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The Poet as Christian
G. Douglas Atkins
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T.S. Eliot: The Poet as Christian

G. Douglas Atkins
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Preface and Acknowledgments

I have written a good deal about Old Possum recently, revealing at least two faults: a near-obsession with the poet, the essayist, and the dramatist, and a stubborn, relentless ongoing essai to get him right. The present book follows from, without repeating or replacing, the most recent, a study of Eliot and his relation to the particular ways of both writing and reading embodied in the sermons of the seventeenth-century Anglican Divine Lancelot Andrewes.

Bishop Andrewes’s way of writing and reading has been succinctly described by (my fellow-eighteenth-century scholars) John Butt and Geoffrey Tillotson, introducing the Cambridge University “Plain Texts” edition of Andrewes’s sermons on the Resurrection:

Andrewes’ business here is exegesis. His interest lies only in the text and he does not consider his work finished until every word has directed a separate pencil of light into the heart of his subject….It is his theme which masters Andrewes….His style progresses with the imperturbable tattoo of a Morse signal. He escapes the muddiness of many of Donne’s sermons and has no use for his ecstasies. Where everything is equally important there is no need for rhetoric.

In his brilliant commentary in the 1928 book that he prefaced with the famous announcement that he was “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion,” Eliot himself opens the way for Professors Butt and Tillotson by demonstrating in theory and practice Bishop Andrewes’s “squeezing and squeezing” of a word “until it yields a full juice of meaning which we should never
have supposed any word to possess.” Although the procedure is obviously susceptible to abuse, it constitutes the focal point of my reading of Eliot’s poems. Lancelot Andrewes’s writing is also the basis of Eliot’s understanding of the Incarnation and of a complementary and entailed way of writing (and reading): philological, comparative, and meditative. What we might call Eliot’s theology of the word becomes a theology of the Word (and perhaps vice versa).

I take from Bishop Andrewes that intensely verbal concentration; from Eliot, I take the complementary comparative, or intra-textual, manner. Inter-textuality enhances the play of intra-textuality, with the result that I am constantly following Eliot’s further advice and weighing one thing by another, often its apparent opposite. From Andrewes and Eliot together, then (but not necessarily in the order of my listing of debts), I take an (Incarnational) understanding, based in paradox and “impossible union” (Four Quartets), with which I approach the writing and the reading of poetry. Incarnation forms the thematic heart and soul as well as the structural pattern represented and dramatized in Eliot’s post-conversion poems.

Comparing Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems with the Ariel poems, the works in verse closest in time to Andrewes’s most profound and revealing effects on Eliot’s understanding and his writing opens up fresh new perspectives on the situation, burden, responsibilities, and opportunities faced by the poet who is (also) a Christian. In order to delineate and define “the way” of the poet writing as a Christian, I compare the “new” writing, post-conversion, with that done under “the old dispensation,” in the process discovering differences and similarities heretofore scanted in previous commentary. The complex, “both/and” nature of Christianity poses particular problems and difficulties for the poet at once true to his or her understanding and responsible and scrupulous as a poet and thus a steward of words.

This book is, then, fundamentally about T.S. Eliot’s perhaps most under-read, misread, and most challenging and demanding works, the so-called conversion poem and five “Ariel Poems” (counting the oft-dismissed The Cultivation of Christmas Trees, included among Faber and Faber’s new Ariel poems in 1954, a sort of second-coming that “book-ends” with the story of the first coming, and the coming to it, Journey of the Magi). The present volume also engages in de-confining critical procedures by (paradoxically) returning attention to the primary units of attention, those “things” composed of mere letters, the literal facticity of

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words themselves. I subscribe completely to Old Possum’s little-noticed declaration that “the letter giveth life.”

