T.S. Eliot and the Fulfillment of Christian Poetics
Also by G. Douglas Atkins

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T.S. Eliot and the Fulfillment of Christian Poetics

G. Douglas Atkins
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Preface and Acknowledgments

*T.S. Eliot and the Fulfillment of Christian Poetics* is the third work in a trilogy that began with a study of Eliot and Lancelot Andrewes, the great seventeenth-century Anglican divine whom he rescued from relative oblivion and who was instrumental in the poet’s embrace of Anglo-Catholicism. Eliot derived from Andrewes’s sermons a poetics that, I have argued, marks the way of writing that appears in the post-conversion poems (the “Ariel” poems and *Ash-Wednesday*) and that differs from the less verbal, less comparative, and less meditative character of the verses written before 1927, the year of his baptism into the Church of England. Another way of putting it: Eliot’s pre-1927 poems play the Old Testament to the New that appears in the poems written after his conversion, which fulfill the “law” present in the earlier. For many reasons, *Four Quartets* deserves extended treatment; and commentary on it here completes my account of *T.S. Eliot: The Poet as Christian*.

I feel the need to acknowledge that I am here returning to a work on which I have already written quite a lot, covering again ground that I have explored before. The simple fact is, I keep on essaying, that is, trying: considering this inexhaustible work from different and fresh perspectives, seeking to understand Eliot’s words. I want to assure you, gentle reader, that what you have in your hands represents a refining of approach that yields something quite different from rehashed material: “the ancient rhyme” in “new” perspective, to modify Eliot himself in *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems*. My focus is how each poem of *Four Quartets*
works, what it means, that and how it matters (so much), and how each of these parts supports the others, “right” in participating in the creation of a structure whose details we fully appreciate only at the end, the place from which we begin in order to appreciate fully those magnificent details. The issue is fulfillment—of purpose. It is only by writing that I can hope to approach Eliot’s meaning and his own understanding.

I admit that as I have proceeded in this effort over the years, I have been wrong, more than once or twice, alas, and so I attempt, unabashedly, to issue corrections. My understanding of the “still” is “unstill,” ever moving. To reach a “perfect” understanding of a text, especially one as complex and explicitly challenging as *Four Quartets*, would be to transcend time, for the poem, like everything else made of words, consists of that which constitutes the details of the pattern whose “still point” is available only to God Who stands outside time and can apprehend the pattern that those un-still words make. I can but “fare forward,” perhaps apprehending (anew) how this detail and that detail work together, how they help to constitute the pattern, the idea of which I have perhaps caught. But I cannot stop time—and Eliot teaches us to (try to) go beyond the desire to want to do so.

The result is commentary—the product of close textual analysis, comparison, and meditation. Commentary is neither identical to the text nor separate from it. To be sure, the text can stand alone, but commentary may be read, not as the primary text’s destruction nor as a transcendence of it, but as its fulfillment. Here, too, there is a forward—rather than Prufrockian and crab-like—movement, the “ancient rhyme” (to adapt *Ash-Wednesday*) faithfully adhered to and/but represented in “new” manner. In commentary, the reader (thus) figures prominently, for it is the record of the text’s intersection with him or her.

Commentary is, in the final analysis, about the text’s ultimate effects on the receiver and respondent (in line with the speaker’s change dramatized in *Journey of the Magi*). Commentary thus represents both affect and effect. It rests upon a foundation of humility, constituting the record of the reader’s response to the text, and that response necessarily involves submission to the text, which (paradoxically) yields the reader’s freedom (to respond). The text is, we may say, thus embodied in the commentary as well as fulfilled there.

Amidst all this close attention to words (qua words), all this theological and philosophical talk, all this surmise about “the Ultimate,” I write in hopes of enhancing your *pleasure*, dear reader, in reading Eliot’s great
essay-poem, its often prose-like verses. I seek to share with you the great
pleasure (never separable from understanding) that I take in reading,
re-reading, and meditating upon the words burning with meaning in
Four Quartets. I hope that you too enjoy this magnificent work of art
with its dramatization of the most essential and enduring insight. Your
pleasure will derive, in no small measure, from recognizing how the
poem works, intersecting with you. You can participate in the mirrored
pattern that governs the writing of the work, the timeless, universal work
of Incarnation—just as my own efforts, my essaying, mirrors at many
points and in so many ways Eliot’s own.

I cannot deny that commentary on the great work is itself, in ways,
difficult. I have sought to make that commentary (not the poem) as
accessible as possible by writing without jargon and with few notes, this
without, I hope, diluting or reducing or falsifying the text on which I
offer these comments. I recommend that commentary and poem be read
together. My hope is that my essay “supports” Four Quartets (even if the
latter does not need it).

The idea of commentary as “companion”—one who goes along with—
should, in my view, be revived (or is it “resurrected”?), for it means the
accompaniment that I have just mentioned, as well as a coming-together
such as befits accounts of Four Quartets. The etymology, traceable at least
to the medieval, appeals to me more than the pedestrian idea of a hand-
book or guide, which this volume does not pretend to be: by “companion,”
I mean, bowing to etymology, the idea of food and a meal, and I like that
a lot. The Doyenne of Eliot studies, Jewel Spears Brooker, described me
in a review of an earlier book of mine on Eliot as “good company,” and I
hope my manner here, despite the admitted and, I contend, ineluctable
difficulty of subject matter and approach, reflects a person engaged in,
and surrendered to, his material, confessing responsibility and accepting
the burden, and in love with his work, a genuine ama-teur, in other words.
I like to think, then, that “companion” may suggest that my commentary
has something in it of that “Gen’rous Converse” that Alexander Pope identi-
fies as crucial in the person who would be a “critic” (An Essay on Criticism
[1711]). Consider, if you will, my voice as an-other voice, accompanying
you on your journey toward understanding—you, after all, I have thought
of as accompanying me on mine to this time and place.

I am happy, once more, to acknowledge my debts to my wife Rebecca,
our children Leslie and Christopher, their spouses Craig and Sharon,
and our grandchildren Kate and Oliver; our Cavvy Bofort Dancing Diva, who came to us from Cambridge by way of Virginia, and who appears to be a Royalist like our late and much-missed Millie; my Wofford College teachers Vincent Miller and Raymond Bourne; my University of Virginia teachers Irvin Ehrenpreis, Francis Russell Hart, and E.D. Hirsch, Jr.; my later “mentors” Aubrey Williams and Geoffrey Hartman; my students over 44 years of teaching at the University of Kansas; the generous support offered by department chairpersons Gerhard Zuther, Michael L. Johnson, and Maria Caminero-Santangelo; the continuing, post-retirement assistance and grace of Pam LeRow and Lori Whitten; and the good folks at Palgrave Macmillan, including Brigitte Shull, than whom no more responsive or supportive editor exists, Ryan Jenkins (who not only puts up with me, but encourages me), and, last but not least, Erin Ivy, who introduced me to Palgrave Macmillan and to whom I shall forever be grateful.

And with (all) that said, “Let us go then, you and I.” We fare forward—to an introduction.
Four Quartets: Simulacrum of Being

Abstract: Four Quartets is about not only the “central” Christian dogma of the Incarnation but also the difficulty of understanding it and the difficulty of getting it down right in words that inevitably slip, slide, and refuse to stay still, their meaning by no means guaranteed. As the poem fulfills, and thus completes, the partial understanding in Eliot’s pre-conversion poems, it calls the reader to participate in “forward” movement. Completion occurs only in time, a point that mirrors the Incarnational understanding that the timeless intersects with time, in time, that is.

The verses in “East Coker” are both mundane and metapoetic, the speaker commenting, in straightforward and prosaic language, on his own just-preceding words: “That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory,” for, he says, it was “A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion” that leaves you “still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings.” The following half-verse is especially striking, raising a question or two perhaps never intended: “The poetry does not matter.” We have, of course, long been taught that it does, that what is said is simply inseparable from how it is said.

The enigmatic remark may, though, be more positive than it at first seems: it forces Eliot’s puzzled reader to explore that puzzlement, indeed to consider reliability of speaking voice and validity of declaration. In what sense(s) does the poetry not matter? Or does it make all the difference in the world? Old Possum imposes the questions, requiring that the reader, in the words of *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems*, “Be mindful” (“Sovegna vos” are his words, indirect as often, the words a quotation in Provençal from the medieval poet Arnaut Daniel, of whom Eliot’s friend Pound thought highly).  

The issue touches on, if it does revolve around, what the conjunction brings together in the subtitle of Eliot’s major volume *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order* (1928). In his first collection, eight years earlier, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, Eliot had pointed a union of differences and argued the necessity of turning to cultural criticism only after engaging fully in the basic and primary work of reading texts closely and doing literary commentary. The foundation thus being laid in his pre-conversion essays—he formally embraced Anglo-Catholic Christianity with his baptism into the Church of England in 1927, a move that he announced in the preface to the 1928 collection of essays—Eliot brings together in his new book, strategically organized, eight essays on a range of figures, some barely recognizable even 80 years ago, and having a range of historical significance. They begin with two on seventeenth-century Anglican churchmen (Andrewes and John Bramhall) and proceed with a discussion of political and philosophical essayists and of writers of drama and poetry: in order, Machiavelli, F.H. Bradley (the subject of Eliot’s Harvard doctoral dissertation, written but never defended though eventually published), Baudelaire, Thomas Middleton, Richard Crashaw, and Irving Babbitt (the Harvard Orientalist and another of Eliot’s teachers). It appears, at first, to be no more than a random collection, belying the claim

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of deliberateness made in the preface and perhaps hinted at in the subtitle.

Of course, the “order” Eliot refers to in his subtitle is that both apparent in the writing itself of the eight men chosen for discussion (and elucidation) and figuring critically in their thinking. Thus, in the titular and lead essay, Eliot employs what he has earlier called “the tools of criticism”—comparison and analysis—to reveal Bishop Andrewes’s poetics of both writing and reading: “squeezing and squeezing a word until it yields a full juice of meaning which we should never have supposed any word to possess,” juxtaposing a word or phrase in its “nearer and more remote contexts,” and adhering to “ordonnance,” that is, structure, form, and order, the whole charged with “intensity.”

Style, thus, reveals order. More: the two are not only inseparable, but a way also appears in their conjunction (“and”)—their “concord”—that affirms and confirms the argument of The Sacred Wood. That is, the way toward “order” lies in, through, and by means of “style.” A writer’s manner of saying—his or her style—reflects, indeed embodies, an understanding of inner and outer reality represented in his words, their “rhyming,” and their “ordonnance.” It is by means a new or unfamiliar idea; in Eliot it both plays a central role and participates as a crucial part of a whole.

Style would, therefore, appear to be more than Alexander Pope termed “dress” of thought in An Essay on Criticism (1711). In other words, the poetry does matter. We are thus back to the contrary assertion in Four Quartets, with elucidation still needed.

And yet—the passage in question in “East Coker”—and especially the bold declaration that “the poetry does not matter”—is like so many others in Four Quartets. It does not, apparently, require analysis, being straightforward and clear. It does require meditation. And that means slowing down, considering, weighing—being mindful (as Ash-Wednesday urges). Indeed, therein may lie Old Possum’s purpose. If we think of “poetry” as signifying the words, then of course it matters. But if, differently, by “poetry” we mean the accoutrements, or “dress,” “style” as ornamentation, then no. Eliot’s concern lies, properly, with “the ancient rhyme”: the word “rhyme” brilliantly captures the entailed paradox, an apparent ornament that is the “dogma” (as the decorative angel atop the Christmas tree is, for the child, an Angel, in the later Ariel poem), “rhyme” itself referring to relations, union, and the play of sameness and difference. That the “ancient rhyme” can appear in “new verse” means liberation from the past mindlessly embraced made possible by submission to
the universal and timeless, which time, along with entailed difference, requires that we convey “in new verse.”

The burden on the reader of *Four Quartets* is not just considerable; it is massive, and exhausting, confronting the inexhaustible poem.

Taking the indirect way that Eliot endorsed, and described as a characteristic of modern “difficult” poetry, I turn, with prospects ahead of further understanding, to the critical discussion of the path toward belief of the “intelligent” pilgrim in the essay introducing Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées* (1931). The following passage from it is rife with autobiographical ramifications. “To understand the method which Pascal employs,” begins Eliot, the word “method” rhyming with the word “process,”

the reader must be prepared to follow the process of the mind of the intelligent believer. 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 order within; and thus, by what [Cardinal] Newman calls “powerful and concurrent” reasons, he finds himself inexorably committed to the dogma of the Incarnation.

Eliot’s words bear greater relevance to his own journey toward belief than is, I believe, often recognized. That “process” is, indeed, intellectual, rather than emotional (or, perhaps, spiritual), and it is fundamentally empirical, exploratory, analytical, and comparative. “To the unbeliever,” he then continues,

this method seems disingenuous and perverse: for the unbeliever is, as a rule, not so greatly troubled to explain the world to himself, nor so greatly distressed by its disorder; nor is he generally concerned (in modern terms) to “preserve values”. He does not consider that if certain emotional states, certain developments of character, and what in the highest sense can be called “saintliness” are inherently and by inspection known to be good, then the satisfactory explanation of the world must be an explanation which will admit the “reality” of these values. Nor does he consider such reasoning admissible; he would, so to speak, trim his values according to his cloth, because to him such values are of no value. The unbeliever starts from the other end, and as likely as not with the question: Is a case of human parthenogenesis credible? and this he would call going straight to the heart of the matter. Now Pascal’s method is, on the whole, the method natural and right for the Christian....
Described is the method Eliot himself followed on the way to Anglo-Catholicism. In this process, as the words above attest, order—and “disorder”—figure prominently. Just as he said it was for Lancelot Andrewes, the Incarnation was for Eliot “an essential dogma.”

Because Eliot refers not to the Incarnation but to “Incarnation“ in Four Quartets (“The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation” [“The Dry Salvages”]), the essay-poem may recall the minor tradition of seventeenth-century “layman’s faith” works, whose focus is things that really matter. These works include, most notably, Sir Thomas Browne’s Religio Medici (1642), Lord Herbert of Cherbury’s De religione laici (1647), and the essay-poem Religio Laici or A Layman’s Faith (1682) by John Dryden, whom Eliot much admired and about whom he often wrote, Religio Laici specifically in his 1932 BBC radio casts published as John Dryden, the Poet, the Dramatist, the Critic. While sharing the desire of the layman’s faiths to direct attention to only the “essential” matters of faith, in hopes of avoiding needless bickering and, ultimately, ecclesiastical controversy quickly spreading to civil unrest, Four Quartets does not amount—or reduce—to a layman’s faith. That Eliot writes as a layman is a fact, though not one that he exploits as do the seventeenth-century writers, who share a clear and definite anti-clericalism. Eliot is, however, even less sectarian, as the reference to “Incarnation” indicates, for It stands as the pattern of which the Incarnation exists as the paradigmatic instance in human history. Another way of putting it: the Incarnation is the fulfillment of Incarnation (as the New Testament is of the Old).

The Incarnational pattern—the way of indirectness and of the “impossible union” of differences, as of divine and human, transcendence and immanence, but one-half of which we all too frequently grasp—constitutes for Eliot, as it does for Lancelot Andrewes behind him, the essential order in and of the world. It is the heart and soul of what Eliot believed; to understand the character of that “union,” to define the essential relation entailed, is the ongoing drama of Eliot’s writing. The other half of the story of his post-conversion work concerns how he represented the dogma that mattered so much to him. The latter constitutes his “style.”

Elsewhere, I have treated Eliot’s poetics and practice, post-1927: from Journey of the Magi in that year, to the other Ariel poems (including The Cultivation of Christmas Trees [1954]), and Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems (1930). I did not, in T.S. Eliot: The Poet as Christian, consider Four Quartets in any detail or depth. There, I was concerned to show differences and similarities between poems written after Eliot’s formal embrace
of Anglo-Catholic Christianity in 1927 and poems written before that year, which often suggest a mind and a sensibility philosophically compatible with if it not fully attuned to key matters and perspectives that Christianity explains “most satisfactorily,” including the relation of time and the timeless, and other critical instances of binary relations, differences, and apparent oppositions. Here, too, the issue is one, not of destruction or (even) transcendence of previous points of view or understanding but, rather, of their fulfillment. As has often been noted, Eliot’s poems frequently refer to his earlier work, and I suggest that he deliberately invokes a question about the relation of post- and pre-1927 poems, the latter work mirroring the relation of Christianity to Old Testament points of view. Eliot is, in *Four Quartets*, fulfilling (the promise of) his pre-conversion work, as “Little Gidding” fulfills that of the earlier parts of the essay-poem.

It would not be amiss to associate Eliot with Alexander Pope, as I have already hinted, for he is another “Catholic” poet for whom parts-whole figures as a central thematic, rhetorical, and poetic concern. In 1921 in one of his most famous and influential essays, “The Metaphysical Poets,” later included in his *Homage to John Dryden*, published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf in 1924 at the Hogarth Press, Eliot reveals the “dissociation of sensibility” that set in during the course of the seventeenth century and that effectively separated thinking and feeling. Via the work of John Donne, on the one hand, and on the other, Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning, Eliot illustrates “the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet”: “A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility.”

Eliot goes on to these elucidations regarding the relation of part to part and part to whole:

> When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amal-
> gamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, 
> irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these 
> two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the 
> typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences 
> are always forming new wholes.

You are invited here to recall *The Waste Land* (1922), which highlights the failures to *connect*, left with only “fragments” to “shore against [one’s] ruins.” The truth is, moreover, that “the ordinary man” and the poet are not so different; for each man, and woman, confront the separation of
apparently disparate experience, facing the prospect, and the necessity, of amalgamating. The poet needs to be seen as forming new wholes.

And Eliot himself, as poet? Wholeness, cohesion, integrity, along with entailed questions of the relation and the necessity of parts and their order (or “sequence”) is an implied, and plaguing question in Eliot’s poetry and prose alike, both before and after conversion to Christianity (with its insistence on, and defining characteristic of, “impossible union”). Single essays, most notably “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” included in The Sacred Wood, may not explicitly raise the question that we have seen Eliot himself point in his trenchant comment on the “unity” of the collection For Lancelot Andrewes, but as a “collocation” of previously published reviews (for it appears seamless), it does signal a familiar characteristic of his work. “The Hollow Men” (1925) is a composite of three separately published poems brought together, not in order of publication, along with two new parts. Similarly with Ash-Wednesday, the first three of the six poems appearing separately. And finally, Four Quartets consists of (longer) poems that begins with the publication of “Burnt Norton” in 1936 and reaches completion—that is, fulfillment—in 1943 with the addition of “East Coker,” “The Dry Salvages,” and “Little Gidding,” all of them published separately as well (the first British edition of Four Quartets followed the American true First on Halloween 1944).

Eliot addressed directly the issue of poetic coherence and order in the preface to his translation of St.-John Perse’s great Modernist prose poem Anabase, within a month of the publication of Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems. There, he acknowledges the charges of incoherence that had greeted Perse’s challenging work. In defense, as I noted elsewhere, he proposes a distinction between a “logic of concepts,” which readers all too frequently bring to the reading of Modernist poems, and a very different “logic of the imagination,” apparent in the organization and movement of Perse’s paragraphs. Eliot’s words regarding Perse’s poetry apply, with some modification, to his own.

The implication in Eliot’s words is that a burden thus devolves upon Perse’s reader, and by extension him or her trying to come to terms with any “difficult” Modernist work of art. In brief, the reader bears the burden of responsibility for adjusting to a “logic of the imagination,” which, itself, requires somewhat more of the whole sensibility than a (mere) logic, which involves the active participation of only one, separate faculty. Another way of putting it may approach closer to at least Eliot’s interests, procedure, and intent, for no force is involved, the poet,
instead, allowing his reader to apprehend meaning and significance, an act of complete freedom: Eliot writes that “The reader has to allow the images to fall into his memory successively without questioning the reasonableness of each at the moment; so that, at the end, a total effect is produced”—a kind of emotional fulfillment, in other words. Although he may over-emphasize emotional import, Eliot goes on to make clear the reader’s intellectual responsibility, his subject “imaginative order”:

...[I]f, as I suggest, such an arrangement of imagery [as Perse’s Anabase] requires just as much “fundamental brain-work” as the arrangement of an argument, it is to be expected that the reader of a poem should take at least as much trouble as a barrister reading an important decision on a complicated case.17

The very idea of a “logic of the imagination” is, itself, a union, even an association of sensibility.

The reader’s burden of responsibility consists in relating parts. It is an ability, a capacity, alien to the wastelanders, who, as noted, can connect “Nothing with nothing,” laden with “fragments” that they cannot bring together or unite. It is both a historical condition and a personal disability, which Eliot works hard to remedy.

In Four Quartets, the so-called invisible poet,18 so often said to be impersonal to the point of asceticism and detachment, even unfeeling, shows perhaps surprising interest in his reader and her or his apprehension. Thus, he frequently enters the poem as “I,” sometimes directly addressing the reader and expressing concern hardly gratuitous, for example in “East Coker”: “You say I am repeating / Something I have said before. I shall say it again. / Shall I say it again?” Accordingly, the first-person plural dots the poem, as does the second-person, which Eliot’s reader is, I suspect, inclined to think of as singular. Perhaps nowhere is Eliot’s interest greater in his reader’s avoiding the misunderstanding that plagues Prufrock and threatens to upset his (placid and “settled”) world than in “Little Gidding,” where, near the beginning, Eliot goes out of his way to insure correct apprehension. Picking up on a charged phrase in Ash-Wednesday, he refers to “may time” as an illustration, if not exemplification, of the imagined or the other-dimensional. That he clearly has his reader in mind is manifest in the repetition—with-difference in the very next verse: “If you came this way in may time, you would find the hedges / White again, in May, with voluptuary sweetness.”
The matter concerns way: the way you choose, the way you come, the way you read. And the way that Eliot recommends is temporal and linear, so that, as he put it, reading the text “again and again,” “the reader has to allow the images to fall into his memory successively without questioning the reasonableness of each at the moment, so that, at the end, a total effect is produced.” Attention needs be focused on the whole, which is made up of parts that should be read in sequence.

The way you come, may well strike as unexpected—in keeping with a major theme of “Little Gidding.” There is, for example, the unlikely, perhaps surprising allusion early on to the Birth in a lowly stable by way of the description of the “ruins” remaining at Little Gidding. The point is, the reader must not only distinguish, drawing out differences, but also determine the positive relation, thus in the end also uniting: “may” and “May” are no more to be separated than the decorative angel and a real Angel (in The Cultivation of Christmas Trees), no more than immanence and transcendence, the divine and the human. In Four Quartets, the focal issue is, of course, the nature of time and, in particular, the relation of timelessness with time.

In a sense not to be over-dramatized, Four Quartets is (also) about how to read (it). It is not, that is, about itself, for the poem lacks vestiges of the egomaniacal and the narcissistic. Rather, it is about awareness of its own complexity and its own difficulty in being understood, thus the questions posed to the reader offering to repeat points, thus perhaps as well the apparent dismissal of “the poetry” as a matter of no real matter.

The matter of what might clumsily be labeled as auto-reading is broached by Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems, a work of difficulty approaching that of Four Quartets. Struggling anew every time I turn to it, I face the temptation to try to pin it down and force it to yield up its secrets. One of the speaker’s final prayers, after all, concerns the desire not to be mocked by falsehood, and indeed, Eliot sets about to disabuse us of one false presumption and half-truth after another (asceticism, for instance, immersion in the senses another), much as Four Quartets works to de-mythologize notions and assumptions regarding time, including the cyclical and the linear. But in the final analysis, we have to say that the later poem works differently from the earlier, although both are thoroughly Christian in basis.

Rather like Perse’s Anabase, Eliot’s Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems requires that the reader figure out how to read it. Eliot clearly offers many, various, and helpful clues and hints, including the gratuitous number of
pages to be turned in order finally to reach the text of the first poem; the similarities-with-difference (as in “the Lady” and the “Lady of silences,” the “Because” that begins the first poem and the “Although” that marks the otherwise identical opening of the sixth poem); and in the fifth poem, the juxtaposition of a philosophico-theological excursus on the Word with the bathetic poetic practice of a would-be poet that directly follows. The reader of *Four Quartets*, on the other hand, is less engaged in drawing distinctions than in discovering relations, “rhymes” in other words, the attend-ance of one word, phrase, or idea with a correspond-ing one: in short, the way in which parts “dance” together, forming “A complete consort.” Indeed, how to read *Four Quartets* becomes a theme as well as a rhetorical strategy. That it is (also) about its reading—again: not itself—is incarnate in the description of words and their “right” ordonnance toward the end of “Little Gidding,” a passage with clear internal, or intra-textual, reference to the scene in “East Coker” featuring Elizabethan rustics dancing. Both references rhyme with the account of necessary “pattern” in the fifth section of “Burnt Norton.” That the first word in the corresponding section of “Little Gidding” is the coordinate conjunction itself echoes as well as embodies the work of “necessary coniunction” differently dramatized in “East Coker”: “And every phrase / And sentence that is right.../.../ Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning, / Every poem an epitaph.” Indicated by my ellipses, the straightforward words are interrupted by a long, meandering paren-thesis that extends six-and-a-half lines. Rightness is here explained as “every word [being] at home, / Taking its place to support the others” and then exemplified by “The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,” in fact “An easy commerce of the old and the new,” with “The common word exact without vulgarity, / The formal word precise but not pedan-tic.” Thus, directly invoking the earlier passage in “East Coker,” there is “The complete consort dancing together.”

