) and describes himself as ‘flash[ing] from the flame to the flame’. In stanza seven he remarks, as Eliot does, on the ‘discharge’ which Christ’s passion makes possible, while the penultimate stanza of the first section is replete with verbal echoes, not only of Little Gidding IV, but also of earlier passages of the poem (emphasis added):

Beyond saying sweet, past telling of tongue,
Thou art lightning and love, I found it, a winter and warm;
Father and fondler of heart thou hast wrung:
Hast thy dark descending and most art merciful then.

Part V

The final movement of Little Gidding, and of Four Quartets, draws upon a number of sources for its imagery: references to The Cloud Unknowing, Juliana of Norwich, and Dante have
been explored in Chapter 5, section VII, part v, although many of its images are taken from the earlier poems in the sequence. The culminating image of the union of fire and rose has been the subject of some speculation, however. Although Dante implies the union of the purgative fire with the Celestial Rose, he does not explicitly identify the two as one. Such an identification is made by other writers who use the two images without any apparent reference to Dante.

In the closing lines of his monodrama *Maud* Tennyson describes the union of a rose and a purging fire. The rose has been a symbol of the hero's passion which drives him madly to love Maud and to kill her brother. At the end of the poem he goes off to purge himself of his passions in the Crimean War, where 'flames/ The blood–red blossom of war with a heart of fire' (III, 1.53).84

A more plausible analogue is to be found in George MacDonald's fantasies *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and *The Princess and Curdie* (1882).85 (Another of his novels, *Lilith*, is mentioned with respect to the rose–garden passage of *Burnt Norton*; see above, p.199.) In the former tale Irene encounters in the apartment of the old Princess 'a huge bouquet of red roses' which is 'in fact a fire which burned in the shapes of the loveliest and reddest roses'. Irene notes also that 'the smell of roses with which the room was filled came from the fire–roses on the hearth', and watches as the old Princess plucks a rose from the fire and cleans stains from her dress with it.86

In the later book the character Curdie wounds a white dove, then follows it to the tower and the old Princess. There 'on a huge hearth a great fire was burning, and the fire was a huge heap of roses, and yet it was fire. The smell of the roses filled the air, and the heat of the flames of them glowed upon his face'.87 The Princess tests Curdie by commanding him to thrust his hands into the fire; he does so, suffers great pain, and upon pulling his hands out finds them 'white and smooth like the princess's' instead of burnt (p.67). This purgatorial theme is continued later in the novel in a scene where the ailing king (the comparison with *The Waste Land* avails itself) is enveloped in a 'fire of glowing, flaming roses' which leaves his face finally '[shining] from under the burnt roses like a diamond in the ashes of a furnace' (pp.201–2). (The analogy is perhaps closer to *East Coker's* 'purgatorial fires/ Of which the flame is roses'.)

83 There is a faint possibility of an echo of Ezra Pound's poem 'The Return' in Eliot's line 'See, they return, and bring us with them':

See, they return; ah, see the tentative  
Movement, and the slow feet,  
The trouble in the pace and the uncertain  
Wavering!

Apart from the verbal resemblance the parallel does not seem particularly significant.

84 See George L. Mussachio, 'A Note on the Fire–Rose Synthesis of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*', *English Studies*, 45, no.3(June 1964), 238.


87 *The Princess and Curdie* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1966), p.66. Subsequent references will be included in the text.
Bibliography of Works Consulted

I Works by T.S. Eliot

Poetry and Drama

Four Quartets, read by the poet (Angel Records, ANG. 45012, EMI (US) Ltd., 1957).

Prose

(i) Complete Volumes:

The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (London: Faber & Faber, 1933).
Essays Ancient and Modern (London: Faber & Faber, 1936).
Notes Towards the Definition of Culture (London: Faber & Faber, 1948).
Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot, edited with an introduction by Frank Kermode (London: Faber &
(ii) Contributions to Periodicals:


‘The Influence of Landscape upon the Poet’, *Daedalus*, 89, no.2(Spring 1960), 420–422.


(iii) Prefaces, Introductions and Essays Published in Other Works:


['Preface' to] *Fishermen on the Banks*, James B. Connolly (Faber & Gwyer, 1928), pp.vii–viii.


II Secondary Sources


________, *Dante’s Ten Heavens* (London: Archibald Constable, 1904).


Kipling, Rudyard, *Short Stories: 1, ‘A Sahib’s War’ and Other Stories*, selected by Andrew


Lewis, Wyndham, Time and Western Man (London: Chatto & Windus, 1927).

Lieder, F.W.C., Popular German Stories (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1934).


Mallarmé, Stéphane, Œuvres Complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).


Vasudeo B. Mehta, 'In Defence of the East', The Criterion, 5, no.1(Jan. 1927), 100-05.


Murry, Middleton, 'Towards a Synthesis', The Criterion, 5, no.3(July 1927), 294-313.


Ralphs, Sheila, *Dante’s Journey to the Centre: Some Patterns in His Allegory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972).


**Secondary Works on T.S. Eliot**

(i) Bibliography:


(ii) Complete Volumes:


Perl, Jeffrey M., *‘Except in Tendency’: T.S. Eliot and the Dilemma of Post-Symbolist Classicism* (Stanford, California; Humanities Honours Programme, 1976).


(iii) Articles:


Bradbury, John M., *Four Quartets: The Structural Symbolism’, Sewanee Review*, 59(Spring
1951), 254–70.


Kennedy, Andrew, ‘The Speaking “I” in Four Quartets’, English Studies, 60, no.2(April 1979), 166–75.


Maxwell, J.C., ‘The Dry Salvages: A Possible Echo of Graham Greene’, Notes and Queries,
New Series, 11, no.10(Oct. 1964), 387.
Miller, Vincent, 'Eliot's Submission to Time', Sewanee Review, 84, no.3(Autumn 1976), 448–64.
Mussachio, George L., 'A Note on the Fire–Rose Synthesis of T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets', English Studies, 45, no.3(June 1964), 238.
Noonan, James, 'Poetry and Belief in the Criticism of T.S. Eliot', Queen's Quarterly, 79, no.3(Autumn 1972), 388-396.
Peter, John, 'A New Interpretation of The Waste Land', Essays in Criticism 2, no.3(July 1952), 242–66.
Reckford, K.J., 'Heracles and Mr. Eliot', Comparative Literature, 16(Winter 1964), 1–18.
Rees, Thomas R., 'The Orchestration of Meaning in T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets', Journal of
Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 28, no.1 (Fall 1969), 63–69.
Reinsberg, Mark, ‘A Footnote to Four Quartets’, American Literature, 21, no.3 (Mar. 1950), 342–344.
———, ‘The Orchestration of Burnt Norton II’, University of Toronto Quarterly, 45, no.1 (Fall 1975), 50–66.
Schoeck, R.J., ‘T.S. Eliot, Mary Queen of Scots, and Guillaume de Machaut’, Modern Language Notes, 63, no.3 (Mar. 1948), 187–88.
Sharp, Corona, ‘“The Unheard Music”: T.S. Eliot’s Four Quartets and John of the Cross’, University of Toronto Quarterly, 51, no.3 (Spring 1982), 264–78.
Soldo, John J., ‘Eliot’s Dantean Vision and his Markings in his Copy of the Divina Commedia’,
Yeats Eliot Review, 7, nos 1–2(June 1982), 11–18.
Williams, Christopher, ‘East Coker and The Lady of the Lake’, Notes and Queries, New Series, 27, no.3(June 1980), 238.