I gratefully acknowledge my debts once more to Brigitte Shull at Palgrave Macmillan, who supports, encourages, facilitates, and opens a way; Erin Ivy, who introduced me to Palgrave Macmillan; Pam LeRow and Lori Whitten, who make my work easier; Leslie, Christopher, Kate, Oliver, Craig, and Sharon, who make me proud; and my wife Rebecca, who not only makes me proud but also makes both my work and my life easier and happier.
1

Toward “a full juice of meaning”: Eliot’s Christian Poetics in Practice

Abstract: Eliot’s poetics, being thoroughly Incarnational post-conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927, center around words, their precise meaning, and their relation to one another. Eliot takes from Lancelot Andrewes the idea and necessity of “squeezing and squeezing a word until it yields a full juice of meaning which we should never have supposed any word to possess” and makes it the center of his own writing in verse. Before 1927 his poems are not made of such “squeezing and squeezing” of individual words. A change appears in Journey of the Magi (1927) and is fully developed in Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems (1930). What is perhaps merely inchoate early becomes fulfilled later, as the New Testament fulfills the Old, the Incarnation the pattern or structure named Incarnation.

Words are the poet’s tools, and his medium—a most burdensome condition. Perhaps no recent poet has been more acutely conscious of—and responsive to—this situation than T.S. Eliot, and that in part because he was a trained philosopher as well as a wordsmith with a working knowledge of several languages and a commitment to writing in his blood.

The first poem of his masterpiece *Four Quartets* (1943) poignantly and powerfully represents the burden that words enact: under that burden, they “strain, / Crack and sometimes break”; under the entailed “tension,” they “slip, slide, perish, / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,” simply refusing to “stay still,” an ability that the speaker in *Ash-Wednesday* prays to have himself “even among these rocks.” The difficulty is, then, not just inherent in the nature of the tool, the medium; there is the additional liability that words suffer abuse in unscrupulous and irresponsible hands, with their “Shrieking voices / Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,” but always “assail[ing] them.” Significantly, Eliot immediately moves from words to “the Word” and specifically that Word that is the God-man Jesus Christ “in the desert”: “most attacked by voices of temptation” (“Burnt Norton”).

In *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems* (1930), Eliot represents dramatically the condition and the plight of words, by imitating, and parodying, the voice of an irresponsible and incapacacious poet(aster), equally maladroit at diction, rhyme, meter, and management of the poetic line. The rhyme in the larger, ideational sense, referring to relation, analogy, and echo, may be on target, but the “verse” is sadly off the mark. “Where shall the word be found,” this second paragraph begins, “where will the word / Resound?” The response is that it will not be “here,” for here “there is not enough silence / Not on the sea or on the islands, not / On the mainland, in the desert or the rain land.” This is so “For those who walk in darkness / Both in the day time and in the night time.” It is simply that “The right time and the right place are not here / No place of grace for those who avoid the face / No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice.”

Eliot’s own poetic voice, point of view, and artistic difference emerge from the obvious comparison and contrast of this pathetic effort with the just-preceding verse paragraph. Ironically, it appears, at first blush, as verbal indulgence, jibberish, and pedantic philosophical or theological lucubration: “If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent, / If the
unheard, unspoken / Word is unspoken, unheard, / Still is the unspoken 
word, the Word unheard.” The line endings here tell, and in the following 
verses the placement of the coordinate conjunction at both the begin-
ning and the end of a line bears striking thematic value (as we shall soon 
see). The focus has become “the Word,” the Logos, that “Word without a 
word, the Word within / The world and for the world.” As a result of that 
incarnation, the Word works in and for the world, “And the light shone 
in darkness and / Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled / 
About the centre of the silent Word.”

“Sovegna vos,” Eliot had said in the previous poem: be mindful. 
Mindful and attentive, the reader immediately becomes aware of the 
meaningful play of “Word” and “word” and of the utter necessity to 
attend every word—to the point of squeezing and squeezing every word, 
for the words appear so ripe and full of meaning, this because of the far-
from-indulgent repetitions, strategic placements, and judicious rhymes 
(in both the micro- and the macro-sense, as defined above and in play 
throughout this book). This is “the theology of the Word.”

The Word is, as I said, the incarnation of God in human flesh, fully one 
and fully the other: an “impossible union” (“The Dry Salvages”) reflected 
as well in the timeless now being in time, spirit in body, transcendence 
in immanence. As Eliot himself acknowledges in “The Dry Salvages,” 
this union is a mystery next to impossible for ordinary humans to 
comprehend; it has always proven so for students in my classes, and for 
readers of Eliot in general. Perhaps a pause here is thus in order to try to 
elucidate the central Christian dogma of the Incarnation.