These verses in “Little Gidding” recall those I have alluded to in *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems* that amount to a defense of the Word and Its work pointedly within and for the world. That important passage may at first appear to be at worst gobbledygook, at best meaningless word-play—“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...”—but in fact the words tell, the poet squeezing and squeezing words repeated and weighed. That the coordinate conjunction both begins and ends the penultimate verse in the passage signifies and
matters: “And the light shone in darkness and....” The reader does not make meaning here, but rather discovers it. That effort participates in the discovery of meaning beyond this poem, reflecting the way “the light” shines in darkness, the Word “within / The world and for the world,” awaiting recognition and discovery by each of us.

*Four Quartets* never tells or shows us directly and exactly how it is to be read—no more than does James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). It does, though, like that novel, offer “hints” and prompt “guesses.” You may read Stephen Dedalus as (still) Joyce’s “hero,” in the event abiding in falsehood. Joyce allows you free will and freedom of choice. But even if you end up, in my ironic reading of the novel, satirized alongside Stephen (and so many others), Joyce does not judge, let alone condemn, you.

Eliot well recognizes the difficulties that understanding entails, precisely what J. Alfred Prufrock dreads, fears, and allows to disable him. For one thing, Eliot emphasizes, in “Burnt Norton,” the problems inherent in language, the instability of words themselves often used and abused by the ruthless and the undiscriminating alike. The passage, opening the final section, returns us to *Ash-Wednesday* and the condition of words represented in dramatic fashion, via competing presentations of words in action. What may at first appear as verbalism and gibberish emerges as truth, juxtaposed with words improperly used and beset by noise, darkness, and both inevitable and willful misunderstanding. The problem is not “style”; it is the word vapid, imprecise, and disabled.

Just before announcing “Incarnation” as “The hint half guessed, the gift half understood,” “The Dry Salvages” offers an extended account of both failures in communication and the extreme difficulty in the “getting right” that worried and eluded Prufrock. The issue is said to be “apprehension”—the object generally of the reader of *Four Quartets*. Here, the poetry is beautiful, although the theme be sad tending to the pathetic: “When there is distress of nations and perplexity / Whether on the shores of Asia or the Edgware Road,” we embrace “usual / Pastimes and drugs, and features of the press,” and indulge in various forms of divination and fortune-telling. Eliot then moves to trenchant analysis, which focuses on our part-iality, separating past and future from the present moment. The true mystery lies, he suggests, in the present as intersected by “another dimension.” That other “dimension” derives from “The point of intersection of the timeless / With time,” whereas “Men’s curiosity searches past and future / And clings to that dimension.” Apprehension, though, is

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inordinately difficult, “something given / And taken, in a lifetime’s death in love, / Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.” For those of us this side of sainthood, “there is only the unattended / Moment, the moment in and out of time” (italics added).

The object is to remain in time, having submitted to it,19 while understanding that, because of the Incarnation, the moment is (forever and always) attended, in other words, not just “itself” but (also) another. With Incarnation—that is, the pattern, of which the Incarnation stands as fulfillment and paradigmatic instance—occurs the “impossible union” where “the past and future / Are conquered and reconciled.” Incarnation is thus paradox: union that is impossible (but nevertheless occurs), figured in God’s becoming man, that man thus both fully human and fully divine.

The critical line, the line describing Incarnation, asks to be squeezed and squeezed some more. The repetition of “half” draws attention to grammatical parallelism as well as the expected definite article before the key word “Incarnation.” “Hint” has, of course, just appeared, in the plural, twice, a couple of verses above, paired with “guesses.” Eliot has thus moved from “hints” dropped and “guesses” made to a strong and assured declaration, with “gift” replacing “guesses” and literalizing the becoming-one. Furthermore, there is a positive sense to “half,” for it means that we both partially get it and partially get it.

The Incarnation is, of course, the gift given to us, surprisingly, in the lowly stable, the Divine giving Himself, miraculously, mysteriously, as His Son in the person of Jesus, the fully human man thus become the Christ. We get, though, but one-half of that “impossible union” of God and man, of transcendence and immanence, of timelessness and time. It is the union that gives us fits, that whole made of parts that, separately, we can grasp. That union occurs as intersection.

Pointedly, Eliot does not refer to the historical event of the Incarnation, but rather to the pattern of which that event represents the fulfillment, as the New Testament does of the Old. The importance, and the implications, of Eliot’s distinction in “The Dry Salvages” emerge only in time, as we read on in Four Quartets. Strategy thus mirrors theme and dogma.

It is clearly the Incarnational pattern that, for Eliot, most satisfactorily accounts for the relations between differences. From his earliest work, the philosopher-poet was centrally concerned with such relations: in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” with the relation between the pedestrian and “settled” social world to which the speaker is drawn and
the other, quite different world he has glimpsed in journeying about; in the essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” with the relation of the important titular ideas, which leads to an undeveloped discussion regarding time and the timeless.

“East Coker” offers a striking dramatization of Incarnational pattern. The passage in question, at which I glanced earlier, comes in the first section of the poem, and rhymes with the account of words and their “rightness” in the fifth section of “Little Gidding,” the repetition of critical terms keying the reader’s attention (and attendance). The speaker here places the scene in an “open field,” and says and repeats that “if you do not come too close,” you can hear the music on “a summer midnight.” You can also see the men and women dancing around a bonfire. Terms used in the representation include Elizabethan orthography, an earlier, simpler time mirroring the rural setting with its joyful rustics. The terms practically leap off the page: “The association of men and women,” “daunsinge, signifying matrimonie— / A dignified and commodious sacrament.” Here, in this over-wrought account, we witness “Two and two, necessarye coniunction, / Holding ech other by the hand or the arm / Which betokeneth concorde.” Man and woman thus engage in what the passage I alluded to in “Little Gidding” defines as (mutual) “support.”

Description continues, generalization and meaning now yielding to particular details. Appropriately, given the Incarnation’s effectual democratization of every moment in every place, the focus falls on the commonplace and the quotidian. Eliot chose the Elizabethan period because it is his intellectual home, the time period to which he returned time and again, and the period during which lived and wrote his ancestor Sir Thomas Elyot, author of the renowned The Boke named the Gouvernour. The dance occupies center-stage in the account, men and women “Leaping through the flames, or joined in circles”; they are “Rustically solemn or in rustic laughter,” further described as “Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes, / Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth / Mirth of those long since under earth, / Nourishing the corn.” The words rhyme with those Eliot used in The Waste Land, describing a very different kind of people, who are mirth-less, separated from one another, making-do in indifferent fashion, and having no sense of continuing on after death. The Elizabethan rustics, though, are engaged precisely in “Keeping time, / Keeping the rhythm in their dancing / As in their living in the living seasons / The time of the seasons and the constellations.” Separated from the natural order, as well as from one another, the wastelanders lack
all sense of rhythm (and of rhyme). Their forebears, poor and perhaps simple, respect difference: “The time of milking and the time of harvest / The time of the coupling of man and woman / And that of beasts.” Oddly perhaps, the “coupling” of the rustics makes them, if anything, less bestial, not more, than the wastelanders, in part because the word “coupling” is at least partially cleansed by its rhymes with all those terms earlier of “association” and “concorde.”

And yet—the ending of the passage strikes a different note: “Feet rising and falling. / Eating and drinking. Dung and death.” The immediate rhyme here is with the earlier description of the dancing. The passage has led at least one astute commentator to think of the whole as essentially negative and satirical. There is, though, simply too much of the positive to be discounted altogether. Still, “Dung and death” cannot but link this rusticity with the end of mortal men and women, “Eating and drinking” with bodily elimination alone, the rising and falling of the dancing feet with cyclical patterns being de-mythologized throughout “East Coker.”

Given these realizations, we may be inclined to look back at the “daunsinge” itself, “signifying matrimonie.” Suddenly, the panoply of ideas and their perhaps over-wrought terms takes on another coloration. The dancing (only) signifies maternity, said to be a “dignified and commodious sacrament” (italics added). There is no matrimony, merely the sign of it. In a similar fashion, the “Holding ech other by the hand or the arm” is said (merely) to “betokeneth concorde.” It is not, I reckon, that Eliot simply has in mind difference between appearance and reality.

Recall that we have been warned not to “come too close” to this scene, a warning that is repeated. The warning applies only to our perception of it in that “open field,” for, perhaps ironically, as readers of the verses, we must come close indeed. The words “signifying” and “betokeneth” take the description out of the purely observational and place them in the sphere of meaning-making: it is the observer, in other words, not the poet, who imagines the symbolization. What is being seen does not, in and of itself, mean, for example, that this dancing participates in a “dignified and commodious sacrament.” What is represented is, in other words, the opposite of that in The Cultivation of Christmas Trees where, for the child, the decorative angel atop the tree is an angel.

The account of the Elizabethan rustics dancing is promising, it is true, but it is not completely satisfactory. Something is missing, something preventing fulfillment of the promise. The dancing points to matrimony, and sacrament, but it is, finally, only dancing.
It is all a matter of the way you read. And in reading *Four Quartets*, “the poetry” very much matters.

It is no accident that *way* figures prominently in *Four Quartets*. A verse paragraph in “East Coker” sharply focuses and accentuates it. It begins with the speaker inquiring of the reader, imagining him or her as charging the poet with repetitiousness, whether he should, nevertheless and in any case, “say it again.” The opening verses of the passage establish the tenor and tone: “In order to arrive there, / To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not, / You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.” These lines rhyme with those from the fifth poem of *Ash-Wednesday*: they smack, that is, of verbal indulgence and mere word-play. Nine more verses follow, in the same vein.

A reader likely is reminded of Heraclitus’s famous words, which Eliot uses, as a matter of fact, as an epigraph for “Burnt Norton”: “the way up is the way down.” In “East Coker,” the words also appear. Eliot does not, however, despite our expectation, endorse them. The reason is that, pace the Greek, Eliot does not subscribe to an identity; instead, he focuses on the *way*. Three times, he thus writes here that “You must go by a way....” and a fourth time, he says, “You must go through the way....” “Way” is means, in other words.

One further point regarding the passage in “East Coker,” and that concerns the (re)appearance of the “necessarye coniunction” beginning each of the last three verses and uniting knowing and not-knowing, being and not-being, possessing and not-possessing. Although the way up is *not* the way down, “where you are *is* where you are not” (italics added). We have to “Be mindful,” attend, read carefully, detect the difference in what appears to be the same. Moreover, parts must be associated, brought together in true concord, in accord with understanding in a certain way.

While it is true that the New Testament fulfills the Old, the Bible is made up of both of them. There is no transcendence of the “earlier” when the “later,” and “fulfilled,” is reached. It is, and remains, a matter of both/and.

In parallel fashion, Eliot does not wish us to let go of or forsake the Elizabethan rustics, “Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes, / Earth feet, loam feet,” those feet also falling, following a pattern that may signify “matrimonie” but also surely signifies a time for one and another for its apparent opposite. He suggests no judgment, or criticism, of these simple(r) folks, whose understanding is evidently limited, falling well short of that of the “intelligent believer” who is likely Eliot’s reader.
In like manner, to move for the moment from the intra-textual to the inter-textual, Eliot does not want us to forsake *The Waste Land* in embracing *Four Quartets*. The idea of “fire” perhaps holds the key to the right way of reading the relation of the works surely deserving to be called his greatest. Being what they need, rather than what they want, fire centers issues that the wastelanders face, or, often, deny. Some, like the “young man carbuncular” who visits the typist home “at tea-time,” and like Augustine before Carthage, burn with lust. The Buddha offers a “fire sermon” that, rather like the water the wastelanders seek (despite the death that comes by it), squelches desire, leading to attempted transcendence and escape. The other side of fire is focused in *Four Quartets*, where it provides purification (not the pagan idea of purgation), and so the poem ends, conclusively, “And the fire and the rose are one.” Together, these contrary perspectives on fire represent fulfillment in the later of the promise latent in the earlier. They are no more to be separated, according to *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems*, than caring and not-caring, the Word and the world, immanence and transcendence.

Eliot asks a lot of the reader, who must be always alert and attentive. It is not so much elasticity that is required, but patience and humility, perhaps above all a willingness to submit to the almost dizzying movement of thought and feeling represented in the great work. The reader may, indeed, feel herself or himself on “the edge of a grimpen, where is no secure foothold, / And menaced by monsters, fancy lights, / Risking enchantment.” As soon as you reach a place of seeming safety, there comes more enigma, challenging where you are, offering another point of view, sometimes suggesting correction, possibly, at some point, fulfillment, about which possibility, as of all possibilities, you must be wary. The greatest temptation—that represented in *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems*—requires the greatest wariness and scrupulosity: that to stop, to come to rest, effectively to transcend time (and place). Eliot would have us “fare forward,” keep on exploring and keep on essaying. The necessity of the conjunction points to the pattern whose details are precisely such movement.

**Notes**

2. Ibid.


8 Ibid.


10 On the layman’s faith tradition, see, for example, my Literary Paths to Religious Understanding: Essays on Dryden, Pope, Keats, George Eliot, Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and E.B. White (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).


14 Ibid.


17 Ibid.


19 See Vincent Miller, “Eliot’s Submission to Time,” Sewanee Review, Summer 1976 (448–64), reprinted in A Packet for Vincent Miller, ed. Donald Greiner and John Lane (Spartanburg, SC: Holocene, 2002). Note especially: “Thinking of time as real and important, and not merely the stage on which some already written play is acted out, perhaps over and over in cyclical fashion, [Eliot] realized that change had to be really change (what [he] was to call ‘a new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been’). This meant that only a God out of time, for whom all time is eternally present, can know the pattern time makes. Immersed in this temporal world at a point where its meaning is only emerging, man lives of necessity in a state of inescapable frustration, caught between his sense of meaning and his sense of meaninglessness, between being and nonbeing, between what is dying and what is not yet alive. ... As Etienne Gilson has pointed out in The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine (1960), in Augustine ‘not a single idea is defined with thorough metaphysical strictness.’ Trying to determine beyond doubt what Augustine meant therefore involves one at every point in attempts to reason carefully from statements of his that neither hold still nor jell” (15).

20 Kenner, esp. 309–12.
2

**Burnt Norton:** “The ancient rhyme in a new verse”: “Only through time time is conquered”

Abstract: The first of Four Quartets, “Burnt Norton” appeared independently in 1936, the last poem in Collected Poems 1909–1935, four years before the next of the Quartets. The beginning of Eliot's exploration of time and being, this brilliant poem moves from an imagined scene in a garden reminiscent of—but not identical with—the Garden of Eden to a fifth and final section on words and their movement in time, their slipperiness, and their liability to misuse and perversion. This opening poem itself moves to an embrace of “still point” and “pattern,” but does not necessarily represent Eliot’s own point of view, which, the poem suggests, emerges only with fulfillment (in time). Considered as part of a whole, “Burnt Norton” enacts and dramatizes the problem of relating part to part and part to whole.

From the beginning—it was published separately, in 1936, as the last work in *Collected Poems 1909–1935*—“Burnt Norton” has attracted commentators, most of them sympathetic and admiring, some dismayed, others plainly perplexed. Hugh Kenner has rightly pointed out Eliot’s intended irony in “opposites falsely reconciled” (while unsuccessfully representing the repeated five-part scheme of the poems in *Four Quartets*); respectively, F.O. Matthiessen and Morris Weitz falsely attribute a desire for “timeless release” from “the flux” and posit “those moments that show, more than any other, the meeting of the Eternal and the temporal”; Dame Helen Gardner borrows from mediaeval commentary, including *The Divine Comedy*, which treats a literal, a moral, and a mystical meaning; more recently, Denis Donoghue, writing that the poem’s success is “still disputed,” supposes that “none of the critical procedures... has been responsive to the kind of poetry we find in ‘Burnt Norton’.”

The temptation is great—at least, I find it so—to try to refute each of these commentators on her or his grounds. It would, indeed, appear simple enough to do so, for each of the interpretations, and others besides, can be found manifestly deducible from the text itself. This is an argument made satirically by Jonathan Swift in *A Tale of a Tub* (1704). Eliot says something similar about words and language in general.

Seven years elapsed between the publication of “Burnt Norton” and *Four Quartets* (1943), in which it then appears as first in the volume. It is said that Eliot at first intended “Burnt Norton” to stand alone. However that be, “East Coker,” “The Dry Salvages,” and “Little Gidding,” when published along with it, show that, even if it can stand alone, it is far better to read it as part of the larger poem. If it does stand alone, “Burnt Norton” cannot move forward, not on its own, and alone. Compared with the other *Quartets*, this first poem lacks a kinetic quality; it seems, rather, to (want to) come to rest with and in pattern.

The fact is, of course, *Four Quartets* begins, in “Burnt Norton,” in speculation and moves toward end, with “Little Gidding,” in enactment. The last poem picks up themes and strategies and fulfills them. The first and last poems are bookends, and should be read together (along with “East Coker” and “The Dry Salvages”). As the dustjacket on the first British edition of *Four Quartets* suggests, “Burnt Norton” and “Little Gidding” form a “necessarie conjunction,” with critical distinctions marking the similarities, the last poem, for example, adopting the lesson offered in the Garden at the beginning of “Burnt Norton” as well as
fulfilling—without transcending—opening speculations regarding “still point” and “pattern,” taking the matter beyond what is first surmised.

Music matters, as commentators have long observed, Helen Gardner certainly major among them. But the textual rhymes—what I have referred to, inelegantly, as intra-textuality—do more: the content matters. That the rhymes are also inter-textual, linking *Four Quartets* with “Prufrock,” *The Waste Land*, “The Hollow Men,” and *Ash-Wednesday*, suggests that more is going on than music can account for. Moreover, dancing functions, figuratively and literally, much more than does music, which, after all, it may be said to enact and embody. I cannot, therefore, but return to the claim in “East Coker” that “The poetry does not matter.”

I begin with a(n)other link between “Burnt Norton” and “Little Gidding” (as well as between these poems and *The Waste Land*—of course, a link exists with *Murder in the Cathedral*, from which Eliot took lines for “Burnt Norton”). It is too little acknowledged that Burnt Norton matters, I mean, the manor in Gloucestershire that burned in 1741, taking the life of its owner Sir William Kept. Fire, of course, figures prominently in the great poem of 1922, linked with and distinguished from water as what the wastelanders need, no matter that they seek its virtual opposite. By the time of “Little Gidding,” the promise of fire is fulfilled as a necessary agent of purification (not purgation, a very different, pagan notion). Indeed, “Little Gidding,” and thus *Four Quartets*, ends with the line “And the fire and the rose are one.”

Eliot links “Burnt Norton” and “Little Gidding” so as to draw out crucial differences—his own poetic procedures follow the definition of critical procedures he offers in *The Sacred Wood* (1920), the “tools” of commentary being, he said, comparison and analysis. Unlike Little Gidding, Burnt Norton hardly figures within the literary work that bears its name. The manor in Gloucestershire is a house, or was, home to an important family; Little Gidding, though another ruin, was a chapel, in fact the site of a thriving Anglican community, established by Nicholas Ferrar in the seventeenth century. “Little Gidding” becomes a poem about “support,” forgiveness, and wholeness; “Burnt Norton,” locked in speculation as opposed to embodiment, is about a diversity of ideas, more abstract in texture, and less ultimately satisfying. Some of those ideas, at least, are strong and promising, notes with latent truths; in the later poem, latency gives way to fulfillment.

It seems an odd sort of irony that Sir William Kept died in the fire that consumed Burnt Norton. Beginning with *The Waste Land*, where the
idea is broached and more, Eliot explores the positive capacities of fire to refine and purify. Water brings death, but fire cleanses, according to the over-arching argument. To accept and affirm that fire and “the rose” are one requires a breadth and depth of understanding beyond what Eliot had—and had to share—in 1922, when he needed his friend Ezra Pound to fulfill the promise latent in *The Waste Land*, doing the work of (self-) criticism that “Little Gidding” dramatizes as the way toward fulfillment of life.

In its beginning, “Burnt Norton” signals the combining of reason and imagination, of essay and poem, and of poetry and philosophy that helps to define *Four Quartets* as a work of literary art. Poetic language bubbles up, amidst the intellectual and the ratiocinative: “What might have been is an abstraction / Remaining a perpetual possibility / Only in a world of speculation,” in the opening verse paragraph, becomes, following a couplet in the philosophical register, “Footfalls echo in the memory / Down the passage which we did not take / Towards the door we never opened,” and that is “Into the rose-garden,” with its own inter-textual rhymes with *The Waste Land*. There is no modulation, but rapid juxta-position. A metapoetic texture is also present, these verses engaged in discourse concerning the very issues raised by the words they use.

This first paragraph of “Burnt Norton” comprises the first section of the poem. It consists, though, of two apparently different parts linked by two verses themselves made up of a complete line between two half-lines; the first of these halves is the closing hemistich, the second the opening hemistich. This arrangement creates the appearance of a break in the paragraph, via the entailed white-space. The poet of *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* may again be at pranks.

The first fourteen-and-a-half verses are philosophical in subject and suppositional in nature; the second twenty-nine-and-a-half are imaginative in nature, their subject a return to the garden. The first part smacks of the opening of *Ash-Wednesday* (and of a few lines of “The Hollow Men”), whereas the second, recalling *The Waste Land*, turns out to be one of but a small handful of concretely realized scenes in the whole of *Four Quartets*. The second part is as rooted in figural language and the imaginative as the first is in conceptual language. My terms inevitably recall the differences, already observed, that Eliot himself employs in the preface to his translation of St.-John Perse’s *Anabase*: a “logic of concepts” and a “logic of the imagination.”

An unease may be apparent in beginning “Burnt Norton,” but clearly the opening verses bring together two
different ways of understanding and communicating. The “logic of the imagination” manifests itself most importantly over time, in time, via the relations that this part of “Burnt Norton” sets up with other parts of the whole essay-poem Four Quartets.

The overt link here between the conceptual and the imaginative follows suppositions, concern about “abstraction,” and the loaded sentence “My words echo / Thus, in your mind.” The linking words are “But to what purpose / Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves / I do not know.” An echo is heard of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”

Before entering the garden-scene, we might pause and look back at one word in the preceding verses, for it is illustrative and significant: “If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable” (italics added). Time is not, however, “eternally present” except for God, in His wisdom, understanding, and perspective. The word I wish to squeeze is that that I have italicized. The expected word here is the more familiar “irredeemable.” The dictionary treats the two as alternative spellings. There may or may not be subtle differences in texture and connotation that Eliot may or may not be exploiting. I for one think of “irredeemable” as not being susceptible to redemption, whereas the word that Eliot chooses carries a sense of the incapacity of an (outside) actor to effect redemption. But such a distinction may well not lie at the heart of Old Possum’s preference. The more likely possibility is that Eliot selects the less familiar and less expected word because it should echo in the reader’s mind with the more probable “irredeemable,” the latter word thus in a manner attending the other. “Unredeemable,” in other words, does not quite stand by itself but uncritically in relation to another, which it may be said to “support.” This is, admittedly, a guess, based on a hint, a guess, though, with which the remainder of the poem seems to offer an intersection.

And so into the garden, alerted by the speaker’s reference to the fact that “Other echoes / Inhabit the garden” and ushered into it by “the bird,” apparently a deceptive “thrush.” The issues of truth and validity are thus immediately joined. The speaker, who has already asked whether we shall follow those echoes, now asks whether we shall follow “the deception of the thrush.” In this contretemps regarding the real (and the imagined), the thrush may deceive us into thinking that what we are entering upon, this garden, is “our first world.” And it is that, though only as we are about to imagine it. The (imagined) representation is “what might have been,” which we have been told earlier here “is an abstraction / Remaining a
perpetual possibility / Only in a world of speculation.” What we now read of hardly seems an “abstraction,” however.

Inhabiting our imagined “first world” are unidentified “they,” described only as “dignified, invisible, / Moving without pressure.” They are completely free, in other words, and they are “invisible” even to the imagination. In similar fashion, “the bird called,” responding to “The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery.” This is not at all “another dimension” as will be developed later in *Four Quartets*, but a conflation of senses and of reality and imagination. Accordingly, “the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses / Had the look of flowers that are looked at.” Subject and object are now added to the conflation, these “roses” rhyming with those before the garden, where echoes “Disturb[ed] the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves.” We may never have “opened” the door into “the rose-garden”; we have only opened the door into “our first world” by way of the imaginings, led on by “The deception of the thrush.”

Here, reversal dominates. The figures (we shall call them, punning on their nature) we are visiting become “our guests”; they are, after all, brought into our apprehension. “They” also move “in a formal pattern,” a representation that rhymes forward with the scene in “East Coker” of Elizabethan rustics around a bonfire on a summer midnight. Not surprisingly, given the earlier uniting of opposites that we have observed, “they” are said to be both “accepted and accepting.” Together, “they” and “we” join in that “formal pattern” and “look down into the drained pool,” which suddenly becomes “filled with water,” water that, somehow, emerges “out of sunlight.” Then—“And”—“the lotus rose, quietly, quietly,” these words highly charged, not just by means of the rhyming (but grammatically different “rose”) but also because of the sexual connotations of the lotus.

Now the “surface glitter[s] out of the heart of light.” Light is creative, as we have just seen, responsible for the water filling the previously drained pool. The light then shines in the now-filled pool, and the silently moving figures are represented as “behind us,” themselves “reflected” in that water and “we” staring into the mirroring pool. Immediately, though, the scene moves from the revealing to the concealing, as the light is eclipsed by a passing “cloud,” and suddenly “the pool was empty” again. With “the leaves” “full of children, / Hidden excitedly, containing laughter,” the bird speaks: “Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind / Cannot bear very much reality.” The imagined and the real are joined in the scene, “Point[ing] to one end.” The imagined scene is (thus) true in the same
way as the depiction in Genesis—the beginning—of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden. It is not, however, intended to be that garden, which it (only) resembles and rhymes with, both of them participating in the same signifying reality.

The Fiat Lux creates a medium into which we look at our peril. What we are privileged to see is ourselves, “our guests” pointedly represented as “behind us.” Seeing ourselves truly, as we are, is more reality than humankind can bear. And we, readers of these magnificent verses, must “Go, go, go,” faring forward, moving on, for the promise here made of self-awareness and possible self-criticism and self-correction will be fulfilled only in time—with our arrival in “Little Gidding” at the “intersection time” where we encounter the “familiar compound ghost.” Darkness in the form of a passing cloud in the garden echoes “the Shadow” that continually “falls between” conception and execution in “The Hollow Men” (while perhaps also recalling the enigmatic figures on the “road to Emmaus” toward the end of The Waste Land). In our real world, such darkness represents a medium of the needed recognition of our own heart of darkness, a point that the third section of “Burnt Norton” will shortly take up and meditate upon.

Before that happens, however, the second section comes between, beginning in stylized, poetized fashion. The passage is, accordingly, descriptive, rather than narrative, as were the preceding verses; it begins, “Garlic and sapphires in the mud / Clot the bedded axle-tree.” In a different register from both the preceding section and the second part of this the second section, these verses situate humankind within its “trilling wire in the blood” and the “dance” of the “lymph” said to be figured “in the drift of stars.” We hear “the hoarhound and the boar / Pursue their pattern as before / But reconciled among the stars.” This passage is suggestive, evocative. It too has to do with similarities, but there is not so much union as “inveterate” difference. That “trilling wire in the blood / Sings below inveterate stars” (italics added), and “The dance along the artery / The circulation of the lymph / Are figured in the drift of stars.” There may, then, be “pattern,” but there is also “drift.” The passage is rife with the physical and the material, to the exclusion of so much else. In fact, it feels as if something other, and more, is being evoked: perhaps present in its absence.

From this imaginative representation, the focus immediately shifts to the straightforward, and prosaic. From the short verses of the first part of this section we have moved to long lines. Verbs are often missing,
what looks like sentences incomplete, though clear. “I” reappears, echo-
ing the “I do not know” of the first part of the first section of “Burnt Norton”: “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.” Rhymes now gather meaning: not-knowing, being unable to “say,” “speculation,” questions concerning the real and the imagined. In addition, these eight verses that seem so much longer, feeling heavy and bearing a good deal of thematic weight, mirror in declaration the desire and direction of the whole of Four Quartets, offering in assured tones the idea of “the still point” in relation to “the turning world” that has occupied Eliot’s poetic attention since at least Ash-Wednesday. At “the still point,” we read, with the verb absent, there is “Neither flesh nor fleshless,” “Neither from nor towards,” “neither arrest nor movement,” “neither ascent nor decline.” But, “do not call it fixity, / Where past and future are gathered” (italics added). The most prominent words here appear to be “neither/nor”—a significance that we come to appreciate only in time, with the emergence of “Incarnation,” “impossible union,” and thus “both/and.”

I suggest that the absence of the verb, that “is” that in stating at once affirms, confirms, and establishes, matters. Its absence grammatically reflects a (metaphysical) lacuna. In fact, confusion exists, and prevails: the dance is said to be “at the still point,” and yet there is “neither arrest nor movement,” a point insisted upon. How can there be “dance” absent “movement”? The relation of “dance” and “movement” and their relation, in turn, to that “point” is the issue: “Except for the point, the still point, / There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.”

It seems that the appearance of conceptual solidity belies the actual slipperiness of the words and their meanings. To return to the previous part of this section, “We move above the moving tree.”

The following verse paragraph bears a structure similar to the first in “Burnt Norton,” consisting of two parts functioning as one by means of a linking hemistich. Here, however, only one of the two verses reaches completion with this half-line, the first.

Paradoxically, the point revolves around the movement. That movement includes the undulations of the speaking voice, for he may be seen as working through possibilities, positions, points of view, engaged in speculation, to be sure, but now at least trying on ideas, trying to take the measure of them. That movement begins with the preceding verse paragraph, if not with the lyrical opening part of this, the second section, and is strategically
critical to the reader’s understanding of “Burnt Norton.” The movement consists of refinement, even of correction, of words, ideas, and meanings in time, as we read on. You cannot say, however, that the preceding words, ideas, and meanings are simply transcended, given both/and-ness and paradox, which, we shall see in time, affirms the one-ness of “the fire and the rose.” Indeed, “And all shall be well,” confirms “Little Gidding.”

This, the third part of the second section, both treats the intra- and inter-textual issue of “freedom from...desire” critical to “Little Gidding” (while echoing the opening of *The Waste Land*) and represents a false step in recording the desire for “release from action and suffering, release from the inner / And the outer compulsion.” “Release” rhymes with the relief and the escape sought by the wastelanders and rejected later by *Four Quartets*.

The link I referred to is the words that state (again) the subject here: “Time past and time future.” They offer, we are told, “but a little consciousness,” for “To be conscious is not to be in time,” and yet “only in time can the moment in the rose-garden.../.../ Be remembered, involved with past and future.” The speaking voice thus comes to recognition—consciousness—of defining and determinative paradox. There is even an anticipation of “Little Gidding” in “The moment in the draughty church at smokefall” and a memory of *The Waste Land* in “The moment in the arbour where the rain beat”—which verses enact past and future. The voice, moreover, has become conscious in time, despite his or her earlier declaration. Not yet understood, in any case, is the fact that every moment now—thanks to the Incarnation—burns with meaning, a capacity reflecting the democratization of time and the de-mythologization of the (epiphantic) moment.

The last verse in this section feels triumphant, quietly so: “Only through time time is conquered.” It illustrates not so much the way we (have to) squeeze Eliot’s words as the way that his words support one another: we notice, first of all, the grammatical inversion by means of which the expected order is subverted in the end. Only in, through, and by means of that that is to be escaped is a thing to be conquered—think, again, of the wastelanders needing the waste land that they would escape. Moreover, the two views of time—as means and as end—are literally together, side by side, rather than separated, nothing coming between them in the sentence, no “Shadow,” for example. Further, time stands here as both object (of the preposition) and subject, but it is as subject acted upon. And, there is that final word “conquered,” which
raises a concern, or should do. Later, in “The Dry Salvages,” in the
excursus on Incarnation as “impossible union” and “intersection of the
timeless / With time,” we hear, differently, that here, “the past and future / Are conquered, and reconciled” (italics added). No hint of reconciliation is (yet) heard in “Burnt Norton,” only the notion of conquering, which differs from “submitting” as pagan does from Christian.

The all-important consciousness of paradox and both/and-ness
carries forward in the third section of “Burnt Norton,” which meditates
on the relation of darkness and light and specifically the necessity of
darkness for light to be, to occur. At the beginning, we consider “Here,”
described as “a place of disaffection / Time before and time after / In a dim light”: only a dim light, that is. There is, simply, insufficient
light to “Invest ... form with lucid stillness.” At least equally important,
no darkness appears “to purify the soul / Emptying the sensual with
deprivation / Cleansing affection from the temporal.” Clearly, in any
case, we are back in time. We have now, as well, the new idea of puri-
lication (again, as distinguished from pagan “purgation”)—although
cause for concern again appears with both the idea of depriving us of
the sensual through “emptying” and eliminating “affection” for “the
temporal.” Later, we shall encounter clarification, refinement, and
correction of these related ideas. Indeed, “cleansing” that affection
from the temporal smacks more of purgation, than of refinement—
although the words are not of cleansing of but less dramatically and
without completion from. The temporal should not, in any case, be
transcended, that is, in effect conquered, but, rather, reconciled. What
Incarnational pattern reveals is the necessity for purification of merely
temporal affections.

There being, here, neither light nor darkness sufficient, we are told,
next, to “Descend lower,” in fact “only / Into the world of perpetual soli-
tude, / World not world.” This is promising, again. With “deprivation,”
destitution,” “desiccation,” “evacuation,” and “Inoperancy of the world
of spirit,” this is also horrific. It is like Hell, with fire or its equivalents
apleny—but where is the (attending) “rose”? That this “way” may not
be satisfactory is indicated by the words following: “This is the one way,
and the other / Is the same, not in movement / But abstention from
movement.” Here, I am frankly stumped. What that “other way” is, I do
not know. I do know that “abstention from movement” is not the way, a
point Eliot has emphasized over and over, at least since Ash-Wednesday:
Six Poems. Movement, like sin (to allude to “Little Gidding” and its

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adoption of a term from the medieval mystic Dame Julian of Norwich), “is Behovely.”

Meanwhile, “the world moves / In appetency, on its metalled ways.” And we readers move on to the fourth, lyrical section, of only ten verses, of varying length, one of them consisting of but one word (“Chill”). Poignantly, and perhaps with reference to our situation as readers, this section begins, “Time and the bell have buried the day, / The black cloud carries the sun away.” I for one feel in the dark.

Whether or not the preceding section has the reader specifically in mind, the fifth and final section of “Burnt Norton” turns to words, the province of the poet (including him who writes those words). The philosopher, who of course includes Eliot himself, takes ideas as his or her province, and “Burnt Norton” opens, as we have seen, on a distinctly philosophical note and in a register intellectual and conceptual. This poem thus sets the stage for the remaining three Quartets, each of which returns to this topic, opening a perspective and offering a promise (that can but go unfulfilled until the end).

In this passage, words do not stand alone; they are not material objects, either, not qua words, so much as nearly disembodied, while represented as participating in pattern, the principal surmise, “possibility,” or “speculation” (to revert to the words opening the poem in the philosophical register): “Words move, music moves / Only in time.” Immediately, focus shifts from words to something other and larger: “but that which is only living / Can only die,” words that require meditation, lifting the discussion beyond words themselves to what comes to mind perhaps as a result of the preceding straightforward statement. (An echo is heard of “The poetry does not matter.”) In any case, we note that the words mean by means of their placement, their “ordonnance” more than their (immanent) sense, only in relation, in other words, only by means of their being compared by the speaker to something else, first music, then graphic representation, followed by the speaker’s own apparent struggling to pinpoint the notions he has to convey: “Only by the form, the pattern, / Can words or music reach / The stillness.” Picking up that idea broached earlier in the poem, the passage then engages in simile, employing the figurative in a manner that recalls the opening of the poem, where concept and imagination dance about: “as a Chinese jar still / Moves perpetually in its stillness.” This is all not without merit, of course, and insight, rhyming with the earlier excursus on “the still point.” That discussion,
however, should confirm the reader’s developing awareness that this passage, despite its allure, does not represent the last word or tell the whole story.

Struggling to be understood, indeed to say what he means, the speaker acknowledges the dilemma before opening a path that the remaining poems will fully explore: “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.” Paradox thus again swims into consciousness, however fleetingly, the idea of “co-existence” ripe with possibility, certainly hinted at, as the speaker appears to guess: “Or say that the end precedes the beginning,” and then more, with the “necessarye coniunction” inadvertently prominent (and at this point, having little meaning for the voice speaking): “And the end and the beginning were always there / Before the beginning and after the end. / And all is always now” (italics added). The verses dramatize, we may say, something other than what they state, and they do so by going beyond the individual word to its relation with other words, the speaker engaging in the comparison that the reader needs repeat, mirroring.

Immediately, and abruptly, the speaker returns directly to “words”: “and” is implied, suggested dramatically, but not perceived by the voice we hear, who does not make the “necessarye coniunction.” Thus: “Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden, / Under the tension, slip, slide, perish, / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, / Will not stay still.” This is all true, and it is good to be reminded. You can, certainly, feel the speaker’s struggle, resorting again (and of course) to figures, and essentially saying the same thing if in somewhat different words. A valuable clue lies here, willy-nilly, albeit it too remains undetected by the speaker: the strong rhyme is with the important words uttered in Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems, describing the poetic enterprise as an attempt at “restoring / With a new verse the ancient rhyme”; if you can say the same thing in different words, then ultimate importance lies in the thing (said).7

Following verses that shift consideration of words from their inherent, or immanent, problems to those that come from outside them, that is, their misuse and abuse (which confirms the sense that the issue of greatest importance is not “words alone”), the speaker returns to the critical issue of movement, the focus, of course, of Ash-Wednesday—he still resorts to the figurative, now literalized: “The detail of the pattern is movement, / As in the figure of the ten stairs.” Then the language
becomes decidedly philosophical in texture and tone, mottled with word-play of a kind familiar in Eliot.

Desire itself is movement  
Not in itself desirable;  
Love is itself unmoving,  
Only the cause and end of movement,  
Timeless, and undesiring  
Except in the aspect of time  
Caught in the form of limitation  
Between un-being and being.

The hint of combining here given modulates into full dramatization with the concluding verses of the poem, the (already mixed) philosophical with the imaginative. It is, indeed, a matter of “and,” that is, of conjunction. In fact, the final, figurative verses enact another “and,” returning us to the opening scene of “Burnt Norton” with rhymes direct and explicit:

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight  
Even while 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.

The promise lies great in the simple words “Quick now, here, now, always,” which I thus repeat.

Fulfillment of words occurs, as we will see fulfilled in Four Quartets, only in and as they work together, supporting one another. Words not only move, as “Burnt Norton” readily acknowledges, but they are also moved, as the poem also recognizes and admits. Movement, in fact, tells only part of the story, pattern another. Both matter, of course; and they are both certainly true to the nature and performance of words. There is no question, in other words, of “but,” if by that we mean a simple corrective whereby they are transcended and left behind.

Words move, and they reach “the stillness” only by means of pattern. And they attain meaning by working together, in relation, in tension, rhyming, sometimes in distinction, at others in similiarity, but always by supporting one another—making a whole. Support keeps words from slipping, sliding, decaying with imprecision. Their strength comes from
their coming together, in numbers; they are then better able to resist temptation as well as repel assault. Their rhyming distinguishes them.

And another thing about words, perhaps hinted at by the binary attention variously in “Burnt Norton” to the conceptual and the imaginative, philosophy and poetry, ideas and words. Attention to words shows that it is never words alone that matters (so much). The writer’s use of them counts. They need both to be the “right” words and to be used rightly, that is, properly. The user’s thinking itself needs to be clear, rigorous, and precise. The idea of words working together, supporting one another, represented as fulfillment at the end of “Little Gidding,” suggests the writer’s responsibility for words chosen and put down, his or her necessary role in the creation of meaning, itself dependent on keeping words in place by means of their “ordonnance.”

In “East Coker,” we will hear, again, for we have already visited the point, that “The poetry does not matter.” Our perspective has changed, thanks to “Burnt Norton,” for in time we have come to see that words by themselves, apart from one another, separate, and unrelated to authors and meanings, do not count for much. “Burnt Norton” is a brilliant poem, whose true importance derives from its part in a (greater) whole, where its promise is fulfilled. The first poem of Four Quartets, enacting the message, opens the promise, filled with desire, its meaning and purpose still and still to be determined.8

Notes

1 See the website “Modern American Poetry”: “On ‘Burnt Norton.’”
3 T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets (London: Faber and Faber, 1944).
7 T.S. Eliot, Ash-Wednesday (London: Faber and Faber, 1930).
8 Eliot’s words in the little-known introduction to Charles Claye’s masque are apposite to points in this chapter: “[Mr. Claye] wishes to revive something of the mediaeval popular attitude towards the divine story, but not to imitate any mediaeval type of performance. Having distinguished this masque from the
Renaissance masque in spirit and material, and from the mediaeval mystery or morality plays in form, we must point out also that it is not an archaeological study, though the costume is of course all of one period, which was a period of beautiful dress. He has set the scene in Pimlico, not to amuse us by the quaintness of mediaeval fancy, but to remind us, on the contrary, of a drama which might have been at any place and at any time. What happened in Bethlehem should be conceivable in Pimlico, and what happened at one time should be conceivable as happening at any time” (Eliot, preface, *The Merry Masque of Our Lady in London Town*, by Charles A. Claye, in 1928 edition reprinted 1988 (Oxford: Perpetua Press)).
East Coker: “Mixing Memory and Desire”: Lyrical Response and the Fear “Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God”

Abstract: The second poem of Four Quartets, “East Coker” features in its first section a dramatized scene, somewhat like that of the garden in “Burnt Norton.” This scene involves Elizabethan rustics dancing, represented in charged language (e.g., “necessary coniunction”). We are warned against coming too close, for if you “squeeze” the words, you begin to sense problems: the point of view embodied needs refinement. From this experience we move to the lyrical fourth section, often thought to represent, in straightforward terms, Eliot’s own position, but it too turns out to be problematical. “East Coker” thus teaches us to “be mindful” of voice and tone, as well as to consider the incomplete character of points of view heard earlier in the poem.

The unidentifiable and disembodied voices speaking in “Burnt Norton” struggle with words, meanings, and ideas, sometimes hitting the mark, at others missing it. I cannot recall one instance of their getting it all right or all wrong. This is not simply an interpretive or critical judgment, rendered by the reader (or, rather, a reader). It is, rather, the poet’s complex and demanding (and difficult) strategy. In keeping with Incarnational (Christian) understanding, the verses, throughout and all along, are intersected with insight.

“East Coker” first appeared separately in Orage’s New English Weekly Easter Number in 1940, four years after “Burnt Norton.” The original complete issue of the periodical “had been exhausted” by that point. A second edition was published some three weeks later. The third edition appeared three months after that, in “book” form (that is, as a pamphlet) from Faber and Faber. (“Burnt Norton” then followed, in the same pamphlet form, from the same publishers, some five months later.)

“Home is where one starts from,” we read in the fifth section of “East Coker.” East Coker, in Oxfordshire, is not only Eliot’s ancestral home, including that of Sir Thomas Elyot, author of The Boke named the Governour (1531), but also the site of the poet’s burial. “In my beginning is my end,” Old Possum writes, opening the second poem of Four Quartets. In the last words of this poem, he says: “In my end is my beginning.”

(Re)turning to East Coker, Eliot also (re)turns to the time period that he found critical in English—and Western—cultural history, the Elizabethan, about which he so often wrote. It saw the birth of Lancelot Andrewes, which almost coincided with the Ascendancy. In “East Coker,” which bears the name of the little village that figures at best titularly and allusively, Eliot signals this time period, and a certain importance, via the orthography he employs in the first section, with its depiction of rustics dancing around a bonfire on a summer midnight.

I have considered the passage above, and need to return to it here only briefly, therefore. In a sense, given the poet’s own biography, ancestry, and intellectual, emotional, and spiritual yearnings, he is going home (again), and “home” figures obviously and importantly in “East Coker.” Another, related idea emerges alongside it, that of community—in similarity but also difference. A secular texture attends the poem, not at all a sense of “communion.”

The representation of the Elizabethan rustics engaged in joyful and satisfying dance is thoroughly and carefully introduced. A longish opening paragraph places the scene in “the Preacher’s” context (that is, from
Ecclesiastes) via the immediate mention that “In succession / Houses rise and fall.” “In an open field,” Eliot goes on, first using the phrase twice repeated as we inch closer and closer to the scene of dancing, we are privy to the truth of “the Preacher’s” solid point, offered with that “necessarYe coniunction” again on prominent display expressing that declared point: “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 / And to shake the wainscot… / And to shake the tattered arras….” Then, “In that open field,” opening a realized scene that rhymes with that in the rose-garden at the beginning of “Burnt Norton”—this is, though, the historical past, if, nevertheless, a work of the imagination—is followed by “If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close.” We must heed the warning.

I have said before that this seductive picture has to be carefully considered. If you come too close, you will see something in addition to the positive and the promising. The positive appears in the dancing itself, with its rhymes with the end of “Burnt Norton” but also with the nouns that stand out: “association,” “matrimonie,” “sacrament,” “coniunction,” “concorde.” That “matrimonie,” though, is only “signif[ied].” Whether the “dignified and commodious sacrament” refers to “matrimonie” or this “association” is, I think, unclear. “Association” and “concorde,” moreover, are rather curious words, hardly romantic, certainly suggesting prior difference. What is signified occupies center-stage; in fact, this is patently a representation and a dramatization of the abstract point: a conception within a realized scene.

Furthermore, the depiction is at the same time romanticized: rustic, rural, older, the dancers carefree and joyful, “Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes, / Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth”—a scene not alien to Wordsworth. These dancers also deserve praise in “Keeping time, / Keeping the rhythm in their dancing / As in their living in the living seasons,” an antithesis, then, to the wastelanders. Ecclesiastes is again echoed (“The time of…,” “The time of…,” “The time of…”), followed by a return at the end to the beginning cyclical declarations (“Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended, / Are removed, destroyed, restored…”): “Feet rising and falling. / Eating and drinking. Dung and death.” The cyclical and the Biblical thus reside side by side, while the reference to “Dung,” at least, de-romanticizes the whole. There may be a pretty picture here, but closer examination reveals warts and all. Things are indeed impure, and mixed (like the Elizabethan time-period).
Section IV is where I often began in trying to teach “East Coker.” The reason is simple: it is easy to understand. Or so I imagined.

This lyric, consisting of five five-verse stanzas, seems a good place to enter the poem (or even Four Quartets) because its allegory is straightforward, simple, clear: “the wounded surgeon” with “the bleeding hands” is Jesus Christ, who reveals “The sharp compassion of the healer’s art” in “Resolving the enigma of the fever chart,” which is our condition (now). “Sharp compassion” catches, nicely, the paradox central to Christian, Incarnational understanding. So far, so good.

The second stanza opens with “Our only health is the disease / If we obey the dying nurse / Whose constant care is not to please.” That unwavering “care” serves (but) “to remind [us] of our, and Adam’s curse, / And that, to be restored, our sickness must grow worse.” Complications begin to pile atop one another. The “dying nurse” is, commentators agree, the Church, although “dying” either perplexes or signifies a difficult truth. “Adam’s curse” is, without doubt, Original Sin. But other words return us to a wariness of the “thoroughgoing” that Eliot has demonstrated in Four Quartets and that he roundly criticizes in his prose. In a critical mode, we look again at the opening phrasing: “The wounded surgeon plies the steel / That questions the distempered part.” The first metaphor is trite, the second, involving “the distempered,” is precise, as long as we do not recall that “distemper” is associated with canines. That “fever chart” is, in any case, flaccid.

The second stanza would, evidently, echo doctrinally the important point made in “Burnt Norton” that “Only through time time is conquered.” But “Our only health is the disease” is structurally different and doctrinally reductive: the disease is not “Our only health,” although it may be, like time, the means in and through which disease is conquered. And so the subsequent claim that “to be restored, our sickness must grow worse”? The words appear to echo the point of view that I have ascribed to the poet in The Waste Land. But what the wastelanders need, contrary to their desire (of rain), is purifying fire. This specific rhyme alerts us to the falsehood in the later, parallel declaration that “If to be warmed, then I must freeze / And quake in frigid purgatorial fires.” The last three words attempt a paradox that they cannot fulfill, and the idea of purgatory flies in the face of the Christian understanding of purification, being a pagan idea better associated with Eliot’s friend Pound.
The last stanza of the lyric is simply gruesome and gory. It begins with a falsehood and moves along with unsuccessful attempts to rhyme, thence to a conclusion that I can only describe as bathetic:

The dripping blood our only drink,
The bloody flesh our only food:
In spite of which we like to think
That we are sound, substantial flesh and blood—
Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good. (Which Friday?)

Lest I be accused of the same reductiveness that I am ascribing to the lyric writer here, I acknowledge the considerable promise nevertheless latent in these stanzas. That potential circles about the notion of paradox, variously broached, as well as such statements as that that comes close to a definition of God: “if we do well, we shall / Die of the absolute paternal care / That will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere.” Still, you must not come too close, for if you attend carefully to these words, that promise is very nearly swallowed up in the untenable statement that, doing well, “we shall / Die of the absolute paternal care.” Surely, we will not die of that; we may, however, come to understand a positive relation existing between caring and not-caring, just what the speaker prays for at the end of Ash-Wednesday.