* * *

As Davidson R. Morse has written, “The mystery of the Incarnation 
concerns how it could be that one person might be both divine and 
human at the same time, without confusion, yet without division.” In an 
essay on Pascal, Eliot writes of the stumbling block for some of “parthe-
nogenesis”; add to that “the balance of emphasis between [Christ’s] two 
natures,” and the mystery is deep, indeed. It means, in any case, that, in 
Christ, “in time and for all time, Heaven and Earth are joined together, 
ever to be divided.” As Eliot averred, the Incarnation is “of central 
importance” to Lancelot Andrewes, on whom Eliot so often drew, and it 
is, writes Barry Spurr in the authoritative study of the position that the 
poet identified as his, “the doctrine which inspired Anglo-Catholicism 
from the beginning.” Nearly a hundred years ago, Sheila Kaye-Smith
identified the Incarnation as one of two “distinguishing marks” of the position: “the use and sanctification of matter by spirit, the inward working through the outward by virtue of the Incarnation of the Son of God; in other words, the Sacramental System.” Spurr thus concludes that the Incarnation was “central to Eliot’s Anglo-Catholic faith,” and Eliot wrote, in a 1937 essay, “I take for granted that Christian revelation is the only full revelation; and that the fullness of Christian revelation resides in the essential fact of the Incarnation, in relation to which all Christian revelation is to be understood.”

Eliot’s poetics, post-conversion to “anglo-catholic” Christianity in 1927, revolve around (individual) words, their ripeness and fullness, and the poet’s effective use of their potency and the reader’s obligation to mirror the poet’s embrace and exploitation. Although it has not been adequately acknowledged in the published commentary, Eliot’s Christian poetics owe a significant debt to, and to a great extent derive from, his reading in Lancelot Andrewes, the eminent Divine (1555–1626), whom he rescued from relative oblivion with his 1928 volume *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order*. The lead essay in that seminal collection reintroduces Bishop Andrewes, author of *Preces Privatae*, master sermon-maker to the Court, and head of one of the companies of translators who produced the King James Bible. In the course of a few pages, Eliot establishes Andrewes’s importance in both theology and literature, effectively comparing him with (“the more modern”) John Donne, and offering succinct, resonant, and charged analyses of Andrewes’s “style” that reflect an “order” in understanding with at least the potential for a poetics of both writing and reading.

Eliot’s own analyses owe much to F.E. Brightman and his 1903 edition of Bishop Andrewes’s *Private Prayers*. The Modernist poet-critic quotes “in full” a paragraph of Canon Brightman’s admirable and acute commentary: “the structure is not merely an external scheme or framework,” a telling series of words bearing enormous implications. Eliot continues quoting, and his own procedures will mirror, we will see, those of the Divine:

Andrewes develops an idea he has in his mind: every line tells and adds something. He does not expatiate, but moves forward: if he repeats, it is because the repetition has a real force of expression; if he accumulates, each new word or phrase represents a new development, a substantive addition to what he is saying. He assimilates his material and advances by means of it. His quotation is not decoration or irrelevance, but the matter in which
he expresses what he wants to say. His single thoughts are no doubt often suggested by the words he borrows, but the thoughts are made his own, and the constructive force, the fire that fuses them, is his own.9

Eliot proceeds to draw out the broad implications of Andrewes’s words. He writes, thus, in a brief but illuminating analysis cum comparison (“the tools of criticism,” he had said earlier in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* [1920]), in which it becomes increasingly hard to distinguish Andrewes’s way of writing and of reading.10 Both of them, if they are to be responsible, entail surrender of “personality,” a focus of such earlier essays as “Tradition and the Individual Talent”:

When Andrewes begins his sermon, from beginning to end you are sure that he is wholly in his subject, unaware of anything else, 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.…. Andrewes’s emotion is purely contemplative; it is not personal, it is wholly evoked by the object of contemplation, to which it is adequate; his emotion wholly contained in and explained by its object. But with Donne there is always the something else…. Donne is a “personality” in a sense in which Andrewes is not: his sermons, one feels, are a “means of self-expression”. He is constantly finding an object which shall be adequate to his feelings; Andrewes is wholly absorbed in the object and therefore responds with the adequate emotion. (Italics added)11