From this mixed, and therefore distempered, lyrical display, we move to the final section, which, like that in “Burnt Norton,” takes up issues concerning writing. It begins with what may be the speaker’s acknowledgment of authorship of the preceding stanzas, however woeful. Clearly the opening verses of Part V comment on what has just come before, the poet of Four Quartets himself perhaps engaging in direct autobiographical reference (and so, in a way, continuing the lyrical register of “East Coker”); there is a rhyme here with the verses we have already considered from the second section (“That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory: / A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion, / Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter....”): “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....” The reference is to the years before, roughly, 1917 and 1939, but whether the speaker is Eliot himself or another remains unclear. I tend, though, to think it is Eliot, in part because the “middle way” is that that he himself embraced, describing it in his essay on John
Bramhall, included in *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order*, as “the most difficult way of all.” Repeated in “East Coker” is the idea that, in essaying “to use words,” there can be, to revert to *Ash-Wednesday* once more, “the ancient rhyme” conveyed “in a new verse,” “and every attempt / Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure,” the reason being that “one has only learnt to get the better of words / For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which / One is no longer disposed to say it.” I hear the voice of Eliot embodying the point on which the second section of “East Coker” ended: “The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.”

The remainder of the verse paragraph builds upon this foundation, connecting a “logic of concepts” with that of the imagination, which has dramatized the just-preceding lines as a critical and necessary response to the beguiling lyric. Self-aware and clear-sighted, these lines constitute an important analysis of writing, as well as evince a marked refinement of earlier treatments of words and writing, accompanied by essential humility borne out of recognition that, as Hilaire Belloc for one insisted, the writer does not *create*. The prominence of “and” too cannot be missed. “And so each venture,” the passage begins, meta-textually, “Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate.” These words may represent a “new beginning.” They are uttered, in any case, “With shabby equipment always deteriorating / In the general mess of imprecision of feeling, / Undisciplined squads of emotion.” The texture here clearly differs from the pontifical claims we have heard before in *Four Quartets*; there is no sense now that Eliot exempts himself. Moreover, there is no sense, either, that words alone constitute the problem and the peril; *that* resides, rather, in the writer’s imprecise feelings and “Undisciplined squads of emotion,” a powerful indictment. The rest of the paragraph continues in this vein, with the humility that comes with power truly realized, enacting that “strength and submission” that is being invoked. The words rhyme forward to “Little Gidding”:

> And what there is to conquer  
> *By strength and submission*, has already been discovered  
> Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope  
> To emulate—but there is no competition—  
> There is only *the fight to recover* what has been lost  
> And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions  
> That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.  
> For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business. (Italics added)
“Faring forward,” in other words (and looking toward “The Dry Salvages”), we keep on essaying.

So much depends on what the meaning of “is” is. The question is real, “is” embodying more than one meaning: for example, “in my beginning is my end” and “the way up is the way down.” And what about the meaning of the former, with which “East Coker” begins, and “In my end is my beginning,” with which the poem ends?

The second and last paragraph of “East Coker” opens with a critical term and works its way, via meditation (not—Romantic, or essayistic—reflection) toward insights some of which represent refinement, if not fulfillment, of points previously considered: “Home is where one starts from.” “Starting from” is not the same thing as “beginning”; it signifies a setting-out, thus a journey undertaken. “Home” may, of course, refer to a birthplace, a figurative “home-place,” as well as intellectual or spiritual locus of origin, however defined.

“As we grow older,” the passage continues, “The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated / Of dead and living.” The point is not that the world and the pattern change, but, rather, that with age we come to see them differently. To put “dead” before “living” may be unexpected, but, in time, we realize, it is right. Among our new understandings is the critical recognition that “Not the intense moment / Isolated, with no before and after,” defines time; instead, anti-epiphantically, there is “a lifetime burning in every moment / And not the lifetime of one man only / But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.” This is a powerful, haunting surmise that does not, per se, await fulfillment but embodies a notion fulfilled. Moments are not isolated nor separated out from one another but part of an ongoing continuum: a community of moments and time. The end is there, in the beginning, waiting in time; not in the same way, then, the beginning is already in the end, not in time alone but other-dimensionally.

Eliot moves toward the ending of “East Coker” with verses that at once burn with rhymes with Ecclesiastes, tell forward to “Little Gidding,” and represent another take on points made earlier in this poem: “There is a time for the evening under starlight, / A time for the evening under lamplight / (The evening with the photograph album).” These three lines are deceptively complicated: to begin with, the emphasis lies, not with the different times, but with the use of those times, a reminder, therefore, of our choice. Further, the parenthesis is a quiet elaboration representing a (re)turn to the past. More is going on than meets the eye.
And so with the remaining ten verses, some of them short. They form, as it were, part of a mosaic, a series of thoughts moving forward, connections left unstated, the “logic of concepts” clearly replaced by a “logic of the imagination.” The first two verses here—“Love is most nearly itself / When here and now cease to matter”—may be a response to memory invoked in turning to a photograph album under the lamplight, but they certainly rhyme forward to the statement in “Little Gidding” concerning “the use of memory: / For liberation—not less of love but expanding / Of love beyond desire, and so liberation / From the future as well as the past.” In “East Coker,” however, liberation is from present desire, therefore an expanding of love (possibly prompted by that turn to the photograph album, where the past may harbor the capacity to burn through to the present).

The immediately following verses convey simple truth: “Old men ought to be explorers / Here and there does not matter / We must be still and still moving / Into another intensity.” The lines connect, of course, with the just preceding declaration that “here and there cease to matter,” denoting the change that comes with age. “Still and still moving” is an effective paradox, rhyming with the best of Ash-Wednesday while refining the testimony in “Burnt Norton” concerning movement and the “still point.” At the end of “East Coker,” opposites meet, coming together, connected by the “necessary coniunction.” In truth, Eliot is now stating his points directly, fulfillment present, here and now, rather than waiting in the future, awaiting time. To be sure, “dimension” will represent a refinement of “intensity,” but the words following, which I did not quote above, can hardly be surpassed or need supplement: “For a further union, a deeper communion.” Thus an effective response to, and clarification of, the verses on the Elizabethan rustics, where another sacrament, that of “matrimonie,” was set “signifying.” Signifying is fulfilled at the end of “East Coker.”

We have not, however, exhausted the poem, nor even reached its actual end, for three verses remain that at least initially appear enigmatic: “Through the dark cold and the empty desolation, / The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters / Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.” Old Possum may be up to his old tricks here, for the punctuation, or rather lack of punctuation, links this passage with the preceding. Thus, we read of old men necessarily exploring, moving, indeed, into another “intensity,” for the purpose of a “further union” and a “deeper communion” in, “through,” and by means of such difficulty as
the wastelanders would avoid and deny. Of course, here, the poet has returned to imaginative language, the way to union and communion, it is suggested, lying in, through, and by means of its promise.

The last three verses of “East Coker” therefore return us to the poem’s beginning, effecting structurally not a cycle but a circle, connecting end and beginning: e.g., “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.” Connections—and “conjunctions”—reign.

The passage in the second section to which the speaker responds critically earns such judgment, a lyrical set of verses that he calls a “periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion.” If there is an opening rhyme with The Waste Land, the speaker does not exploit, or even recognize, it: “What is the late November doing / With the disturbance of the spring[?].” The following three lines all begin with the signifying connection “And,” but that too is essentially wasted. That the end-rhymes do not succeed—for example, the inept “Thunder rolled by the rolling stars / Simulates triumphal cars / Deployed in constellated wars”—points to the large(r) separation of these words from analogies and “attend-ance” of intersecting ideas. The last part of this lyric is, merely, filled with prophecy and doom: “Whirled in a vortex that shall bring / The world to that destructive fire / Which burns before the ice-cap reigns.” That the poet who speaks in the following paragraph recognizes the “not very satisfactory” nature of the lyric reflects promise.

“It was,” he says then, “a way of putting it.” The theme of “way” now emerges, and is exploited in this verse paragraph. The recognition of exactly where he, and we, are, is sure and important: “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.”

This attention to “way” leads on to the large(r) treatment at the end of the third section. “Way” then becomes the means of combining so as to offset separation: for example, “In order to arrive at what you are not / You must go through the way in which you are not.” With its intensity of attention on “way”—the word itself appears five times in thirteen-and-a-half lines—the passage approaches the verbalism of, for instance, the excursus on word and the Word in Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems. That the “way” is indirect is well established, in the process offering an alternative
to and effective critique of the direct and immediate display of emotion in the lyric with which the second section of “East Coker” opens.

The “logic of the imagination” as a way of proceeding can be satisfactory and effective. But dangers lurk, that way “menaced by monsters, fancy lights, / Risking enchantment.” “Sovegna vos,” urged Ash-Wednesday: Be mindful.

We are likely to imagine that time brings wisdom, experience the great if painful teacher. “Old men” are, accordingly, afforded a privilege, said to represent knowledge unavailable to the young that comes only with age. Time, though, may bring only a “worn-out” way of doing things, periphrasis not at all identical to necessary indirectness.

Immediately following the critical account of older “poetical fashion,” the speaker begins a substantial analysis—in “a new verse”—of age and the wisdom it is said to promise and to fulfill. That this passage stands as another “go” at the “rhyme” unsuccessful in the preceding lyric brings that response into general question and is established by the reference to “autumnal serenity,” an altogether better way of putting it than the preceding direct way: “the late November.” Indeed, the speaker now says, “It was not (to start) again....” This “new verse” eschews the lyrical for the analytical, the reflective for the ratiocinative—precisely what Eliot himself had embraced in distinguishing “metaphysical” poetry from Romantic (and Victorian) some twenty years before.

The texture of this paragraph is not at all dogmatic; rather, it is marked by the interrogative. But that does not translate as tentativeness, neither un-knowing nor uncertainty, but instead “the wisdom of humility.” We had expected, the analysis begins, something else, had long looked forward to the “calm, the autumnal serenity / And the wisdom of age.” None of that desire and longing fulfilled, we have to ask whether “the quiet-voiced elders”—perhaps including Matthew Arnold and his critique of his own time, in, for example, “The Scholar Gypsy” and “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse”—had “deceived us, / Or deceived themselves.” The “serenity” that did appear was “only a deliberate hebetude,” and the “wisdom only the knowledge of dead secrets / Useless in the darkness into which they peered / Or from which they turned their eyes.” This is the past, the recent past, sincerely represented.

From that which has brought us to the present moment, the speaker now turns, modestly, humbly, offering a refinement of perspective: from disillusionment, in other words, to alternative surmise. “There is, it seems to us,” he begins, “At best, only a limited value / In the knowledge

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derived from experience.” That includes, of course, experience of the missteps of the recent past. We are thus implicated in the criticism, for we, anti-Victorian, imagine ourselves as (newly) enlightened. The words thus turn back upon this presumed progress, offering a burning “valuation” of it. The reasoning is based in a refinement of the idea of pattern, that with which “Burnt Norton” was so keen on establishing and maintaining. “The knowledge imposes a pattern,” the speaker says in “East Coker,” “and falsifies / For the pattern is new in every moment / And every moment is a new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been.” Experiential knowledge imposes a way of knowing that the Incarnation with its different (and differential) pattern deconstructs.

The remainder of the verse paragraph, and thus of the second section of “East Coker,” concentrates on the matter of “way.” That return is initiated by a statement that feels earned: “We are only undeceived / Of that which, deceiving, could no longer harm.” The complexity here stated mirrors what is being represented dramatically. There is no apparent deception here, and so the verses continue with the representation of being “all the way,” on a “grimpen,” lacking security, in tension. This is our condition—in his prose, Eliot specifically embraces “tension” and pursues its necessity in, for example, matters of Church and state.

Before ending the paragraph with the couplet I have referred to already regarding the only wisdom we can hope for, which is that of humility, the speaker offers these words, returning us to the issues of age and experience and expanding to a new note concerning “belonging,” itself another name for such “conjunction” as Incarnation names, that overcoming of separation that Eliot has long been exploring: “Do not let me hear,” the speaker says in a rare instance of impatience, if not pique, “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 others, or to God.” The short list is inclusive.

We do not come upon Incarnation, not so stated at any rate, until the final section of the next poem, “The Dry Salvages.” It has, of course, been implicit, all along, unstated—just as Incarnation is universal and timeless, the Incarnation that event in time and place that fulfilled (the promise of) Incarnational pattern. We do not know that at this point, however. You will not fully understand until the end. That is the Christian way.

Lest we, in any case, begin to think that an unmixed, purely positive insight or revelation is forthcoming or awaits us, Eliot ends the second section of “East Coker” with two, matching sentences, set off from the
preceding as well as from each other, thus separated, for all their closeness: “The houses are all gone under the sea” and “The dancers are all gone under the sea.” No “autumnal serenity” here, “late November” proving dark, indeed.

Dark is the texture of the following section, which begins with precisely its invocation: “O dark dark dark.” The change in the speaker—if we can indeed speak of but one voice in “East Coker”—has been quiet but definite. It is clearer and more functional in this section. “They all go into the dark,” says he, proceeding to an extensive list, beginning with “captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters.” But it is not just they who “go into the dark.”

A change now appears in the voice we hear. It is the first time we have heard “I” uttered in “East Coker” since the isolated and rhetorically understated (although thematically relevant) annunciation at the end of the first section (“I am here / Or there, or elsewhere. In my beginning”). The third section of the poem, in which we hear the latest instance of “I,” proceeds with repeated self-reference, which did not emerge even in the second section with the critical remarks on the preceding verses and their “way.” Here, the “I” achieves the status, not of character or personality, but of point of view—a position to be read, analyzed, and compared: “And we all go with them, into the silent funeral, / Nobody’s funeral, for there is no one to bury” (italics added). Being names the issue.

More is revealed about the speaking voice as it proceeds. There is no apparent “wrestle / With words and meanings,” nor are they charged; instead, they are merely descriptive, though not given in a “worn-out poetical fashion.” The resort is, again, to the figurative: “As, in a theatre...,” “Or as, when an underground train...,” “Or when, under ether.” The words rhyme forward with Krishna’s at this same point in “The Dry Salvages.”

This “I” is insightful in recognizing self-division, but not (yet) possessed of the inner eye—that eye of the Other—necessary for satisfactory self-criticism. Thus the speaker says that he spoke to “my soul,” and what he said was, “be still, and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God.” The “way” to be taken, though, involves something different. You cannot command your soul to be still. And “the darkness of God”? God is not merely “dark.” Nevertheless, the speaker tried, he says, to direct his soul, willing it, to stillness and acceptance: wait, he urges, for hope would be for the wrong thing, as would love, likewise with faith, even thought. The end is sound, but the “way” is
unsatisfactory. As the following makes clear, the problem lies in identifying, and reducing, rather than connecting, uniting, and reconciling and thus expanding: “So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.” The verse paragraph that immediately follows, at which we have already looked, supports the interpretation, for it pointedly does not identify the way of knowing and ignorance or that of possession and dispossession. Instead, the way is identified as the issue: in, through, and by means of which you proceed (“You must go through the way in which you are not” [italics added]).

What begins to dawn is recognition of the difficulties, and often the failures, of the voice (or voices) in “East Coker” to say it satisfactorily, Incarnational pattern the standard of measurement, yet to be fully revealed or fulfilled.

A valuable hint, or glimpse, resides in the remark I have quoted before, which begins with that nearly ubiquitous “coniunction”: “And where you are is where you are not.” Eliot means, it appears, that you are, that is, have being, where you are not. The difficulty in saying it satisfactorily, in getting it right, may lie in the fact and the presence of the “I.”

I return to the fifth section of “East Coker,” specifically, the beginning, where the speaker acknowledges his attempts over the years to “say it right,” his consequent struggles, and his plaguing lack of success. Like the urgency to return to the place “where we started” and know it for the first time (the ending of “Little Gidding”), these important verses enact the major thematic point. We (can) know them for the first time.

After apparently autobiographical references, the poet, you recall, says he has “largely wasted” twenty years “Trying to learn to use words.” Each and every attempt, he continues, without lament, “Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure.” You can “get the better of words,” he goes on, accepting the fact, “For the one thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which / One is no longer disposed to say it” (italics added). There is what you want, and need, to say, and that is related to but not identical with nor reducible to the way you are now “disposed to say it.” The poet finds himself, willy-nilly, “With shabby equipment always deteriorating / In the general mess of imprecision of feeling, / Undisciplined squads of emotion.” His problems thus mirror those of Everyman, trying to get on with living—only more keenly felt and so exacerbated.

The passage itself has the texture of the keenly felt and honestly and sincerely stated, rendered, indeed, with clarity, precision, perception, and acute analysis. The “I” is simply different now from earlier, not at all
lacking desire, yet not enslaved to it or driven by it, either. Returning to a couple of those passages that I have labeled as problematic, I find the following contrived and programmatic, in addition to, that is, adopting the pagan, and anti-Incarnational, notion of purgation: “If to be warmed, then I must freeze / And quake in frigid purgatorial fires.” Similarly with “I said to my soul. . . .” although this statement does not feel contrived or necessarily programmatic in its lack of sophistication; it is, however, blithe in its assumption that what it says, be possible, let alone desirable. In the fifth section, the “I” appears only at the beginning, the switch quick to “one” and “we.” There is no pretension, and with its essential invisibility now, the voice appears liberated from desire.

It is important to remind ourselves that the humility of which we speak is as earthy as the Elizabethan rustics with their “Earth feet, loam feet.” Earth is the element associated with “East Coker.” The word “humility” derives, after all, from *humus*, which means “earth.”

Humility emerges as the most satisfactory way of responding to the situation that attends writing, with its “intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings.” While you perhaps inevitably strive for control and mastery, they inevitably elude you. “And what there is to conquer” can only be attempted with “strength and submission” (italics added). Besides, it has all been done and said before, “Once or twice, or several times,” and “by men whom one cannot hope / To emulate.” The only fight—for “there is no competition”—is one of recovery of what has been lost and found and lost again and again. What remains further humbles: “there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.”

“East Coker” is about, we might conclude, the humility that accompanies the recognition, and the acknowledgment, of the difficulty of understanding. We may conclude that *Four Quartets* as a whole dramatizes a journey—not that of a character or a personage, to be sure—from self-involvement to self-criticism. The great poem is also about writing and reading and their ultimate inseparability. In some ways, *Four Quartets* is about its own writing, and thus of the way that we (are to) read its words.

The light shines in darkness.

Notes


4

The Dry Salvages: Many Voices, Many Gods

Abstract: In “The Dry Salvages,” voice emerges as an even more significant issue than in the previous poems of Four Quartets. In “East Coker,” the (main) voice appears on-the-way-to-knowing. Beginning the third poem of Four Quartets, the voice claims, however, not to know, the reader’s situation mirroring that predicament. “The Dry Salvages” ends, though, on a strong declarative note that “The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation,” surely the most important single line that Eliot ever wrote. Crucial in this poem is the relation of what is being done to what is being said. The “Annunciation” represented in Part II here is to the reader too, whose situation rhymes with that of the Blessed Virgin, Who accepted and (so) received, in the event giving birth to the Word.

The speaking voice in “East Coker” shows signs of beginning to understand. In “Burnt Norton,” the voice—whether to be taken as same, similar, or different—says, without shame or hesitation, “I do not know.” The voice in the later poem says, confidently, knowing: “And what you do not know is the only thing you know.” Paradox lies at the heart of his/her/its refined grasp. By the end of the poem, “he” can say, with a knowledge (that the Incarnation fulfills), that a lifetime burns in every moment.

My notes here are clumsy, for the notions of voice and speaker are problematic, enigmatic, plaguing, throughout *Four Quartets* (if only more so than in Eliot’s other poetry). There may well be no “character” as such, at least not before “Little Gidding” (and well into the poem, at that). There may not even be a “personage” (to adopt the term that Eliot himself uses for the seer Tiresias in *The Waste Land*). We may have to do, instead, with something like a center of consciousness whose “being” derives from both the poet’s intentions and execution and the writing that is that execution, fulfilling the intentions. The “logic of the imagination,” to adopt another of Eliot’s own ideas, may refer both to imaginative (as distinguished from logical) ordering and the forward drive of thinking itself as writing embodies it.

The tone and the texture of the words are what matter (most), which we familiarly name as voice, imputing a speaker to the tone and the texture. As we move through “East Coker” and into “The Dry Salvages,” there are passages, certainly, that strike us as Lancelot Andrewes-like. That is, as Eliot says of the churchman, “you are sure that he is wholly ‘absorbed’ in his subject, that his emotion grows as he penetrates more deeply into his subject, that he is finally ‘alone with the Alone’, with the mystery which he is seeking to grasp more and more firmly.” If anything, the matter is even more complicated in *Four Quartets*, however, for in the poetry a created voice interposes between the poet and his “subject”—unless we include in that “subject” the fact of the (other) voice. That voice does, indeed, seem at times wholly absorbed and close—and closer—to saying it right. The voice, I feel, is at those points the poet’s own as represented and dramatized in his created, textual voice, and at those points the Word appears to speak through the words, three voices now become one.

These questions, with Eliot’s “hints and guesses” (exacerbated by the commentator’s guesses), though perhaps important to aficionados, may not much matter to most readers, especially to those of us principally
concerned with what the poem is saying. I shall, then, continue to use the term “voice” as well as that of “speaker,” wary of the distortions swirling around both—and caught in the same morass of imprecision, and the condition of words, as the voice or voices we have been following.

Another difficult question attends this matter of apparent change in the speaking voice, from not-knowing to being-on-the-way-perhaps-to-knowing (I find it impossible not to be clumsy). There seems an uneasy relation, easily seen as a disconnect (rather than productive “tension”), between the repetitions, queries, missteps, and even falsehoods, on the one hand, which describes the movement of Four Quartets, and, on the other, the sense we are feeling that the poem as a whole moves forward toward refinement and correction of earlier understanding (and misunderstanding). The point is that the poem does not lack form, Incarnational form, to be specific. The effort to get it right—to understand, to convey that understanding, and to be understood—is itself that refinement, on the way to fulfillment. This is so even when mistakes are made. Only in time do we discover that “purpose.” Thus, Eliot can associate “the dark dove” with Love and believe that “all shall be well,” repeating it, in slightly different form, to embody the point while also expressing acceptance and confidence. “And all manner of thing shall be well.”

“The Dry Salvages” begins with the speaker’s stating: “I do not know much about gods, but I think that the river / Is a strong brown god.” Here, the voice does not sound like Eliot’s own. It is not personal, despite the repetition of the first-person pronoun. The “I” is, at any rate, humble, unpretentious, apparently honest, and trustworthy. It is the same voice we hear introducing Krishna at the beginning of the third section: “I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant— / Among other things—or another way of putting the same thing.” The issue broached in “East Coker” of what you say and how is here repeated (with difference, of course). But there, attention centered on the words, here, differently, on meanings. Accordingly, you do not find very much concerning “way” in “The Dry Salvages” (apart from some attention in Krishna’s represented, and finally unsatisfactory, understanding). At poem’s end, in fact, you find a straightforward, direct, and clear annunciation of the pattern about which Four Quartets has been moving, offering hints and dramatizing guesses (and prompting more) that will, in “Little Gidding,” be realized as part of a purpose that we can know only in time.

Krishna’s long excursus on time repeats the Heraclitean point of view, which Eliot reproduces via an epigraph for “Burnt Norton.” Krishna, it
seems important to note, is a name deriving from a word meaning dark or black, and is in Hinduism, which Eliot studied at Harvard, the supreme incarnation of the Supreme god Vishnu. We do not know until the end of “The Dry Salvages” of the central importance attached to “Incarnation,” but to which Christian pattern the Hindu stands in important relation, figuring some of the issues I have just treated above.

The long paragraph is a mix of valuable insights and problematic statements in need of refinement and sometimes modification, delivered in and as a representation of Krishna’s understanding. To begin with, there is that famous Heraclitean claim that “the way up is the way down, the way forward the way back.” The confident tone now slides over into the assertive, if not dogmatic: “You cannot face it steadily, but this thing is sure, / That time is no healer.” There follows illustration via travelers first on a train, then on a boat, all of them different from the persons that “left the platform”; punctuating the elaboration is the injunction to “Fare forward,” followed by an imperative, “You shall not think ‘the past is finished’ / Or ‘the future is ahead of us’.”

Emerging then “Is a voice descanting (though not to the ear, / The murmuring shell of time, and not in any language).” This statement appears less mysterious than spiritual, and as such, its validity must be in question. The voice is not exactly an inner voice, although it resembles that dangerous thing that Eliot reviled. It is a generalized point of view, uttered (though not to the culpable ear) by Krishna and representing a widespread (though not universal) position. The voice begins by repeating that “You are not those who saw the harbour / Receding, or those who will disembark.” With a rather odd introduction, the voice adds, “You can receive this: ‘on whatever sphere of being / The mind of a man may be intent / At the time of death’—well, that is the one action / (And the time of death is every moment) / Which shall fructify in the lives of others.” The main voice here concludes, “So Krishna…” and adds, “Not fare well, / But fare forward, voyagers.” It is an important point, delivered in a tone more sympathetic than Krishna’s.