As important and suggestive as this statement is, it pales beside the following, the last of Eliot’s elucidations of Lancelot Andrewes’s ways of writing and reading, which here appear as inseparable:

Bishop Andrewes… tried to confine himself in his sermons to the elucidation of what he considered as essential in dogma…. The Incarnation was to him an essential dogma, and we are able to compare seventeen developments of the same idea. Reading Andrewes on such a theme is like listening to a great Hellenist expounding a text of the *Posterior Analytics: altering the punctuation, inserting or removing a comma or semi-colon to make an obscure passage suddenly luminous, dwelling on a single word, comparing its use in its nearer and in its most remote contexts, purifying a disturbed or cryptic lecture-note into lucid profundity.* (Italics added, other than the translated Greek title)12

The crucial points that Eliot adumbrates include the goal of commentary as elucidation of texts, the bringing to light of what might well otherwise go unnoticed or under-appreciated, philological-like concentration on individual words, intensive comparisons of words in their repetitions and their contexts, thus a focus on even the seemingly most minute textual matters.
At this point, Eliot importantly veers from literary to cultural commentary, his move reflecting the strategy that the latter commentator would do well to follow, proceeding in, through, and by means of the former. The single sentence is uncharacteristically long, winding, convoluted. It attests, thereby, to the strength of Eliot’s feeling. We must always start from minute particulars and never leave them behind, assuming we are finished with that kind of detailed attention:

To persons whose minds are habituated to feed on the vague jargon of our time, when we have a vocabulary for everything and exact ideas about nothing—when a word half understood, torn from its place in some alien or half-formed science, as of psychology, conceals from both writer and reader the meaninglessness of a statement, when all dogma is in doubt except the dogma of sciences of which we have read in the newspapers, when the language of theology itself, under the influence of an undisciplined mysticism of popular philosophy, tends to become a language of tergiversation—Andrewes may seem pedantic and verbal.13

These words may be seen as (satirical) antithesis to Eliot’s thesis that we have been observing.

Then emerges Eliot’s single most important statement concerning Andrewes’s poetics, which becomes critical and indeed central to Eliot’s own. He begins this account of writing with our attention directed to the reading of it—as readers we must model, as Eliot has done, Andrewes’s way of writing, critically analyzed by Eliot:

It is only when we have saturated ourselves in his prose, followed the movement of his thought, that we find his examination of words terminating in the ecstasy of assent. Andrewes takes a word and derives the world from it; squeezing and squeezing the word until it yields a full juice of meaning which we should never have supposed any word to possess. In this process the qualities..., of ordonnance and precision, are exercised.14

Eliot thus points to the necessary comparison of words in their contexts as well as to the “ordonnance” that these words together (thus) construct. These matters constitute the manner and procedure of Eliot’s poetic writing from 1927 forward.

* * *

As early as his first major poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915), Eliot represented difficulties in understanding. In fact, the difference between what you mean and what you are able to say stands...
as a central thematic issue. “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” exclaims the incapacious Prufrock, who worries as well about being gravely misunderstood. He imagines a woman in the “rooms”—where they “come and go / Talking of Michelangelo”—trapped in this debilitat- ing condition:

Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
“That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all.”

Best not to risk, best not to unsettle, and so Prufrock ends up concluding (rather than deciding) not to “fare forward” (Four Quartets). After all, when “human voices wake us,…we drown,” concludes the poem’s last verse.

The revolutionary “Prufrock” is a timely re-vision of Robert Browning’s dramatic monologues, a brilliant psychological study in self-revelation, rendered by a distinctly anti-Romantic poet, who (simply) observes and dramatizes. From the first line, its words are highly charged: “Let us go then, you and I” (the “you” forever enigmatic); the depiction of “a soft October night” and its relation to the theme of variously “settling”; and the allusions to Hamlet, Andrew Marvell, and Lazarus. But Eliot does not precisely squeeze the words, nor does the reader, for whom the effort would produce relatively few insights. You can squeeze and squeeze that first verse, for example, but you are likely to derive somewhat less than “a full juice of meaning.” “Prufrock,” then, does not yield up its meaning to a squeezing of its words, even though you must nevertheless attend to them individually, in their “nearer and in their most remote contexts,” as well as their “ordonnance.”