Working on this essay, I very nearly foundered. About the fifth, climactic section, of “The Dry Salvages,” I felt, and still feel, reasonably confident—it adheres, after all, to the “logic of concepts,” about which we commentators likely to think we know well. Suddenly, though, any conceptual basis that I had erected for the poem as a whole collapsed, leaving me certainly “wan and forlorn.” I felt humbled, to be sure, and thus tempted to claim this as Old Possum’s purpose. But that would be
easy, too easy, and Eliot never lets me get away with ease or the easy. So I turned back to the poem, to the words, yet again.

You begin—you have to begin—with les trois sauvages, which the headnote to the poem identifies as “a group of rocks, with a beacon, off the N.E. coast of Cape Ann, Massachusetts.” The differences are thus clear with the other Quartets: “The Dry Salvages” is the only one set in the United States, and it is the only one not titled for a spot of land. The poem very nearly does run you adrift, but with the literal rocks there is a “beacon” nearby. “The Dry Salvages,” accordingly, poses severe tests for the reader attempting to navigate its murky and rocky waters.

In some ways, the poem recalls, and rhymes with, The Odyssey as well as such a (later) text as Hermann Hesse’s Siddhartha, both of which place the main characters on the sea or “by the river” and trace their continuing education to its roots there. Both Odysseus and Siddhartha, on their respective journeys toward understanding, are severely tested. Temptations and dangers lurk and abound.

You simply do not know—about the poem as about those other matters that the poem brings up: how to understand time, what to make of claims toward timelessness, the apparent “addition” that names our sense of movement from one point in time to another, the “wreckage” of our dreams and our hopes, the cries heard and silent that stream forth from the suffering, and so very much more. The speaker of “The Dry Salvages” is in the drifting, perhaps doomed boat with us: “I do not know much...,” (so) he begins.

But the poem does end with substantial knowledge, even if that end exists alongside the humble claims that we proceed from “hints” and can make only “guesses.” Be alert to and aware of paradox, once more.

And I have to attend to what is being done in what is being said. In a sense, Eliot thus also unites Hellenism and Hebraism, the Logos and “davhar.”

The Annunciation is sudden, and unexpected. There were, of course, hints before, and guesses aplenty, echoes, anticipations, surmises, and lots of speculation. And yet no real preparation occurred. It emerged, seemingly out of nowhere, much like the Incarnation of which It tells.

Not just recently but always, the second section of “The Dry Salvages” has struck me as enigmatic, even problematic. It begins with the rhyming question “Where is there an end of it?” That is, of “the soundless wailing,” of flux, change, and mutability, the incessant movement, in other words, that gives a moment, perhaps in a rose-garden, and then takes it away, leaving us “wan and forlorn,” indeed. Time is la belle dame sans merci.
The end of the six stanzas on “Annunciation,” however, refers confidently to questions concerning “an end of” and “to” it with these words: “Only the hardly, barely prayable / Prayer of the one Annunciation.” The word has occurred before in these stanzas, at the end of both the first and the third, but not capitalized. The other end-words share the -tion structure: in order, “renunciation,” “destination,” “examination,” “annunciation” enveloping as it were the first of these words, “Annunciation” following the second and the third. Moreover, there is that pointed difference between end “of” and end “to,” which might be insignificant were they not written by Old Possum. “Of” persists until the second verse of the last stanza. There is a close rhyme with the second verse of the first stanza in the same of the last stanza: “No end to the withering of withering flowers,” and “The silent withering of autumn flowers.” If anything, the approaching close bears signs of increasing dis-ease. The tone throughout is lamentational.

And that “of” that becomes “to”? The question refuses to go away, echoing in my mind. “End of” may refer to purpose, “end to,” differently, to close or stoppage: thus, where is the purpose of the wailing, the withering, and what does it all mean? On the other hand, “Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage” (italics added), etc.? “There is no end of it,” we read, at the beginning of the last stanza: it has no purpose, in other words. And: “No end to the withering of withering flowers,” no close, just continuation, on and on, endlessly. The perspective thus grows dimmer and bleaker.

The speaker in these stanzas (simply) gets it wrong. There may be no stopping of “drifting wreckage,” withering, and wailing, but that does not mean there is no purpose to it all. We move, after all, in, through, and by means of all the lamentations, the withering and worsening of perspective, from prayer merely that of “the bone on the beach, the unprayable / Prayer of the calamitous annunciation”—whatever that is—to the monumentally different declaration at the end to “The bone’s prayer to Death its God,” leaving “Only the hardly, barely prayable / Prayer of the one Annunciation” (italics added). That is to say: “the bone on the beach” knows only “Death its God,” its “prayer” “unprayable,” whereas the other prayer is “hardly” but “barely prayable,” and it is to the one Annunciation, the other announcements mentioned being either “calamitous” or clamorous (thus rhyming with the clanging of the bell at the end of the poem’s previous section). What is being shown, by Eliot, in these stanzas is what escapes the represented poet speaking here: that is the emergence,
quickly, indeed abruptly, of a pattern alternative to the bleak one being declared. The purpose of the unending is perhaps manifest in the striking paradox in the final stanza: there is no end “To the movement of pain that is painless and motionless.”

“The one Annunciation” is, of course, that dramatized in the New Testament Book of Luke, where the angel Gabriel declares to the Virgin Mary that, having received God, She will conceive and give birth to His incarnate son, the baby Jesus, who is the Christ, thus effecting the Incarnation. Receiving God, the poet and the reader, alike and differently, continue to give birth to His Son, bringing forth what lies latent in the unsatisfactory annunciations, the examination, even the renunciation, redefining destination (as, for example, purpose). The Annunciation may here, then, be to us that the Incarnation will happen, if we accept and receive.

A different voice altogether speaks in the remainder of the second section of “The Dry Salvages.” Hugh Kenner thinks it both unattractive and incapacious:

[I]n Part II he nearly expostulates with us, urges us to follow an argument which he is having difficulty in formulating satisfactorily.

... [T]he voice we hear in The Dry Salvages is using [a] poetic illumination, or his own leaden paraphrase of it, as a datum in a labored construction. The rhythms are cumbrous, the phraseology has neither grace nor pith ... the instances lack sureness.... [One] sentence in the passage loses its direction and its syntactic identity entirely; and the labored “I have said before” has none of the ironic grace of the comparable detail in Part III of East Coker.6

Kenner is always interesting, his intelligence acute and massive, and he is rightly attuned to voice and tone, few if any better at pinpointing subtlety and difference. But he fails to reach Eliot’s “end,” unable to connect the dots. Still, he is right to insist on the speaking voice’s attempts here “to mediate between recurrent illumination and pervasive failure,” another way of putting the same point that extends in identifying the essential forward movement of Four Quartets toward refinement and fulfillment of purpose present—but only latent—in failures to reach something satisfactory.

In the second section of Part II, we find at the beginning mildly stated opinion, echoing the opening of “The Dry Salvages”: “It seems, as one becomes older,” the second verb awkward (at best). This voice, like the one opening the poem, does not know; but it seems to him that “the
past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence— / Or even
development.” This last, he supposes, is “a partial fallacy / Encouraged
by superficial notions of evolution, / Which becomes, in the popular
mind, a means of disowning the past.” The voice sounds rather like
Eliot himself, in some of the prose essays; it has a grasp, albeit tenuous,
on some key points. Similarly in the tortuous following verses, nearly
bewildering in the syntactical morass and ultimate failure to constitute
an English sentence, or even a workable fragment—whether the penul-
timate sentence below simply marks the speaker’s informality of tone
or represents an abject failure to mix in lightness and humor may not
ultimately much matter:

The moments of happiness—not the sense of well-being,
Fruition, fulfilment, security or affection,
Or even a very good dinner, but the sudden illumination—
We had the experience but missed the meaning...

By dramatic and indirect means, Eliot captures how we too often read,
getting it only half-right by expecting words to be either right or wrong,
ot an unholy mixture of “illumination and pervasive failure.”

The speaker continues, after stating that we miss the meaning of our
experience: “And approach to the meaning restores the experience / In a
different form, beyond any meaning / We can assign to happiness.” The
emphasis on happiness is troubling, apparently expecting direct access
to it. The passage, in any case, echoes Wordsworth’s famous Romantic
speculation concerning past experience “recollected in tranquillity,”
thence available to be made into poetry. The speaker’s word “restoring”
is that that Eliot uses in *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems* when talking of the
poet’s putting the “ancient rhyme in a new verse.” Moreover, experience
now loses any primacy it may have enjoyed, meaning itself become
the object of questing. Experience is revived but in a “form” new and
different, allowing understanding from the perspective made available
by experience and meaning to come together as a whole made of those
inseparable parts. Unfortunately, the speaker then vitiates his insight
by jumping to the desire of happiness. The remainder of the paragraph
consists largely of the pattern repeated of insight and inanity.

Following the addition of Krishna’s voice to the mix, which we have
already considered, we turn to the lyrical fourth section of “The Dry
Salvages,” consisting of fifteen lines, in equal stanzas. The invocation of
“Lady,” as the first word, rhymes with *Ash-Wednesday*, where She plays
a central role. Here, too, the “Queen of Heaven,” She is turned to for prayer, a promising sign. The manner is, however, even more inept than we witnessed in the second section: “Whose business has to do with fish,” “with every lawful traffic.” The last stanza, even so, is acute and well done: “pray for those who were in ships, and / Ended their voyage on the sand, in the sea’s lips / Or in the dark throat which will not reject them” or, the speaker concludes, “wherever cannot reach them the sound of the sea bell’s / Perpetual angelus.” The “bell” rhymes with other references in “The Dry Salvages,” and the last verse, made of but two words, embodies attend-ance, that is, another dimension intersecting with the temporal.

The way is, thus, smooth to the fifth and final section, consisting of one long verse paragraph, suddenly shifting to shorter length (after the climactic annunciation). Kenner finds even these verses suspect, evidently the equally unsatisfactory efforts of the voice heard throughout “The Dry Salvages.” Concluding his brief and generalized account, Kenner expresses his criticism in language intemperate and verging on loss, I sense, of interpretive control:

Thus, the parody-reconciliation, the collective voice of the late nineteenth century, urging us to strive without personal hope, to consider how we are placed in a cosmos whose dimensions dwarf us on an earth whose soil at least knows how to make use of us, seeking our fulfilment in a collective endeavor, and our religious support in “religious experiences” which are likely to be experiences of nature... or of music, and not really distinguishable from the fulfilment of “a very good dinner.” It is some ideal Matthew Arnold’s road out of East Coker.8

The shoals upon which Four Quartets so often drives the best readers have gotten the best of even this exemplary commentator. Little wonder that we turn to commentary, little wonder that we come away from it either mired in falsehood or more confused than in dealing with Old Possum’s own words.

Some of these very issues Four Quartets elucidates. Such elucidation derives, in large part, from “Little Gidding” and the final section of “The Dry Salvages,” neither of which can stand alone, without the other or without the prior parts of the essay-poem. It is always working in saying.

“Little Gidding” is a different kind of thing from “Burnt Norton,” “East Coker,” and “The Dry Salvages.” It tells a different kind of story. We shall turn to it directly, but first comes Part V of “The Dry Salvages,” which helps prepare for the final poem, particularly by way of tone, though not
so much of texture. It might be considered as a sort of John-the-Baptist figure opening the way for the Greater to come. This remarkable paragraph of fifty verses deserves an essay, and a chapter, of its own.

Notes


“The central image of *The Dry Salvages* is water and the sea. The images are similar to the *Odyssey* but represent internal aspects. Humanity loses itself to technology and theories like evolution that separate mankind philosophically from the past. According to Eliot, within each man there is a connection to all of mankind. If we just accept drifting upon the sea, then we will end up broken upon rocks. We are restrained by time, but the Annunciation gave mankind hope that he will be able to escape. This hope is not part of the present. What we must do is understand the patterns found within the past to see that there is meaning to be found. This meaning allows one to experience eternity through moments of revelation. Through Christ, we are able to overcome time unless we do not know him. Our corruption can be overcome and that we are able to join the eternal. Eliot invokes images of original sin and Adam’s fall when talking about the past and points out that such events can be forgotten but can still affect mankind. Eliot brings in the image of Krishna to discuss how the past and future are related: Krishna, speaking to Arjuna, claims that death can come at any time and that men should always find the divine will instead of worrying about what their actions will bring. If an individual were to follow Krishna’s words then they would be able to free their self from the limitations of time. Even if it cannot be fully attained, the effort in attempting it is still important. The way for mankind to understand the divine will is through prayer and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

“Many of the images connect back to his earlier works. The images of life as boat adrift with a leak is similar to the ‘Death by Water’ section of *The Waste Land*. Like images about old age and experience found in *East Coker*, this image reinforces the need to look at the whole of life and try to see things beyond the limitations of time. Men are supposed to progress, but they aren’t supposed to focus on what they can gain in the future. The prayer to the Virgin Mary is intended to help guide the journey which would end with understanding eternity and the Annunciation. It is Mary who will guide the metaphorical sailors to their proper harbour. While connecting back to his earlier works, Eliot also connects back to his family’s past; the ‘Dry Salvages’ was part of the landscape his ancestor Andrew Eliot travelled to in 1669.”
I have just quoted from a notoriously unreliable source. I do so unblinkered, for that venue is nevertheless the likely place to which hundreds, if not thousands, of readers, especially students, (will) turn for help with this rocky poem, “The Dry Salvages.” The author or authors of this account, only a bit of which I have quoted, come equipped with sources and footnotes but appear deaf to poetic texture and tonal shifts as well as oblivious to what is going on in what is being said. It is a huge disservice to the poem, I am sorry to say, to Eliot, to Christianity, and to all readers. You feel that the writing here is far from attuned to the poem—or at-oned with it; the writer or writers are outside its intensity.

Far better commentary is provided by such statements by Eliot himself as “[T]he fullness of Christian revelation resides in the essential fact of the Incarnation” (untitled essay in Revelation, ed. John Baillie and Hugh Martin [London: Faber and Faber, 1937], 2) and “The unbeliever starts . . . with the question: Is a case of human parthenogenesis credible? and this he would call going straight to the heart of the matter” (“The Pensées of Pascal,” Selected Essays, 3rd ed. [London: Faber and Faber, 1951], 408).

8 Kenner, 317.
5

The Dry Salvages (Continued): Four Quartets and the Work in the Word: What the Word Does

Abstract: The fifth and final section of “The Dry Salvages” effectively turns from writing to meaning. Crucial to an interpretation of Four Quartets, these verses offer the climactic affirmation that “Incarnation” is the “gift” we only half-understand. Avoiding exclusivity, Eliot presents not the Incarnation, but the pattern of which it is the paradigmatic instance in human history, thus fulfilling the promise of “Incarnation.” The voice making this critical affirmation is, however, tonally complex; the passage, in fact, represents—the doing thus apparent in the saying—the difficulty in ever fully grasping the mystery of the Incarnation, the “essential” Christian dogma. “The Dry Salvages” dramatizes this difficulty.

The fifth and final section of “The Dry Salvages” seems almost more Eliot than Eliot, perhaps more Eliotesque than Eliot (cf. “haruspicate or scry”). The words join with cultural critique, contemporary reference, authoritative theological statement, and a certain skepticism emblematic of Catholic disillusionment to rhyme with a great deal in the poet’s past and present. Although authoritative, the voice lacks the magisterial sound of the earlier criticism in The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism. The voice stands in need of embodiment, which comes at the end, in “Little Gidding.”

The fifty verses that make up this single verse paragraph, which consists of two very nearly seamless parts of long and short lines, focus on knowing, more specifically, the (extreme) difficulty in (ever) knowing (what the voice appears to know). Although these verses, like many other sections of Four Quartets and like each of the four collected poems that were published separately, can stand alone, the “rightness” of their words derives from the “support” they receive from other words, from the role each part plays in the whole. This situation mirrors, rhyming, that of human life lived. What ultimately matters, burning with meaning that we can know only in time, is the relation of the part to one’s life whole, and beyond that, to all life’s whole.

Part V of “The Dry Salvages” begins with our attempts to “communicate”: “with Mars,” with “spirits,” via the horoscope, to learn from “signatures” and “the wrinkles of the palm” and tea leaves, to “riddle the inevitable / With playing cards, fiddle with pentagrams / Or barbituric acids, or dissect / The recurrent image into pre-conscious terrors.” The list is endless: continuing with exploration of “the womb, the tomb, or dreams.” Desperation of attempt figures alongside a certain bemusement and sympathy. These are all “Pastimes and drugs, and features of the press,” turned to especially “When there is distress of nations and perplexity / Whether on the shores of Asia, or in the Edgware Road.” Local or foreign, then—it does not matter. The attempt is the same, “And always will be.” These words rhyme with “the ragged rock in the restless waters,” at the end of this poem’s second section, which “is what it always was.”

Immediately, the focus shifts, a cause identified for the unsatisfactory results of these desperate efforts: we search past and future, assaying and trying to take the measure of the former and hoping to foretell the latter. Uniting the searches is our clinging, in focusing on past and future, “to that dimension.” There is another, hinted at in “sea bell’s / Perpetual
angelus” and in “another dimension” about which “East Coker” speaks at the end.

As easy as are the efforts to read the past and predict the future—never mind the results of those efforts—the attempt to penetrate the other dimension is hard, if not impossible. Specifically, the speaker defines that dimension as “The point of intersection of the timeless / With time,” suddenly sending us reeling to the over-riding question with which *Four Quartets* has been dealing. “To apprehend” that *intersection*, says the speaker, pulling no punches, “is an occupation for the saint,” and thus almost certainly beyond the capacity of the ordinary man or woman. He catches himself, correcting himself, for it is “No occupation either,” rather “something given / And taken, in a lifetime’s death in love, / Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.” This is a totally new note in *Four Quartets*, the tone suddenly spiritual and mystical, the texture in tandem with it.

Then the speaker turns back to “most of us,” for whom “there is only the unattended / Moment, the moment in and out of time.” In other words, the experience whose meaning we have missed, but that seemed pregnant—epiphany names such unattended moments that occur in time but whisk us out of time into that other (pure) world we hanker for. Such moments—which are mentioned here, including “music heard so deeply / That it is not heard at all”—are, let there be no mistake, “only hints and guesses, / Hints followed by guesses,” in fact. Temptation lurks in this extended description, especially with the example I have given regarding complete absorption in the object. *That*, however—attractive as it may sound, rhyming, or so it seems, with Eliot’s account of Lancelot Andrewes’s way of writing and reading—amounts to unattended transcendence, a way of getting out of self and out of time, “you” becoming something else.

*We* must do more, be mindful, fare forward—work not required of those of us who turn to diviners as to drugs and other “pastimes”—and that work involves “prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.” The last word is quiet, unobtrusive, but in time we will see that it is all important in “Little Gidding.” We, though, are like the ascetically inclined speaker at the beginning of *Ash-Wednesday* for whom “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.” We, that is to say, assume an either/or: either within time or outside time, getting it half-right.

Next comes, in a single sentence, the climactic annunciation, returning to the notion of hints and guesses while establishing our propensity
for (mere) half-apprehension, and rhyming with the preceding point regarding either/or: “The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.” Not the Incarnation, as we no doubt expect with the definite article before the noun, but a generalized term, here capitalized. It is thus unfamiliar, even in its universality. Jesus the Christ—in Whom God became fully human while maintaining His (full) divinity—is the Verbum, the Word about Whom Eliot writes in Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems. In the Incarnation, verba became res, the Word the thing, come together, in “impossible union.” “The Dry Salvages” now, at the end, turns from writing to meaning, from word to the Word.

But it does so without the imputation of exclusivity that so troubled authors in the “layman’s faith” tradition, to which, I have argued, Four Quartets shows some signs of belonging. Eliot pointedly omits the before “Incarnation,” leaving the capitalized word to signify the pattern of which “the Incarnation” stands as paradigmatic instance, timeless and universal. Thereby, the talk earlier in Four Quartets of pattern moves toward its fulfillment. What follows in the paragraph establishes the specifically Christian completion of the pattern that has “always already” been available.

Being dramatized here are the speaker’s own incapacities, incarnating what he has just said about the difficulty in (ever, fully) understanding. He, that is, gets it only half, in other words, partially, right. The defining pattern is Incarnation, but “the Incarnation” is the paradigm of that pattern and its ultimate fulfillment. We not only get “half”—either transcendence or immanence—but we read the speaker as either crucially apprehending or, as Kenner supposes, “the parody of the real.” The speaker does not see his partiality, and too often, neither do we, the situation dizzyingly complicated, frustrating our characteristic attempt to reduce it to an easy and simple either/or. There is something at work that we do not see, lacking critical eyes (such as Eliot has sought since at least “The Hollow Men” fifteen years earlier). “Half”—right means, after all, that we may get it partly right or (only) partly right.

As we move from the climactic statement to the shorter verses, the tone is decidedly philosophical. These eighteen lines are marked by a fluidity not always apparent in the Quartets, and by their end, with the emergence of the first-person (plural) otherwise absent in Part V of “The Dry Salvages,” a fully human and humane note is sounded. Hugh Kenner thinks the final note here Arnoldian, Victorian, and anti-Christian. The reversion is clearly to earlier accounts in the poem of past-future,
temporal movement, and, perhaps especially, “concorde,” “association,” and “necessarie coniunction.” There can be little doubt that things are coming together, Incarnation now available to us as anticipated by, latent in, and inchoate in the other rhyming instances throughout the poems:

Here the impossible union
Of spheres of existence is actual,
Here the past and future
Are conquered, and reconciled,
Where action were otherwise movement
Of that which is only moved
And has in it no source of movement—
Driven by daemonic, chthonic
Powers.

Conquered and reconciled, note: not just another “coniunction” and perhaps “impossible union” but also an instancing of what can lie beyond conquest, a peaceableness following but not transcendent to it. This is not only well-said but also accurate, avoiding lurking pitfalls. The speaker is, indeed, far from insouciant; on the contrary, he gets a great deal right.

Kenner thinks the final few verses of this section, and thus of “The Dry Salvages,” are to be read critically (whether via Eliot’s intentions or our judgment is not, I think, clear):

The poem’s last formulation is one from which no agnostic propounder of a free man’s worship would dissent. No one succeeds, the thing is to try; our efforts “fructify in the lives of others,” and we ourselves enrich the ground. This is very close to the social gospel of ants; and the final line empties of inconsistent optimism a [John] Ruskin-like cliché about “significant soil.”

Well, again, no and yes—the first line here begins with a (linking) repetition of that a bit earlier concerning our apprehending only “the unattended moment”:

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.

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Indeed, the passage does smack of both full-speed-ahead accompanied by gritty determination and the clear-sighted recognition that it will all come to naught. The difference is subtle, at least in Eliot’s formulation, but it is real between this classic Victorian work-ethic and the Christian understanding that works within these words.

This passage is critical to understanding *Four Quartets*, and to what Eliot is saying and what is being done in that saying. At least four points need be made, and brought together. First, the notion of “trying” echoes that of “faring forward,” itself an element—paradoxically—of the necessary attending to the present. Second, the presence of “the yew-tree” here, its (seemingly ubiquitous) appearance in *Ash-Wednesday* and elsewhere in *Four Quartets* a symbol of both mortality and immortality. With that in mind, third, the curious, clumsy doublespeak of “temporal reversion,” which seems to confirm Eliot’s distance from the speaker. And fourth, that “We,” said to be “content at last” with being interred not far from the symbol (that we do not understand) and now, simply, “enrich[ing]” the soil. The speaker thus counts himself among the great majority, no saints, who remain in the dark (figuratively and, at last, literally). For us, no light shines in, through, and by means of the dark.

Thanks to that “We,” emphasis resides squarely on not-knowing and not being able to know. The “We” is so emphatic, in fact, that it confirms the speaker’s place among the not-knowing and seems to affirm the reading of the earlier climactic line that I have offered. It is not that Eliot is about exposing or revealing falsehood—in *Ash-Wednesday*, one of the final prayers was not to avoid falsehood but “Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood” (italics added). I cannot but think, despite his critical acumen, that Hugh Kenner mistakes the tone and texture here at the end of “The Dry Salvages,” falling into the very camp of either/or-ness that he (generally) rejects, repudiates, and avoids. I see no lack of sympathy on Eliot’s part, even as he presents his speaker’s point of view as partial and finally unsatisfactory.

Surely, Eliot focuses on the near-impossibility of the ordinary layperson’s ever penetrating the mystery of the Incarnation and being able to convey in words the details and nuances of that nonpareil complexity. The effort is by no means reflective of mere skepticism, nor is there simple resignation (although acceptance does appear). “The Dry Salvages” ends on a note of not-knowing very much like that with which it begins. At the same time, the poem ventures, appropriately, no interest in or grounds for distinguishing falsehoods with any kind of finality.
Among the conclusions we are justified in drawing is this: The Word is silent, as *Ash-Wednesday* says repeatedly, and dramatizes as well, speaking in, through, and by means of *action*. The word, on the other hand, speaks, but acts in, through, and by means of that speaking. The Christian poet, accordingly, writes in such a manner that his or her words both declare and enact; that enactment is not necessarily a simple equivalency, and indeed in Eliot, as we have seen, there can certainly be an effective counter-statement, as it were, going on in what is being done in the verbal articulation. The layperson, living her or his life, almost certainly will not be able to apprehend fully the divine mysteries, but, not-knowing, he or she may still act, and act according to revelations of those mysteries.

Fulfillment, including of understanding, comes, if at all, only at the end, completion reaching completion, the “I” being then one with the “I am.”

There is no escaping, no way around or transcending, the darkness. The darkness includes the ultimate knowing of *nothing* that is hell, in, through, and by means of which the Trojan hero Odysseus proceeds toward (some) enlightenment, coming to terms with his own heart of darkness. The Light is not that darkness, but It is in that darkness, and it, moreover, works through it. The darkness is an (ultimate) agency of the Holy Ghost—and all this makes understanding so difficult and unlikely. But a thing or two or three is clear: you have to face darkness, your own and that outside the self; and you have to accept death; and you must, in both writing and living, learn to listen to what words say and to apprehend what they are doing. Words move and act, as the Holy Ghost works within and for the world, fulfilling the Father’s mission and acting as the Word in the world. In *The Waste Land*, the speaker, he says, shores fragments “against my ruins.” In “Little Gidding,” the speaker does not concern himself with *his* ruins, and so we visit the ruins of the chapel at Little Gidding, where “prayer has been valid.” The ruins *act*, doing the work of words.

With Eliot in *Four Quartets*, I cannot but conclude, the matter is blindness and insight, not falsehood and truth. The poems consist of verse paragraphs and stanzas, stanzas and verse paragraphs, rendered by imaginary voices in whom blindness and insight come together (as do my metaphors here). No one voice is either completely blind or completely insightful; in each voice, there is a (different) degree of insight and a (different) degree of blindness.

Sight has, I think, to be activated, as “The Hollow Men” says: “Sightless, unless / The eyes reappear / As the perpetual star / Multifoliate rose.” We
need, in short, *critical eyes*, a vantage-point outside the self that allows for clear vision, not least of that self. We may develop such (in)sight, allowing those other eyes in. It happens in “Little Gidding” with the significantly named “familiar compound ghost.” The final poem of *Four Quartets* takes us in new and different directions, fulfilling truths latent in the previous poems, showing the Word in action, and dramatizing the effects of Incarnational understanding. It is, in every way, a satisfactory ending to a remarkable work of art, in which “complete simplicity” intersects with almost unimaginable complexity: what is being done in what is being said, what is being done in what the “ghost” says.

**Notes**

4. Ibid., 317.
5. Ibid.
Abstract: A different sort of poem, “Little Gidding” completes, refines, and fulfills the previous three poems of Four Quartets—without transcending them. By means of a focus on the point of “intersection” of apparent opposites (time and timelessness, for example), the poem dramatizes Incarnational understanding. The other-dimensionality apparent from the beginning of this poem reaches its climax with the speaker’s encounter, on the bombed-out streets of London, with the “familiar compound ghost,” “himself” an “impossible union.” Here, “intersection,” signaling “necessarye coniunction,” constitutes a refinement of “still point” and of “pattern,” fulfilling “Incarnation.”

God would not leave Mankind without a way.
—John Dryden, *Religio Laici or A Layman’s Faith* (1682)

God loves from Whole to Parts: but human soul
Must rise from the Individual to the Whole.
Self-love but serves the virtuous mind to wake,
As the small pebble stirs the peaceful lake;
The centre mov’d, a circle strait succeeds,
Another still, and still another spreads,
Friend, parent, neighbour, first it will embrace,
His country next, and next all human race,
Wide and more wide, th’overflowings of the mind
Take ev’ry creature in, of ev’ry kind;
Earth smiles around, with boundless bounty blest,
And Heav’n beholds Its image in his breast.

It is impossible to say just what I mean!

The thing is, despite all the denials, facile and otherwise, by commentators over the years, Thomas Stearns Eliot, poet, essayist, and Christian, does resemble his most famous character, the inimitable J. Alfred Prufrock. They share, if nothing more, the great desire to *get it right*. Prufrock gave in to his anxieties, dread, imaginings, and fears, while Old Possum kept on trying, just as he advised us to do in *Four Quartets*: “For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.” His greatest work may be read as an *essai* in essaying: an attempt whose very nature (thus) is conjoined with—or intersected by—its apparent opposite drive toward precision, accuracy, and Truth. *Four Quartets* is a series of attempts, of trials, edging ever closer to the “still point,” a quartile of verse writings at once ever widening in a spirit of union, community, and communion, while ever-narrowing in analytical concentration on the cause(s) of egotistical narrowing. “Little Gidding” is as close as Eliot ever got to that “point of intersection of the timeless / With time”—perhaps it is as close as anyone can get, short of being a saint, at least.

“Little Gidding” may or may not be orthodox. The question now strikes me as largely irrelevant—even though the great work of which it is (but) a part insists on trying to “get right,” that is, to say precisely, accurately, unequivocally, and definitively what is truth and what is falsehood. And at the same time, “Little Gidding,” more than its *semblables* “Burnt...
Norton,” “East Coker,” and “The Dry Salvages,” insists just as strongly on forgiving—perhaps especially forgiving those, like Milton evidently, who “got it wrong.” “Sin is Behovely,” but its inevitability must not keep us from “faring forward.” We must forgive while pressing on, committing again and again that for which we must, with humility and in penitence, pray for forgiveness. It may be a circle, but, if so, one less vicious than delicious.

We would not be far off the mark in observing that all of Eliot’s major poems have to do with movement: Prufrock’s fear of it, the wastelanders’ frenetic efforts to avoid facing Death, the abortive action of “the hollow men,” the journey of the Magi, the movement of perception in Triumphal March, the studied—and false—moves to avoid “turning” in Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems, and the annunciation *cum* representation of the “still point” actually intersecting in *Four Quartets*.

“Burnt Norton” says it clearly, if not definitively, wrestling with words and meanings, well on the way to clarification and elucidation: “Words move, music moves / Only in time.” And a bit later: “The detail of the pattern is movement.” And a few lines below that: “Desire itself is movement / Not in itself desirable; / Love is itself unmoving, / Only the cause and end of movement.” The philosopher Eliot here intersects with the poet Eliot. Love and desire, death and living, speech and writing— they are all in play here, moving, dancing.

Each of the last three poems of *Four Quartets* may be read as one part of a series of elaborations, clarifications, and refinements of the understanding focused in the preceding poem(s). The first of the four poems, “Burnt Norton,” does not stand alone, of course, though it has no preceding understanding to refine. It has always felt to me, though, that it *could* stand alone. One reason—of several—why it cannot is that it moves away from “the still point” toward the (ultimate) embrace of “pattern.” In fact, the lyrical fourth section of “Burnt Norton” ends with the definitive-sounding words “the light is still / At the still point of the turning world.” This is not a falsehood, although Eliot appears to question whether the notion is somehow ineffective, or incomplete.

In all four of the poems, as I have argued above, the fourth section is suspect, representing a lyrical response emotional, personal, and smacking of egotism. Immediately in “Burnt Norton” following the reference to “the still point,” the fifth poem opens with a studied response that turns in a somewhat different direction: “Words move, music moves / Only in time”—not outside time, at some “still point.” We need, in other words, to stay with and within time, and seek an idea other than “the still point.”
Here, the alternative emerges of pattern: “Only by the form, the pattern, / Can words or music reach the stillness.” Pattern thus represents the path in time, although you may proceed through time by means of pattern to “the stillness.”

The way is being paved for the rather different “Little Gidding,” and its focus on such action (in the world) as exemplified in the work of the Holy Ghost. The idea of “Incarnation” is, in other words, both refined (via “intersection”) and gone beyond (via “right action,” which anticipates the “right”-ness of phrases and sentences detailed in the fifth section of the final poem of *Four Quartets*).

In “Little Gidding,” “intersection” takes center-stage: from the beginning description of “midwinter spring” to the intersection—or “attendance,” another new, parallel term—of both the Birth in Bethlehem and King Charles’s visit to the thriving chapel with the ruins that now comprise Little Gidding itself, to the direct mention that “the intersection of the timeless moment / Is England,” here and now, “and nowhere. / Never and always.” The Mystery has entered our world and continues, and Eliot works hard to make sure his reader understands that he is talking precisely about *intersection*.

The same occurs in the critical scene featuring the “familiar compound ghost” in the next section. In fact, Eliot describes the poet’s encounter as resulting “In concord at this intersection time / Of meeting nowhere, no before and after.” As we saw, he had earlier written of “the intense moment, / Isolated, with no before and after.” Now, the same phrasing occurs in the contrasting account of a scene precisely not isolated, but attended and intersected by that which makes for “another dimension.” For most of us, ordinary laypersons and hardly saints, there is but the “unattended moment,” which is “isolated,” and separated from time. The idea—the desire, really—to transcend time, here represented, should alert us to the unreliability and problematic nature displayed. Eliot rejects the notion of timelessness alone being possible for us fallen creatures. The crucial fact appears as the “familiar compound ghost”—he from “another dimension” and representing a greater “intensity”—literally intersects with the speaker.

“Little Gidding” focuses on the results and the effects of the understanding represented in approaching and at least glimpsing Incarnational understanding. In this regard, it differs—and feels different—from “Burnt Norton,” “East Coker,” and “The Dry Salvages.” Its presiding Trinitarian figure is the Holy Ghost, attention directed to the Word’s being “within /
the world and for the world.” Acting does not trump thinking, but is presented as going beyond thinking—necessarily: in other words, incarnating (Incarnational) understanding.

“Little Gidding” thus illustrates that reaching correct understanding, after one falsehood after another has been revealed as variously lacking, incomplete, and unsatisfactory, is hardly the end of the story, the journey, the quest (shared by poet, speaker, and reader). There is more to be done, much more.

The final poem of Four Quartets, thought by most readers (evidently) to be best of the four, is, appropriately, the only one to incorporate—embodying, incarnating—its titular “place” into the dramatic action and thematic direction. Burnt Norton essentially does not figure in the poem of that title; East Coker appears only indirectly, in fact only inferentially, as apparent location of the Elizabethan rustics dancing; and “the dry salvages,” that “small group of rocks, with a beacon, off the N.E. coast of Cape Ann, Massachusetts,” according to Eliot’s headnote to the poem, do not appear as such, where the dominant “element” is water and the sea beckons in its manifold dangers.

Directly, though, Little Gidding—the tiny village in Northamptonshire where Nicholas Ferrar established a thriving Anglican community in the early seventeenth century—matters thematically, rhetorically, emotionally, and spiritually: it received King Charles I in 1642 after his defeat at Naseby, and it subsequently suffered desecration by Oliver Cromwell and his Puritan extremists. Little Gidding thus stands as a ruin for which “before and after” figure significantly. It also stands as the ruin that may occasion the speaker’s own ability, later on in the poem, to offer forgiveness. Finally perhaps, Little Gidding stands as so important because it rhymes with, representing intersection by, the humble scene in the manger in Bethlehem that saw the Birth of Jesus the Christ.

“Little Gidding” places us in time as well as in space. It is both historical—unlike the other poems of Four Quartets—and other-dimensional, a fact apparent from the first, where “May time” is juxtaposed with “maytime.” The chapel itself, at Little Gidding, historicizes, of course, but the strongest temporal setting is felt in the encounter with the “familiar compound ghost”: war-torn England and specifically the streets of London, in the early morning, following another night of Nazi bombs raining down upon the innocent. The scene is the thematic and rhetorical center of “Little Gidding,” perhaps appropriately off-center—and thus not to be confused with a “still point”—coming as it does in the second of the
five sections. Eliot leaves little doubt as to the significance of the meeting, the place, and the time: “In concord at this intersection time.” The “meeting” does, of course, occur here, now, but because it is precisely an intersection of the timeless with time, of this world and “another dimension,” you cannot say it occurs anywhere in particular—another dramatization, then. No wonder that the speaker reports feeling “wonder.”

Paradox does, indeed, abound here, pattern certainly apparent. It is clear, though, that by “intersection” Eliot means the emergence of “another dimension” within our world, within our time. The subject is by no means confined to the intellectual or the ideational, not even the philosophical or the theological. It is moral, ethical, and personal, and we shall see dramatized the effects of it all upon the speaker, who, following the wondrous encounter, shows himself to be different, to be forgiving, for one thing, even of those, like the Cromwellian hordes and perhaps even the unspeakable Nazis, who have committed and are committing such heinous crimes and atrocities that strain the capacity to forgive. And yet he does forgive, the speaking voice now incarnating the heart and soul of Christian understanding.

“Little Gidding” is, indeed, a step (or two or three) beyond the other poems of *Four Quartets*. It is not, however, a transcendence of those poems or of their affirmations.

We now find ourselves in a position to understand better not just some key and troubling points in *Four Quartets* but also to get a grip on some of the most plaguing questions that we have concerning other poems as well made by Old Possum.

For one, “intersection” represents a refinement of the understanding that we have been tracing in this book from “still point” to “pattern” and on to “Incarnation,” which is, itself, as distinguished from the Incarnation, limited and ultimately in need of the event in time and place that, as with the relation of the New Testament to the Old, fulfills the promise of the idea, indeed embodying precisely that. And as a result, we gain a new and needed perspective on “and,” that “necessary coniunction” we find of such evolving importance in Eliot’s poems. “And,” we now can understand, matters so much because it signals intersecting. Such enigmatic statements as are used to characterize the “Lady of silences”—that is, the Blessed Virgin—in *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems*, for example “Torn and most whole,” which we have been trying hard to grasp and understand, finally make sense to us: She may be “torn” in time, but in “another dimension” She is indeed whole.
In the same manner, that stubborn wording in *Ash-Wednesday*, with which I wrestled so in my previous book *T.S. Eliot: The Poet as Christian*, now proves susceptible to our comprehension:3 “Teach us to care and not to care.” Caring is that from and with which we start our journey, our quest, in time, but what seems so desirable, so worthy, here and now, becomes, in “another dimension,” less so; it is then, and there, that we may come not to care. The same pattern of understanding appears, finally, in that troublesome wording in “Little Gidding” that seems to bear so very much importance: “This is the use of memory: / For liberation—not less of love but expanding / Of love beyond desire, and so liberation / From the future as well as the past.” Clearly, Eliot does not embrace some sort of asceticism, no more than he does idealism. “Love beyond desire” is not “less of love” but its refinement figured as other-dimensional.

Mystery too abides and abounds, despite our “progress” toward rational comprehension, just as Old Possum said it would when pointing to the requirement of “something given / And taken, in a lifetime’s death in love, / Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender,” for which we may strive, amidst hints received and guesses taken, in “prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action” (italics added).

From the beginning of his poetic career, starting with “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in 1915, as we have seen in this book and the previous two in this series, T.S. Eliot has been centrally concerned with both understanding and communicating that understanding. Prufrock struggles with the possibility—with memory and desire, with the past and the future—of communicating to others what he has observed. For him, that is hardly “another dimension,” but instead “only” another world, in the same dimension of time and space as his own (and ours). If, as is surely the case, *Four Quartets* represents a refinement and an expansion of the understanding reached in *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems*—much of that, I am convinced, resulting from the act of writing itself—within his last, great essay-poem, there is a development, refinement, and expansion as we journey through “Burnt Norton,” “East Coker,” “The Dry Salvages,” and “Little Gidding,” never leaping out of time but submitting to it (as my teacher Vincent Miller aptly put it in his *Sewanee Review* essay) while recognizing that “another dimension” intersects with it.4

Everything changes with the Incarnation. Incarnation was there before; indeed, it has always and everywhere been present and operative, apparent to those with eyes and mind attuned. *The* Incarnation gave flesh to that idea, that decisive, determining pattern. Every moment now
matters, burning with meaning, because the Divine has entered time, at a particular time and in a particular place. The gift is without price, even if/though we merely guess at its value.

In a sense, then, “Little Gidding” is about *faring forward*. To do so is extraordinarily difficult, although you perhaps would not think so. Experience confirms my claim, and *Four Quartets* does or says nothing to contradict it.

I will go further and say that, from the beginning, Eliot’s verse treats issues circling about this issue. As I have argued in *T.S. Eliot: The Poet as Christian*, J. Alfred Prufrock’s particular liability is his inability to “fare forward,” stuck in a netherworld of memory and desire, on the horns between two worlds, afraid of one, in sad dis-ease about the other. “I should have been a pair of ragged claws,” he says in a perceptive moment that he cannot internalize, the conditional verb revealing to us what he does not see, “Scuttling across the silent seas.” For him, movement is always only lateral.

The wastelanders react in somewhat similar fashion, unable to face the nothingness of their existence or to proceed in, through, and by means of their egotistical imprisonment, their waste land, to its end. In one form or another, abortion marks their efforts. For “the hollow men,” the same abortiveness characterizes their actions: “the Shadow” always already “falls between,” modern men resembling the fumbling, bungling Guy Fawkes. Capping off such incapacity is the ascetically minded speaker early in *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems*, who rejoices that he will, or so he supposes, no longer turn, free, then, from the future and its uncertainties, if still locked in memories of past moments with their inevitable failures.

Eliot might say that it takes a Christian to “fare forward.” The Incarnation shows why and how. The hope is always tempered, because “another dimension” only *intersects* with our world—not because it has been, and will always be, fallen and unsatisfying but because we do not grasp that it is now “attended,” the timeless having come within it. The problem is ours, in other words, not the world’s. “Little Gidding” says it, and says it well, reminding us of just that gift that the Incarnation gives us, God having once entered our world: “And all shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well / In the purification of the motive / In the ground of our beseeching.”

And, regarding words: we return one more time—probably not the last time—to Eliot’s return to the word in the fifth section of “Little Gidding.”
I once and for long while supposed that his words rhyme perfectly with those at the end of “Burnt Norton,” where the stress falls on movement and pattern. I have above, though, raised questions concerning the trustworthiness of some of the comments in the later passage.

Here, I suggest, regarding verses that are, after all, Eliot’s last on the subject, that at the end of Four Quartets he offers a(nother) refinement of matters broached earlier. A certain clumsiness appears at this point in “Little Gidding,” it is true, most notably with the long parenthesis, but the verses feel conclusive, if not exactly triumphant. A modesty inheres, which is thematically appropriate (whether or not rhetorically effective). And an implicit alternative to and criticism of the immanent-ism that marks the earlier verses claiming that pattern gives meaning to the movement of words. Differently, the fifth section of “Little Gidding” begins, not directly (versus, that is, “Words move, music moves / Only in time...”): “What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning.” Then follow the key words “The end is where we start from.” “End” is not “pattern,” and “pattern” is not “end” but more like a medium.

Accordingly, “Little Gidding” goes on to emphasize the “rightness” of every word and phrase: “where every word is at home, / Taking its place to support the others.” You may say that this is (merely) another way of referring to pattern, but if so, by emphasizing “home” and “support,” Eliot humanizes the effort. In fact, I am inclined to think that here, but not in “Burnt Norton,” Eliot’s verses imply that an author is always at work with words, transcendence intersecting with immanence. Whereas pattern derives from the figure(s) made by the movement of words, a purely lateral affair, a whole depends upon, while deriving from, a (transcendent, or vertical) purposiveness. We start from the “end,” which we cannot know until the whole swims into consciousness, being revealed. That the passage in “Little Gidding” proceeds to describe the kind of words “necessarye” for the whole to be made—“neither diffident nor ostentatious,” both old and new, forming “easy commerce,” the words “exact without vulgarity, / The formal word precise but not pedantic”—reflects authorial presence, judgment, and direction. (Here, key differences in Eliot from Derridean deconstruction appear prominently.) Determinacy thus shifts from linguistic management of self-induced pattern to authorial intersection with slippery, sliding, imprecise words. Someone is always in the act of wrestling with words, a condition and a situation intolerable and “necessarye.” One keeps on essaying.
“For us, there is only the trying,” faring forward. “The rest is not our business.”

One of the most troubling points that “Little Gidding” elucidates is that in “East Coker”: “and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God.” The stakes are high. Our way is indirect.

In “The Hollow Men,” first published as a whole in 1925, two years before his formal embrace of Anglo-Catholic Christianity, Eliot used as an epigraph words from Joseph Conrad’s novella *The Heart of Darkness.* The poem proceeds to develop this “hint,” the speaking voice allowing that we “hollow men” are “Sightless, unless” mediating eyes come to our aid. Critical eyes able to penetrate each person’s “heart of darkness” are central to the poem’s movement and meaning. Our (fallen) condition shows us burdened by “the Shadow” that “falls between” “the idea” and “the reality,” “the motion” and “the act,” “the conception” and “the creation,” “the emotion” and “the response,” “the desire” and “the spasm,” “the potency” and “the existence,” and “the essence” and “the descent.”

Three years before “The Hollow Men,” Eliot represented the wastelanders as awash in misunderstanding and, indeed, as “East Coker” puts it, hoping “for the wrong thing” (immediately following come these words: “So the darkness shall be the light”). Just as they look toward water as the opposite of the refining, purifying fire that they actually need, the “I” says early on, returning from the thematically charged “hyacinth garden”: “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 mistake lies in supposing—expecting—that the way to light is direct. Our business lies, rather, in seeking out the darkness, especially our own. We should note, as well, the apparent identification of “the heart of light” with “the silence”: silence is the speech of the Word Whose speech is act.

In “Burnt Norton,” recall, light creates water in “the garden” filling the “empty pond,” in which we are momentarily “reflected”: “the surface glittered out of heart of light.” Then, “a cloud passed, and the pond was empty.” Whatever darkness there was eliminated the possibility of “our” seeing ourselves fully and satisfactorily reflected in the pond. In the next poem, “East Coker,” the speaker says to his soul, “be still, and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God” and eventually concludes, “So the darkness shall be the light.” The assumption is that you can will yourself into allowing the darkness inside you. Does “the darkness of God” refer to God’s being dark Himself or, quite differently,
to darkness understood as the possession of God? In any case, in the final words of “East Coker,” a more likely point of view emerges, that of “a deeper communion / Through the dark cold,” etc., darkness now become a means, a necessary medium.

And so we come to “Little Gidding.” More specifically, to the all-important encounter with the “familiar compound ghost,” an intersection of timelessness with time, of the Dead with the living, and of the self with necessary critical spirit (here, the barely disguised Holy Ghost, at work in the world). The meeting occurs at an appropriately in-between time, in the dark, in fact: “before the morning / Near the end of interminable night,” thus just before light dawns. The place is war-torn London, nightly ravaged by Nazi bombers, taking advantage of the darkness that they also represent. The speaker—whom we likely think of as Eliot himself—meets up with a figure wearing the “look of some dead master,” both “intimate and unidentifiable,” thus a both/and creature reminiscent of the Blessed Virgin, the “Lady of silences,” in *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems*. As their initial exchange makes clear, the speaker “was still the same, / Knowing myself yet being someone other.” Everything, here, is intersected—and “in concord at this intersection time.” The speaker knows himself as “someone other,” that “other” lending necessary critical distance (and measurement). After a pointed lecture on forgiving, and letting the past be, the ghost directs himself to the speaker, disclosing, in his trenchant, and burning, words “the gifts reserved for age, / To set a crown upon your lifetime’s effort.” It is all humbling, putting the speaker in his rightful place. Soon afterwards, we see the salutary effects. Then “the day was breaking,” issuing light beginning to chase away the darkness: “He left me, with a kind of *valediction*, / And faded on the blowing of the horn” (italics added), signifying all-clear.

The ghost thus spoke in the dark, his words clear and sharp. He acts as the critical eyes—an outside force that comes within, a capacity necessary to reveal ourselves to ourselves. The dark cloud having emptied the pond of light with which we had seen ourselves briefly reflected, we need the darkness now for the light to speak and to become “all-clear.” This does not mean, Satanically, that God’s “being” is darkness.

*Journey of the Magi* (1927) represents Jesus’s birth, in “‘the worst time of the year,’” in the most humble of circumstances, as the “new dispensation,” in which birth and death no longer appear as different:8 “this Birth was / Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death” (italics added). The
“good news” is, then, inseparable from (what we perceive as) bad. If, as the speaker says in “East Coker,” God is He Who “prevents us everywhere,” it is always the case that in His “absolute paternal care / [He] will never leave us.” No kindly figure in the sky so familiar in our sanguine imaginings.

Eliot’s, it is clear, is no “easie God,” such as John Dryden rejected and repudiated in the Latitudinarians of the later seventeenth century. Eliot’s God, instead, requires much of us, making our way difficult, for perfectly understandable psychological reasons. Journey of the Magi again: “A hard time we had of it.”

The speech we may come to hear within the darkness is not to be confused with the so-called inner voice, the work of “the private spirit” that the English Augustans summarily reprobated and that Eliot saw as the most offensive and dangerous thing imaginable. The true spirit is (self-)critical, whereas the other is self-generated and aggrandizing, optimistic and consoling.

It is but another falsehood that God is present in His absence (a familiar last-resort). He is, simply stated, not absent, but silent, as Ash-Wednesday repeatedly and emphatically says, working in mysterious ways, even when words are unheard, the Word at work, doing the Father’s work, in, through, and by means of the Holy Ghost. He is that other, “walking beside [us]” (The Waste Land), with eyes that allow us to see ourselves honestly, our eyes become those eyes, participating.

And so that “dark dove” (“Little Gidding”), visiting terror, destruction, and death upon the innocent? I will say much more in the following essay, but for now, this:

Our own darkness must encounter that darkness. There must be a meeting, an intersecting with it, just as we see in the speaker’s with the “familiar compound ghost,” in the dark, on the bombed-out streets of London in the early 1940s. You must receive and accept the dark, “the darkness of God”—God’s possession.

You do not simply let it come upon you, passively; instead, you must pray for it: “Let thy will be done.” Thereby, you are actively involved, doing your part, which is precisely a part, not apart.

The “darkness of God” meets, intersecting with, the darkness within us, which we do not easily recognize nor readily acknowledge. This condition necessitates prayer, understood not, as commonly supposed, as request for special favor. Since “the light shines in darkness,” the “darkness of God” is more than self-awareness and self-criticism, a rebuke to and critique of self-satisfaction, “prevent[ing] us everywhere”; it is also the unvarying, never wavering, way of and to Light and Love.
“And the fire and the rose are one”: this last verse of “Little Gidding” and so of the essay-poem *Four Quartets* both says and does, declaring and embodying “impossible union.” It begins with the “necessarye coniunction,” and ends in and with “one.”

**Notes**

Little Gidding (Continued): The Pattern in the Movement, the Doing in the Speaking

Abstract: Refining and fulfilling the previous poems in Four Quartets, “Little Gidding” brings together, having them intersect, this world and “another dimension,” most notably in the speaker’s encounter with the “familiar compound ghost.” In a tone different from that in the other poems, “Little Gidding” highlights forgiveness and reconciliation. Rhymes emerge reflecting sameness-in-difference, an understanding that figures importantly, and in pervasive fashion, in Eliot’s thinking and writing: sameness and difference are neither absolute differences nor equivalencies. In more than one sense, Eliot thus “brings together.” After the ghost’s “sermon,” things change, the speaker having visited a version of “the kingdom of the dead”: he begins to show effects of the ghostly encounter, sameness now reigning. The poem shows how difficult Incarnational understanding is to embrace and enact—and to “get right.” The speaker’s words must always, therefore, be read, the reader required to be ever-mindful.

In “Little Gidding,” without losing “hold on reality,” or on the “logic of concepts,” Eliot engages the imaginative more, and more successfully, than in the previous poems. Here, the essay-poem restores focus to the poetic and the ordinary world imagined as “flattened” (since the Renaissance and Reformation) and now revealed in its richness, fecundity, pregnancy, and “rhymes” with “another dimension” that, in fact, intersects with it but that we had grown accustomed to assuming was unavailable to us (if it even existed). Among (many) other things, “Little Gidding” may be read as a poetic and dramatic representation of what literature is, how it works, and how a responsible reader should approach it. It is as much about what both the word and the Word do—that is, how they work—as what they say.

The final, most revered, and most satisfying of Four Quartets, the poems’ completion and fulfillment, “Little Gidding” establishes its difference from the beginning. The poems have lacked, heretofore, an opening scene. “Burnt Norton,” which perhaps most closely resembles it, soon modulates into the imaginary action in the rose-garden, but it opens in philosophical language and speculation. The more literary, the more concrete, and so we begin “Little Gidding” with a brilliant “impossible union,” a “necessary coniunction,” rendered in likely the fewest words imaginable: “Midwinter spring.” We are immediately, without any to-do or preparation, in “another dimension.” It is a timeless moment, not an epiphantic one. There is no transcendence of time here, nothing at all separate from time or apart from it: spring and midwinter united, like the fire and the rose at poem’s end. Another way of putting the same: the present moment is here “attended,” being within time and a necessary part of a whole that includes it and more. Intersection means this ineluctable, inseparable presence of the other in the “same.”

Here, spring literally springs up, dividing winter, revealing: “Midwinter spring is its own season / Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown, / Suspended in time between pole and tropic.” This last verse completes the middle verse, itself an “amalgamation” of differences, in reiterating the suspension “in time” that those opening, climactic two words name; the in-between is as well a sophisticated notion deserving a pedantic-sounding word and a quite mundane one that the expressively dispiriting word captures.

“Frost and fire” form another union, and the “sun flames the ice.” The verses rhyme with the opposite point of view expressed by the satirized speaker early in The Waste Land, who, matter-of-factly and blindly,
records the desire for winter, cold, and snow that blight signs of spring and work to abort any new life. Here, “Between melting and freezing / The soul’s sap quivers.” Here, simply put, as the speaker does, “is springtime / But not in time’s covenant.”

The next two verse paragraphs both emphasize “way”: in order, “If you came this way,” “If you came this way in may time,” and, in the poem’s third paragraph, “If you came this way, / Taking any route, starting from anywhere, / At any time or at any season, / It would always be the same.” “Sameness,” in fact, joins “way” in emphasis: the time of the year does not matter, nor the starting-point or the route taken, for this is “may time,” its other-dimensionality stressed by the poet, who in the following verse, repeats the sameness that will be found if you came “in May.”

Irony resides in the fact that the place described, an actual place in northern England, plays a thematic and rhetorical role in its poem, unlike the titular places in “Burnt Norton,” “East Coker,” and “The Dry Salvages.” Little Gidding names, specifically, the ruined chapel of a once-thriving Anglican community, established by Nicholas Ferrar in 1626. To it, King Charles came in 1642, following his defeat at Naseby. Subsequently, Cromwell and his Roundheads came to Little Gidding, and desecrated the chapel, leaving the ruins, to which Eliot had himself come in May 1936, otherwise having no direct personal connection to the hallowed ground.

“It would be the same,” we are told, “when you leave the rough road / And turn behind the pig-sty to the dull façade / And the tombstone”: there is no change in what matters, while the remains rot and deteriorate and the ground grows more sacred. Time is “attended,” and that “attendance” is timeless, perhaps rhyming with the “tombstone” that is different from the “dull façade,” the façade being what changes, the only thing that time tampers with. There is a hint here, perhaps only the barest hint, of the stable in Bethlehem, the paradigmatic instance in human history of unexpected site. This “rhyme” emerges particularly if we think of the words “in common with” instead of “sameness,” an altogether more fitting definition. We might begin to see how the Baby delivered in that stable is, like Little Gidding the chapel, the site where people come together, in and as community and in communion. That Little Gidding is also connected with the King following defeat and is itself, like him, now ruins, points to the other side of the truth that the Incarnation names: the ruins of the human condition following another, much greater Fall,
ruins that constitute our home. Death and Life, says *Journey of the Magi*, may not be different.³

Surprise reigns supreme, in this place of the unexpected. Emerging is the critical emotional node—“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,” which rhymes with both *Four Quartets* as a whole work (read in time) and each human life lived in time. That emotional node spins perfectly within a sphere of cerebration that continues and confirms authority and authorization: “Either you had no purpose / Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured / And is altered in fulfilment.” Commonality may be revealed. Although other places, in the desert or in a city, might be understood as “the world’s end,” Little Gidding is “the nearest, in place and time, / Now and in England.” Despite a certain modesty, Eliot well knows that this place is particularly charged, and he fully exploits those charges.

After repeating “If you came this way,” now making clear that you understand that he means “Taking any route, starting from anywhere, / At any time or at any season,” Eliot emphasizes the ineluctable, governing *sameness*: “It would always be the same: you would have to put off / Sense and notion.” This is other-dimensional.

This final verse paragraph then turns, perhaps surprisingly, to the matter of prayer, which is scrupulously weighed and judged. “You are not here,” says the speaker (whom I find no reason to distinguish from the poet at this point), perhaps referring only to Little Gidding: not to “verify,” “Instruct yourself,” “inform curiosity,” or “carry report.” None of the usual reasons for visiting applies; instead, “You are here to kneel / Where prayer has been valid.” We will return directly to the surprising word “valid,” but for now we move on to note that the speaker takes on directly a particular approach to prayer: “And prayer is more / Than an order of words, the conscious occupation / Of the praying mind, or of the sound of the voice praying.” He has in mind something mystical, and other-dimensional, which reaches beyond the conscious; it is more than the recitation of words. Abruptly then, we find another “necessarye coniunction” and a turn to the dead. What this does is link prayer with the communication of the dead, with whom prayer brings us together (as the two rather different-looking sets of verses thus do). The dead may, moreover, offer the critical voice we need, to weigh and judge ourselves: “And what the dead had no speech for, when living, / They can tell you, being dead: the communication / Of the dead is tongued
with fire beyond the language of the living.” The dead, that is, find, in being dead, speech for what they knew: fulfillment, here the finding of speech, comes only at the end, although it is latent all along, as with the fulfillment of Incarnation in the Incarnation, the Old Testament in the New, and the earlier poems of *Four Quartets* in “Little Gidding.”

*Here* “the intersection of the timeless moment / Is England and nowhere. Never and always.” The timeless is in England, but it is (also) non-existent here, or there.

We are not yet ready to depart Little Gidding, which, in a sense, we will never leave (behind).

Back now, to begin with, to that word “valid” used to describe prayer at Little Gidding, that is, “where prayer has been valid.” Validity may have to do precisely with loss, defeat, and ruin. Normally, we associate prayer with desire and self: we ask for what we want, whether it be material things or health or some form of assistance or salvation, for ourselves and perhaps others we care about. Here is a place where, in the past, itself attended by the King’s personal defeat and the chapel’s sad destruction, amidst anything but a sense of personal or physical well-being, prayer has, willy-nilly, focused responsibly and appropriately. Here, perhaps, we do not pray that something be prevented from happening to us, because it has already happened, not only rendering that kind of prayer moot but also allowing us the opportunity to see how God “prevents us everywhere.” Prayer is valid, amidst these ruins now sacred, as acceptance of God’s Will.

A different tone marks “Little Gidding,” as does a poetic texture different from that in “Burnt Norton,” “East Coker,” and “The Dry Salvages.” That difference is apparent, for instance, in the coming-together, by allusion, of both the Cavalier King and the destruction wrought by his Roundhead opponents. The union is not stated as such, but that is what the remarkable paragraph that we are scrutinizing does.

Difference-and-sameness names the overarching matter: differences in time take their place beside essential sameness, creating a pattern of response, and differences in point of view—Royalism and Puritan theocracy, among them—take their place alongside one another as ending, despite all their vaunted and costly differences, in the same place, with the same ultimate results. With this in mind, “Little Gidding” adopts a tone of reconciliation, conciliation, and community. The ruined chapel is where opposites meet, not in time itself, to be sure, but in the understanding wrought by prayerful attendance. “The poetry does not
“Little Gidding” (Continued)

matter.” We thus (at last) have a full definition of “rhyme,” which does matter.

The fourth poem of *Four Quartets*, we can already perceive, works by “amalgamating disparate” points, perspectives, positions, for example, spring and winter, May and maytime, time and timelessness, Charles I and Oliver Cromwell, fire and ice. There will be others, in time: fire and rose, fire and water, despair and hope, England and nowhere, even you and I and the “compound” ghost, among them.

“Little Gidding” may also be read as the fulfillment of Eliot’s attempts to revive and redirect the dramatic monologue, which he received from Robert Browning and which he first used on a grand scale in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Not all of Eliot’s poems are dramatic monologues, of course; in fact, none of them is a pure dramatic monologue, if we use Browning as standard of measurement and judgment. “Prufrock” comes closest, but the setting is indefinite, and the “other” in it—that “you” in “Let us go then, you and I”—is not another person or personage but, evidently, a part of J. Alfred himself.

Furthermore, if we take as basis Robert Langbaum’s brilliant and enduring account of the irony always at work in Browning’s dramatic monologues, whereby the speaker—the Duke of Ferrara, for example, in “My Last Duchess,” Fra Lippo Lippi in the poem of that title, Andrea del Sarto in the poem named for him—reveals more about himself than he intends, and other than he wishes, we have another difference from Eliot’s poems. In Browning, we read “against the grain,” and counter to the speaker. In Eliot, say in “Prufrock,” the reader does not merely evaluate the speaker, nor just sympathize with him (as we also do even when the speaker is a murderer who charms us as he does his immediate auditor). We may well be interested in the psychology at work in Andrea and Fra Lippo, but with Prufrock psychology is less important than understanding the whole sensibility, and that sensibility confronting cultural, social, moral, and even theological issues that far outweigh in focus and importance the assertion of self that marks Browning’s dramatic revelations. “Gerontion” is even further from Browning’s dramatic monologues than is “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” The name Gerontion gives the point away, for we have here not an individual, nor a type exactly, but the voice of a tradition.

The speaker in the fifth section of *The Waste Land* engages in a dramatic meditation and analysis; there is no presumed auditor, nor an occasion or scene, and we are being asked, I think, not to judge him morally but,
rather, to see his intellectual position, his point of view, as unsatisfactory, that is, incomplete and flawed. Similarly with speakers at various points in *Four Quartets*, not just in the lyrical sections but, in fact, in most of the others as well. The whole poem is composed of a series, a wide range, of these dramatized statements, meditations, and analyses, and the reader has to navigate the same rocky waters in which so many founder, reading them in their representations of just those “grimpens,” “dark woods,” and philosophical and theological waste lands. *Four Quartets* is a range of points of view and essays to “get it right,” all on the way to one end.

Although I would be loath to go so far as to claim that it holds the key for reading *Four Quartets* responsibly and satisfactorily, the words in *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems* must echo in the mind: “restoring / With a new verse the ancient rhyme.” The words reverberate with those in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that treat of the relation of present to past and past to past. That relation is (already, in 1920) complex, hardly a simple either/or.\(^6\) We have ourselves struggled with the structurally similar claim in “East Coker” that “The poetry does not matter.” And it may not, I think Eliot would answer, for the same reason that “the ancient rhyme” can be conveyed in a new and different “verse” without distortion or corruption.

Take for comparison the words that open “East Coker” and are shortly thereafter repeated: “In my end is my beginning.” The beginning is not my end, nor my end my beginning. Rather, my beginning is *in* my end (although to reverse the syntactical priority is not without weight and difference). This is crucial, making all the difference—that addition of the little preposition.

And take, again, the words in *Ash-Wednesday*: “And the light shone in darkness and....” Light and darkness are not identical or made equivalent; rather, the light shines *in* darkness. Similarly with, we may begin to understand, a whole series of differences and (apparent) oppositions with which *Four Quartets* has significantly dealt or on which it has at least touched; these include soul in the body, presence in absence, *the* Incarnation in Incarnation, transcendence in immanence, the Word in the world, stillness in movement, the whole in the part, birth in death, right in wrong, the New in the Old, doing in the speaking (and speaking in the doing), the Word in the word, sameness in difference. The implications are enormous. The obverse is not always or necessarily so: immanence in transcendence, for instance. A major implication is, of course, as with the New in the Old (Testament), that of fulfillment of the
incomplete or partial. In that instance, Old and New are kept together, rather than separate and apart as but incomplete truths (rather than half-truths?).

Both together is what Eliot gives us in the all-important passages to which I have often referred from the beginning of the fifth poem in *Ash-Wednesday*, perhaps the clearest dramatization in all of Eliot’s writing of the relation of words and the Word and so of this pattern that we are tracing, whereby the “superior” already exists, is latent, in the “inferior,” attending it. Such a pattern defines the movement of *Four Quartets*.

The first of the two verse paragraphs juxtaposed at the beginning of the fifth poem in *Ash-Wednesday*, recall, declares the continuing operation if “the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent / If the unheard, unspoken / Word is unspoken, unheard.” Emphasis lies in the direness of the situation: those words “lost” and “spent” also point to an unresponsive and non-accepting world. In that case, if all this motion and ineffectualness describes our condition, if, in fact, there is nothing heard or spoken, still is the word unspoken and the Word unheard. The presence of both “word” and “the Word” implies the possibility (at least) of “the Word” in the “word,” just as “the Word [is] within / The world and for the world.” And the word “still” looks both ways: it means “always” and also “without movement.” I thus hear Eliot literalizing: the word is in the wor(l)d, the Word in the word (as in the word in the Word). This is, we know from Eliot’s adoption of Lancelot Andrewes, far from word-play or “pedantic verbalism”: it is, rather, a gracious and humble display (to borrow from Georg Lukács) of the irony whose attendance points toward “the Ultimate.”

We are, still, not finished with this verse paragraph. Eliot insists that the Word is “within / The world and for the world.” He does not say that *even though* the Word is Itself “unspoken, unheard,” for silence points to the work of the Word, a matter of presence, and is thus positive, and not at all a matter of absence, and thus negative. When he says, moreover, that the Word is in and for the world, he means more and other than we may commonly suppose: for with the Incarnation, God came fully into the world, becoming man while remaining God. He is thus not just *within* this and that, but within the (whole) world, “world” understood as metaphor for everything material, physical, earthly, the good and bad and evil alike. It is but another half-truth to assume that He appears and works only within what we limited and fallen creatures imagine as

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worthy and reflective of His Name. Accordingly, within our world, God is “for” it, and with us (thus His Name is Em-manuel), in and with all of us, and everything not-us. This event in history, in time, and in the world changes everything, restoring the ancient, pre-Edenic “rhyme” in a “new verse.” The “world” is now sacramental. (And that means that the scene in “East Coker” featuring Elizabethan rustics dancing around a bonfire is Incarnational, “daunsinge,” indeed, “A dignified and commodious sacrament,” after all.)

As I observed earlier, the verse “And the light shone in darkness and” itself does more than it simply says. The “necessarye coniunction” points to the Incarnation, and its presence at both the beginning and the end of the line represents the Incarnation as the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the end in the beginning. I note that the following two verses bear charges, as well, bringing this paragraph to a close: “Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled / About the centre of the silent Word.” The world, represented as “unstilled,” does not clash with the “still” Word, even though that world is “against” the Word, for in always (note the different, unitary sense of “unstilled”) whirling, the world does so precisely “About the centre of the silent Word.” The Word may be silent, yet It does, thus speaking. There is no getting away from It: It is, indeed, always and unmoving. Finally, note again the phrase “the unstilled world still whirled”: “still” is in “unstilled” as the still-whirling merely rhymes with the unstilled world.

The following verse paragraph, after a connecting quotation from the Catholic Mass (deriving from Micah and the Reproaches) is itself a reproach to the “unstilled world.” It resembles the former account of the Word, but it is merely worldly despite its opposition to the world, here represented as lack of silence. It means well, but means little. There is no mention of the Word.

The rhymes are scattered, haphazardly, and amount, still, to slant-rhymes: “No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice.” The texture is both general and trite: “there is not enough silence / Not on the sea or on the islands, not / On the mainland, in the desert or the rain land.” While “those who walk in darkness” may be both positively and negatively familiar, the two following verses detailing that activity founder in bathos: “Both in the day time and in the night time / The right time and the right place are not here.” And while it is true that “here, there is not enough silence,” that is not the reason why “the word” cannot be found and will not “Resound.” More silence would be
welcome, but the point to be carried over from the first verse paragraph is, rather, that silence is in the confounding noise that may try to drown out the word (and the Word) but cannot and will not succeed.

That the bathetic attempt to defend the word amidst noise comes after the charged and attended words that both repay and require our squeezing and squeezing suggests perversion, abuse, and failure—the Word is not mentioned. It may be over-wrought, for together these paragraphs, one theological and requiring the squeezing of each word, in the other the word unable to sustain such scrupulous philological analysis, evince in the latter a lack of substance that is not fulfilled but contextualized via the presence of the first: the bathetic verse paragraph shows light shining in darkness.

At last, you may well think, we re-turn to “Little Gidding.” In fact, we move now beyond the first section into the critical section. It consists of two parts, the second a long, thematically powerful and rhetorically strategic scene involving the speaker’s encounter with a “familiar compound ghost,” and the first, consisting of three eight-line lyric stanzas. The osten-sible subject here is the four elements, with each of which the four poems of the Quartets is associated. The overarching matter is, again, ruins.

These stanzas begin with air, and specifically “the death of air,” and move to earth and “the death of earth,” finally to water and fire together and “the death of water and fire.” The verses all treat “end,” and destruction, first that of a house, now burned to the ground, “Ash on an old man’s sleeve / ... all the ash the burnt roses leave.” In the next stanza “flood and drouth” are represented as “Contending for the upper hand,” as “The parched eviscerate soil / Gapes at the vanity of toil, / Laughs without mirth.” “Flood and drouth,” excess and lack, lead to the same (destructive) results, no matter our efforts and the vanity of our wishes. Then, in the final stanza, “Water and fire succeed / The town, the pasture and the wood,” the results of this excess and lack (also) the same. The same tone and texture thus mark all the verses, from which you come away thinking, this is the way it is; here, in this world, there is no other way. The poet pulls no punches. The first word is “Ash,” the last “fire.” Something interesting seems afoot.

Looking more closely, we pause over the tiny preparation “of.” Obviously, what is meant by “the death of water and fire” is the sort of death that they bring about. But with “air” and “earth,” the reference is evidently to both their death and that they differently cause.
Interestingly, water and fire are (also) united, the elements that “contend” for agency of successful response in *The Waste Land*. In “Little Gidding,” they, in fact, play a powerful and dominant role relative to the other elements: fire in the air-stanza, water in that of earth. Furthermore, whereas the first stanza focuses on an old man and the destruction of his (single) house, and the second on “flood and drouth” and their effects “Over the eyes and in the mouth,” the third moves out to the more general. The death by air spells “The death of hope and despair,” their eclipse. Death *at the hands of* the earth brings revelation of “the vanity of toil,” we being left as “parched eviscerate soil.” Water and fire complete, or fulfill, the mission of the elements: they “deride / The sacrifice that we denied.” The verb-tense suddenly becomes predictive: “Water and fire shall rot / The marred foundations we forgot / Of sanctuary and choir.”

Perhaps particularly with these last-quoted words—including “marred” and “we”—the plaguing question arises once more of the speaker’s reliability: are we to take him as Eliot or as Eliot’s “mouthpiece” at this point? Let us start with what the verses *do*. Whether against the grain of the speaker’s understanding or not, they show that you cannot keep the four elements apart (any more than you can *Four Quartets*): they mingle, mix, and, in the case of water and fire, unite. Fire creates the ashes left from the fire that contaminates and destroys (or threatens to) the air. Moreover, as the poem—for it is that, a distinct poem within a poem that is a distinct poem within the four poems that comprise *Four Quartets*—represents apparently natural change and destruction *in time*, “we” play a part. Human agency, then, bears responsibility alongside inherent decay and the ravages of time.

The voice we hear in this little poem is surely right that “we”—obviously he includes himself—deny “The sacrifice,” likewise that we forget the “foundations” of “sanctuary and choir.” But of course, in the immediately following part of this section of “Little Gidding,” the “familiar compound ghost” emerges as a reminder, in the midst of (man-made) devastation. Are the “foundations” mentioned in the stanzas “marred” as a result of our misrepresentations of Christianity, that is, “foundations” being metaphorical for doctrine, dogma, and liturgy? Or, differently, have the physical “foundations,” those of Little Gidding, for instance, been “marred” by us? Have we forgotten, say, the place and the chapel Little Gidding, or have we forgotten *only* the partial, incomplete, even false? The latter would assume, of course, that *true* foundations remain...
untouched, and remembered. In that case, we can make substantial difference.

One point seems clear, and that is the speaker’s failure to see clearly that “the fire and the rose are one.” That is, he represents only a half-truth, based in half-understanding, for God is present within and for the world, operating in silence and speaking through doing, with the result that “All shall be well.” There is no such recognition in these stanzas, however. That the elements mix and mingle is a hint that the speaker misses. The problem may, then, lie, in the speaker’s (limited) lyrical point of view, not the way it is. We have but his interpretation, though it seems, all right, that it is the way it is. But we should note that in his point of view lies the fact that it is his point of view. At any rate, the speaker does not keep the four elements separate, and indeed they are not finally separable. The speaker’s failures are thus dramatized. The Truth does, however, shine in that darkness.

The all-important second part of this second section of “Little Gidding” affirms the point. It is placed, though, “In the uncertain hour,” time mirroring place in an in-between state: it is “before the morning / Near the ending of interminable night / At the recurrent end of the unending.” Rhymes appear not with immortality but with endless terror and horror. The “dark dove” that is the German Luftwaffe had done its best, that is, its worst, and has now, at last, “passed below the horizon of his homing / While the dead leaves still rattled on like tin.” Death permeates, and Eliot had seen it, had walked in its midst, as a fire warden patrolling the bombed-out streets of darkened London, darkened as protection against nightly raids and darkened by the smoke rising from the ashes made by means of that “dark dove” (later, we shall see, Eliot boldly and with seeming reckless abandon associates that “dove” with the “Love” that “devised the torment”). This is, by far, the most detailed scenic representation in Four Quartets, variously rhyming with the preceding lyric stanzas, and it joins Little Gidding itself in creating a specific, localized texture, with place figuring and mattering thematically and rhetorically.

Precisely at “the uncertain hour” and in a place “Between three districts,” the speaker “met one walking, loitering and hurried.” This enigmatic figure thus bears the characteristics of paradox that accompanies the “Lady of silences” in Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems. Everything is highly charged.

The speaker reports “fixing” upon “the down-turned face,” applying the “pointed scrutiny with which we challenge / The first-met stranger
in the *waning dusk*” (italics added), these last words not the result of the poet’s faulty memory but an indication of the complexity, surprise, and enigma that accompany the entire scene and encounter. That very point continues with the immediately following characterization: in that face, the speaker “caught the sudden look of some dead master / Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled / Both one and many.” His paradoxical nature is then spelled out in the added description of “the brown baked features / The eyes of a familiar compound ghost / Both intimate and unidentifiable.” The ghost thus embodies “impossible union,” being a “compound” of apparent opposites.

At this point, the interpreter feels not adrift or confused so much as reduced to guesses based on the poet’s hints. The speaker in the poem is said to have “assumed a double part,” mirroring the ghost’s nature. He then “cried / And heard another’s voice cry,” this “cry” not a response nor a separation in time but, rather, a recognition of his own “cry” coming from that other. That other voice, evidently external but becoming internalized, cries: “‘What! are you here?’” about which the speaker tells us, “Although we were not.” Neither the speaker, that is, nor the other voice coming from without and now within him are anywhere, being in a dimension now intersecting with “the world.” The speaker says plainly: “I was still the same, / Knowing myself yet being someone other.” He remains himself, in other words, knowing himself by means of an-other, by means of this intersection with him. Sameness in difference does, indeed, abound in “Little Gidding,” and at least here, difference-in-sameness, for the one is in the other as the other is in him. The situation closely rhymes, then, with the representation in “The Hollow Men,” with its claim that we are “Sightless, unless / The eyes reappear. ...” The speaker’s eyes become activated and enabled, by the (re)appearance of the ghost’s. Light (again) shines in darkness.

The speaker adds that “compliant to the common wind” (italics added), and, significantly, “Too strange to each other for misunderstanding,” *they* “trod the pavement in a dead patrol”: “In concord at this intersection time / Of meeting nowhere, no before and after” (italics added). An intersection—not an identity—exists, too, of inside and out, of speaker and ghost, of one and an-other.

At last, we are ready for speech. First, the speaker says, informal, playful, insouciant, and cavalier, his word-play both pedantic and egotistical: “‘The wonder that I feel is easy, / Yet ease is cause of wonder. Therefore speak: / I may not comprehend, may not remember.’” The ghost is
neither amused nor unresponsive. In fact, he upbraids the speaker, not “eager,” he allows, to “rehearse / My thoughts and theory which you have forgotten.” Continuing, the ghost begins to admonish him, launching a veritable sermon that will go on for some verses. The lesson centers on letting the past be and forgiving others, “both good and bad,” as he would pray to be forgiven: “Last season’s fruit is eaten / And the fullfed beast shall kick the empty pail.” Attention then turns to words and language, the speaker’s province as a poet: “last year’s words belong to last year’s language / And next year’s words await another voice.” The present is thus focused.

Describing his “spirit” as “unappeased and peregrine,” and finding himself here, now, “Between two worlds become much like each other” (that is, evidently, the temporal and the timeless, intersecting), the ghost confides that he finds “words I never thought to speak / In streets I never thought I should revisit / When I left my body on a distant shore.” The ghost here echoes the forgotten Elpenor in Homer’s *Odyssey*, who, though, was left dead but unburied and unmourned by the Trojan hero and his other “companions.”

Sameness marks the “concern” of both speaker and ghost, according to the latter: “our concern was speech, and speech impelled us / To purify the dialect of the tribe, / And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight” (note the word “purify” as well as the echo of past and future in other words). In speaking, the ghost here echoes another figure in *The Odyssey*, the blind Theban seer Tiresias, whom the hero must consult in his climactic voyage to the Kingdom of the Dead and whom Eliot employs in *The Waste Land* “as the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest.” In that poem, Tiresias serves as a *compound* (Eliot says “collocation”), once a woman, before and after a man, blind and blessed with insight, able to foresee the future because so knowledgeable of the past. The ghost differs from *The Waste Land’s* Tiresias also in being intensely, trenchantly critical.

Indeed, what the ghost does, in his remaining words rhyming with earlier declarations throughout *Four Quartets*, is to “disclose the gifts reserved for age / To set a crown upon your lifetime’s effort.” His foresight into the future may be general, unlike Tiresias’s, which is specific to Odysseus, but, more importantly, it is negative, with the texture of (Catholic) disillusionment. The ghost offers three “gifts”—and I think the word I have placed in inverted commas is precise, as well as powerfully indicative. The first concerns the eventual and inescapable falling

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“asunder” of “body and soul,” accompanied by “the cold friction of expiring sense,” lacking “enchantment” and “offering no promise / But bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit.” This is evidently meant to rhyme with, and enforce, the tone and texture of the preceding part of this the second section of “Little Gidding.”

The second of the “gifts” that the ghost discloses takes up the least amount of space and time to detail: it is “the conscious impotence of rage / At human folly, and the laceration of laughter at what ceases to amuse.” The bite here is sharp, and deep, especially painful for a writer who is a satirist. The last of the three “gifts” has to do, not with the physically inescapable, or with the particularities of point of view and sensibility, but, rather, with harm done to others, with one’s own failures, in other words. Making matters so very bad is the fact that there is to come “the rending pain of re-enactment / Of all you have done and been.” Your sight into yourself will then be unblinkered, for there is “the shame / Of motives late revealed, and the awareness / Of things ill done and done to others’ harm / Which you once took for exercise of virtue”; “Then fools’ approval stings, and honour stains” (a line worthy of Alexander Pope). Do not be so sure, that is to say, that your intended good will turn out to be that at all, for God’s mysterious ways within and for the world mean that we cannot know in advance (all) the results of our decisions and actions, or their part in the whole pattern, by which “All manner of thing shall be well.”

Having completed his lesson, the ghost then speaks of the “spirit” released in death that witnesses the “re-enactment” of the ill done to one and done by one: “From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit / Proceeds....” There is help, however, surcease possible, for “the spirit unappeased and peregrine,” yet unable to rest or be still: the spirit moves about as described “unless restored by that refining fire / Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.” Three ideas (at least) often mentioned earlier in *Four Quartets* echo in the mind here: the idea of “restoration,” that of “refining fire,” and that of “mov[ing] in measure, like a dancer.” A rhyme with Being, Understanding, and Love, perhaps?

In any case, as “The day was breaking,” no intersection now with “dusk,” the ghost “left me,” a phrasing perhaps tending to confirm that he had been (also) within. The ghost departs, moreover, with “a kind of valediction,” phrasing suggesting that what he had offered was a sort of sermon. And so finally: “And faded on the blowing of the horn,” a near-pun on the sign of the all-clear, clarity in the midst of (our) darkness.
The central section of “Little Gidding” consists of two parts, with radically different textures, though similar tones. The second shows the effects on the speaker of the ghost’s sermon. The first is an authoritative statement on “three conditions which often look alike / Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow.” That is to say, difference here asserts itself in the midst of, and despite, the appearance of sameness.

The first two conditions mentioned are attachment and detachment “to self and to things and to persons,” the third being indifference, which grows between them and “resembles the others as death resembles life,” a damming critique, indeed. In fact, the speaker continues with his withering criticism, tonally reminiscent of the ghost’s asseverations, describing indifference as “Being between two lives”—that is, the detached and the attached—“unflowering, between / The live and the dead nettle”: with these words, judgment is rendered of detachment. We may certainly understand indifference as reflecting the opposite of the depiction in *Ash-Wednesday* of the Word as within and for the world: it is for no thing, person, or even self. Attachment we may well find as rhyming, in the same poem, with “caring,” while detachment rhymes with not-caring.

In “Little Gidding,” focus suddenly shifts, in mid-verse, in fact, as the speaker announces, “This is the use of memory,” which reverberates with the lack of memory to which the speaker there admitted in the encounter, at the close of the previous section, with the “familiar compound ghost.” In proceeding to detail “the use of memory,” the speaker swerves back to the issue he had just quitted. It is, he explains, “For liberation—not less of love but expanding / Of love beyond desire, and so liberation / From the future as well as the past.” This sentence has the weight, heft, and gravitas of a major statement.

Beginning to squeeze these words, we observe that memory is said to liberate us from the past as well as the future—which cannot, surely, mean that we forget the past; rather, we recognize that we cannot simply re-live or re-do the past, keeping alive the universal and the permanent within it, a form of “restoring / With a new verse the ancient rhyme.” Liberated from the past and the future, we (rightly) focus on the present, living in the present, and faring forward, acting here and now. With the focus on the present, we may move beyond desire (which settles in on the past and the future). This signifies not less of love, or detachment, nor indifference, but releasing from particular attachment(s) and purifying it (them) into love. That which is beyond desire is not attachment, nor
either detachment or indifference. The process, progress, or sequence begins in and with attachment, as Eliot’s analogy makes clear. The movement is (always) a purifying, a refinement, never a purgation or elimination or (mere) transcendence.

Part of what *Four Quartets* shows and does is to repeat the admonition of *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems*: “Sovegna vos” (Be mindful). We must be ever-vigilant, attentive, and scrupulous, always distinguishing, marking differences, focused on relations, and recognizing subtleties and the allure of the easy, the “thoroughgoing,” and the call of and to purity. It is the most difficult of all ways.

With the scene featuring the speaker’s encounter with the “familiar compound ghost,” we are witness to a dramatization, an enactment, of spirit coming into the world, another literalizing, if you will. That event effects major change in the speaker, as we are able to see.

We may set the scene in the following way: We *half* guess, *half* understand “the gift” that is the spiritual *in*—that is, within and for—the material. We either immerse ourselves, accordingly, in the flux of the present, or pine for a future or a simple return to the past. As we have seen, however, the past speaks, intersecting with our present and (thus) changing the future.

Change is inevitable, and so the movement that the ascetically minded speaker early in *Ash-Wednesday* claims to have brought to a standstill. Contrary to the usual assumptions regarding Old Possum, Eliot does not cling to the past; he is no simple conservative (as we typically understand the term). He accepts the fact of change, endorses it, in truth, understanding that, with the Incarnation, the universal and the timeless exist in time. In like manner, then, the so-called still point, so often sought (by Ezra Pound, among others), resides in movement, sameness in difference.

Like movement, and change, “Sin is Behovely” begins the second and last part of the central section of “Little Gidding,” declaring inevitability. The unusual, unexpected word is medieval, perhaps borrowed from the well-known medieval mystic Dame Julian of Norwich. In any case, the word is lovely, a deliberate, striking, and significant predicate for sin. Sin is not, however, the last word, for in the opening verse, the last word is “but”: “All shall be well, and / All manner of thing shall be well,” statements that will be, reassuringly, repeated toward the end of the section.

Immediately, the “I” appears, the tone markedly different from earlier, reflecting the speaker’s (continuing) education following Eliot’s version
of the Homeric *nekuia* (visit to the Kingdom of the Dead). Evidently, the speaker thinks of Little Gidding, and his thoughts now bear the texture of union, rather than division and separation: indeed, in the differences of “people,” he finds, and emphasizes, sameness, and in his words you hear neither detachment, nor indifference, nor attachment:

If I think, again, of this place,
And of people, not wholly commendable,
Of no immediate kin or kindness,
But some of peculiar genius,
All touched by a common genius,
*United in the strife which divided them* ... (Italics added)

Having established the essential texture of his “thoughts,” the speaker then turns to unnamed particular men: thinking of the scene, one may suppose he refers, first, to Charles I, then to martyrs (and those including Jesus on the Cross at Golgotha), and finally to Milton, opponent of Royalism and defender of Cromwell, whose “side” killed the King:

If I think of a king at nightfall,
Of three men, and more, on the scaffold
And a few who died forgotten
In other places, here and abroad,
And of one who died blind and quiet,
Why should we celebrate
These dead men more than the dying?

The lines walk a tightrope, or, better, trace a middle ground, reflecting neither the collapse of all difference nor unreasoning identification.

Reflecting a valid understanding of the relation of the present and the past, the speaker allows that “We cannot revive old factions / We cannot restore old policies / Or follow an antique drum”: it is futile to fight now the old battle of Cavalier and Roundhead, High Church and Latitudinarian, Royalism and theocracy. “These men, and those who opposed them / And those whom they opposed”—all these differences— “Accept the constitution of silence / And are folded in a single party,” sameness reigning. What these men, opponents and partisans, left us is, simply, “A symbol perfected in death.” The upshot is also simple: “And all shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well”: the “necessarey coniunction” beginning and ending the line embodies connection. All shall be well “In the purification of the motive / In the ground of our beseeching.”
Purification of motive occurs when we grow sight-ed, able to look critically at ourselves, and see clearly the basis of our seeking. Prayer becomes valid in the purification of our motives.

The next section of “Little Gidding” is lyrical, and brief, in keeping with the previous fourth sections of *Four Quartets*. The poem is striking, disturbing. The opening image rhymes with the representation of the “dark dove with the flickering tongue” that is the Luftwaffe bomber of Hitler’s Nazi air force, in the second section of “Little Gidding”: “The dove descending breaks the air / With flame of incandescent terror.” Here, though, the agent of horror becomes a positive medium, that terror “declare[d] / The one discharge from sin and error.” The lyricist extrapolates to this unreserved and thoroughgoing claim: “The only hope, or else despair / Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre— / To be redeemed from fire by fire.”

The temptation that Eliot’s reader faces is agreement, and acceptance of these words, extreme as they are. After all, they rhyme with so much else, as we have seen, in *Four Quartets*, including the embrace of purifying fire, the tone frequently of near-despair, and representation of God Himself as demanding, difficult, and contrarian. And indeed, here, with pointed rhymes with the lyric representation in “East Coker” of God as He Who “prevents us everywhere,” His Church’s “care” lying similarly in not-pleasing us but, instead, “remind[ing] of our, and Adam’s curse,” the second and final stanza answers its own question as to who “devised the torment” with the one word “Love.” Elaboration, along with certainty, follows: “Love is the unfamiliar Name / Behind the hands that wove / The intolerable shirt of flame / Which human power cannot remove.” It sounds like sound theology—although the final two verses may raise some questions: “We only live, only suspiere / Consumed by either fire or fire.”

By the end, if not earlier, doubts enter the mind. The sentiments expressed are extreme, the endorsement of fire and of the “dove” raining down nightly terror both absolute and thoroughgoing, the whole beginning to appear reductive and simplistic. There is no hint here, or feel, of the middle way. In fact, this lyrical interlude may well matter for what it does at least as much as for what it says. What it does, is show how hard it is to take the middle way, to negotiate the troubling waters of Incarnational understanding, to stand on the edge of a “grimpen” without a secure “foothold,” to embrace the very different “both/and,” instead of “either/or.” *Four Quartets* works by means of its various and diverse dramatizations of complexity and the “necessarly coniunction,”
the “impossible union” of apparent oppositions. That means that, if my reading of the lyric be responsible and valid, it is a part of a whole that should not be simplified thanks to the omission of what I consider an overstatement and, in the final analysis (at best), an incomplete representation of Love.

A substantial burden devolves upon Eliot’s reader in *Four Quartets*, possibly never more so than at this point. In general terms, the burden is, to say it again, to “Be mindful,” heeding the advice of *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems*. With the lyric, particularly this lyric (although that in “East Coker,” as we have observed, also exacts complex demands), the reader not only sees how difficult it is to “get it right,” about which we have been severely warned at the end of “The Dry Salvages,” but has to work hard him- or herself to avoid finding the “grimpen.” It would be entirely too easy to have a straightforward lyrical statement, merely putting in other words the thematic and doctrinal center of a work whose whole is made of essential parts, none of which can be dismissed, ignored, or excluded (but sometimes viewed critically). We have to see, and work out, how those parts fit together, supporting one another.

And that is precisely the point of the fifth and final section of the last poem in *Four Quartets*. The parts do come together, supporting each other: the “logic of concepts” in this first paragraph, the “logic of the imagination” in the following and last, the philosophical and the poetic, the analytical and the lyrical. Such “amalgamation” of the “disparate” reflects at once an *association of sensibility* (which had been separated in the seventeenth century, the time of the flourishing of Little Gidding and of its decimation) and that “necessarye coniunction” fundamental to and indeed definitive of Christian understanding. Furthermore, that “concord” is what the last line of *Four Quartets* incarnates, beginning with the conjunction and ending, literally, in unity: “And the fire and the rose are one.”

Part V of “Little Gidding” consists of two differently textured sections, linked by the line “With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling.” The first section opens on what is surely by now a familiar note—and what it does is alert us to the need to attend to the words: “What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning.” These two verses anticipate, rhyming forward, verses that we shall shortly turn to in the last part of this section. They also, of course, hearken back to earlier representations of beginning and end, prepare the groundwork for critical verses to come in the present
paragraph, and serve as a sort of “necessare ye coniunction” for the different accounts that follow of, first, writing and, then, living-dying. Sameness-in-difference thus again operates, doubled, in a sense, since sameness-in-difference here is sameness in difference.

The treatment of writing begins straightforwardly and, it would seem, incontestably: “The end is where we start from.” Differently this time, the speaker, who may or may not be Eliot (it is yet to be determined), eschews the idea of pattern much bruited about earlier in *Four Quartets*. The idea of writing as like dancing reappears, and there is a rhyme—in “complete consort”—with the Elizabethan dancers in “East Coker.” But the “doctrine” is distinctive, congruent with the moral lesson taught and learned earlier in “The Dry Salvages”:

> 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)
> Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
> Every poem an epitaph.

While the syntax is decidedly unusual in Eliot’s writing, the parenthesis going on for six-and-a-half verses, the manner internal to that adjunct is decidedly Eliotesque in its careful drive toward precision, clarification, and elucidation. The speaker then ends this segment of his discourse with words that at once focus on “doing” and round us back to the paragraph’s own beginning: “And any action / Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea’s throat / Or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start.” Words here thus play with each other, becoming something like meta-words, all without seeming to fall out of place.

At some point, the question that I hinted at is bound to surface full-blown: where is Eliot in this paragraph? Is he the speaker, and if he is not, is his speaker here reliable? There is, after all, that matter I have mentioned of the long parenthesis that it is difficult to see otherwise than as clumsy.

I have supposed, upon past readings and previous drafts of this essay, that a fissure exists, in the first segment, between meaning and expression. Take, again, the long parenthetical insertion regarding rightness...
of word, phrase, and sentence: expression fails to mirror the meaning, words (still) struggling to fit in, to find their place, any support shaky. Then come—what we have not yet considered—the highly enigmatic verses over which we must now pause. They cause us to wonder how they are fitting in—or is it, rather, the previous verses fitting in with and supporting them? Does the speaker manage, that is to say, to represent a “complete consort dancing together” (which, I have suggested, seems, surely, to be the point of it all)?

One way of responding takes us in this direction: perhaps Eliot—again—puts the reader on the spot: *Eliot* gets it right—“All manner of thing is well”—but within the drama of the poem, his own voice, without irony, says one thing but is unable perfectly to match “how” with “what.” “The poetry,” it was said in “East Coker,” “does not matter.” The message here is not being undercut. What is shown—what is played out, and thus done, in this little drama—is the poet’s ultimate humility in revealing the difficulty in and of writing, of being able, indeed, to effect “the complete consort dancing together.”

We are all, ultimately, “folded in a single party.” “All manner of thing [being] well” must translate as good and bad, among so many other differences and (apparent) oppositions, finally coming together, in that “necessarie coniunction.” Purity is a mistaken quest, as well as an impossibility, undesirable in its very desiring. So with the thoroughgoing and the extreme, the *via media* being the most difficult of all ways to follow.

And so we arrive at perhaps the most enigmatic statement in *Four Quartets*, and quite possibly the most complicated and the most important of all oppositions and antinomies. This is the four-verse statement that appears to embody a decided turn from the discussion of words and writing:

We die with the dying:
See, they depart, and we go with them.
We are born with the dead:
See, they return, and bring us with them.

The first thing to observe is the lexical and structural parallelism. You would expect, ordinarily, that the “content,” statement, or doctrine would match, but such is not the case, not unexpectedly perhaps.

Perhaps the second thing to observe is the rhyme with an earlier, enigmatic statement: “that which is only living can only die” (“Burnt Norton” V). We might well recall, in addition, the last sentence of “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” which has to do with the relation
of the present and the past: a poet “is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living” (italics added). There is also the rhyme, finally, with Journey of the Magi, where the difference between Birth and Death is thrown into question: “I had seen birth and death, / But had thought they were different; this Birth was / Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.”

And the words (from which there is no escaping): dying with the dying requires a distinction from “dead.” That is to say, we die “attended” only by those who are dying, meaning separate from proper “attend-ance.” The similarity of the words—“die” and “dying”—alone points to a mutual effect.

“We are born with the dead” is more difficult to squeeze for the barest sustenance. If we look to our discovered essential structure in which, for example, speaking occurs in doing, pattern in movement, God in time, history, and humankind, we may say that being is in not-being (we are back to the passage in “East Coker” regarding “ways”).

We go along with the dying, dying with them, departing with them. But we come into being—are born—with the dead all about us. And not just about us, but in us, in a sense taking their living from us, that is, by means of us. We reciprocate, taking our living from them, aware of them, both attended by them and—crucially—attend-ing them, seeing thanks to their eyes (become ours). We (come to) live in others, as the dead live in us, existing—that is, being—in us. Life representing and necessarily involving movement—pace the speaker early in Ash-Wednesday—death means stillness. The dead thus “return” as they live in us; and living in us, they “bring” us—not “take,” as you might suppose—with them, in a further instance of mutual support.

I am, obviously, struggling, accepting hints and making guesses. If I say that I am given to wonder whether anyone else can do much better, that is not to express arrogance or conceit; it is, rather, to suggest that we simply may not, as Eliot has said of Incarnation, be able to understand, short of the end. I can only try, and try again, committed to exploring, not about to cease. It is a daunting, and humbling, task, trying to put into precise and accurate words what the poet has admitted caused him so much pain and effort and time. There is, Four Quartets teaches, more than one way of saying the same.
If, in terms of writing, every word is found “taking its place to support the others,” and if, in terms of “life,” “all manner of thing shall be well,” some things become clear. One is that we are thus liberated from past and future. Another is that you should be better able to forgive. Both these things serve to focus the present. And that makes for the ending of the penultimate paragraph in “Little Gidding”: “So, while the light fails / On a winter’s afternoon, in a secluded chapel / History is now and England” (“secluded chapel” suggesting the seventeenth century before desecration, which exists now).

Eliot's magisterial essay-poem relates, unites, amalgamates, and reconciles different points of view. There is no hint in *Four Quartets* that any of us, including the poet, has unique or privileged access to Truth; only “by indirections” do you “find truth out,” said the wise old fool Polonius in *Hamlet*. There is always only mediated access, and so we know God, insofar as we (think we) do only in, through, by means of such works as the gift of His Son and the continuing Holy Ghost in the world, for which He gave that Son. *Four Quartets* works as a series of essays, or attempts, offering different points of view. In those differences, sameness appears, uniting them in their difference. Sameness itself takes different guises, sometimes being latent, sometimes inchoate, but always there, walking beside us, attend-ing. We know only in time (in every sense I can imagine of those words).

And so, to move now to the last paragraph of “Little Gidding”: “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.” We then return, via echoes, to that garden, where *Four Quartets* had its beginning. The pattern we observed there, long ago, of the “logic of concepts” followed by the “logic of the imagination,” first philosophy, then poetry (united in being verse), finds reversal here, as we have moved from the conceptual in the first paragraph of Section V to the imaginative: children are at play, “in the apple-tree,” there is “The voice of the hidden waterfall,” and noise and stillness are “heard, half-heard.”

“A condition of complete simplicity / (Costing not less than every-thing)” confirms the critical significance of the child-like as it reminds of the price to be paid. And there is “now, here, now, always” the burning, possibly purifying reassurance of the very “coniunction” with which the idea finds expression: “And all shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well.” This shall come, as it does here, now, in the end, “When the tongues of flame are in-folded / Into the crowned knot of fire / And the
fire and the rose are one." That will be in time; in the meantime, we (can but) fare forward, essaying, seeking Truth while struggling to accept that we—all of us—are united in the struggle and not reaching completion, or fulfillment, until the end.

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