Similarly in The Waste Land (1922), an altogether more complex and demanding work. Perhaps most poignantly, the theme of understanding emerges in the lamentations of the “Thames Daughters,” in the central section titled “The Fire Sermon.” These statements, which bear a heavily sexual charge, conclude with these words:

On Margate Sands.
I can connect
Nothing with nothing.
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
My people humble people who expect
Nothing."
Here, more prominently and significantly than in “Prufrock,” words must be scrutinized for tone, particularly in the fifth and final section. The speaker in “What the Thunder Said” appears in a close reading to be an inveterate wastelander, mistakenly seeking relief from dryness, sterility, and difficulty by calling for—with increasing desperation—the very thing that produces death: “death by water,” the title of the poem’s fourth section. Still, it is not the squeezing and squeezing of words that identifies tone; it is, rather, the scrupulous juxtaposition of (full) statement and its contexts. This involves, of course, the comparison that Eliot endorses in his essay on Lancelot Andrewes and puts into practice in his post-conversion verse.

A change in Eliot’s poetic practice is observable in “The Hollow Men” (1925). There is, to begin with, the admittedly enigmatic fifth and final section, which brings together verses of a children’s play-song, fragments of the Lord’s Prayer, and tonally philosophical lines in striking contrast with so much of the poem’s direction. At the same time, Eliot invites us—requires, really—to squeeze the meaning of the titular “hollow” (thanks, in part, to the rhyme with the rather different “empty”). The reiterations of “kingdom”—including “death’s other kingdom,” “death’s dream kingdom,” “the twilight kingdom”—similarly require distinguishing, not merely inviting and requiring the reader’s active participation in the work of understanding but also alerting us to the play of similarity and difference that defines that work. Similarly with the reiteration of “voices” and “eyes,” but with this difference: the explicit theme is here joined with what functions as parts—eyes and voices—that obviously call out for the understanding of relation—to each other and to themselves. That Eliot uses the simple preposition “between” seven times in short space in representing the abortions enacted by “the Shadow” not merely confirms the significance of individual words but also points the reader to these less frequent but more important reiterations, these “rhymes.”

At least three aspects of necessary attentiveness thus assert themselves in “The Hollow Men,” indicative of poetic strategy heretofore unexploited in Eliot’s verse: repetition, comparison, and relation. Soon, the reader gets it: the matter is how these words—“hollow,” “kingdom,” “eyes,” “voice,” “between”—somehow work together, forming a pattern and constituting a dance. (I use both terms deliberately.)

As critical as such strategies are to how “The Hollow Men” works poetically, they are, obviously, limited in scope, significance, and effectiveness. They pale, that is to say, in relation to the squeezing and squeezing of
words in *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems* and *Four Quartets*. Still, the major work of 1925 shows Eliot underway with a poetic procedure largely new for him. It is the case, however, that in 1920 in the undervalued poem “Gerontion” Eliot shows the influence—and presence—of Lancelot Andrewes, from whom derives the poetics of his post-conversion years. In this early poem, he uses a favorite notion of the churchman, clearly signaling specific use (via quotation), which he significantly modifies: the words—tight and efficient as they are, to the degree of being elliptical, say many readers—are attended only because of quotation or by usage; as with all the poems written prior to his conversion in 1927, in “Gerontion” nothing shines within the words, pointing beyond them. This is true even of “The Hollow Men,” where signs of difference and change nevertheless appear in Eliot’s poetic practice.

In *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems*, that difference and that change are most readily apparent and functional. (Such new practices also appear in the Ariel poems and will be treated here in due course, beginning with *Journey of the Magi* [1927].) Eliot’s so-called conversion poem is famous (or infamous) for its play on the word “turn,” the poet following closely the practice of Bishop Andrewes in his several Lenten sermons. Eliot, though, goes even beyond the seventeenth-century churchman: “turn” is, of course, precisely what the Christian holy day is all about, the believer “turning” from his or her sinful ways, in penitence and contrition and preparing for Easter. It is also what conversion signifies and so is both appropriate and important for a poet who has recently and publicly committed himself to the Church (Eliot specifically identified himself as “anglo-catholic in religion” in the preface to the essays *For Lancelot Andrewes*, one year after his baptism and confirmation in the Church of England).

“Turn” is, in addition, what is required of Eliot’s reader in the first editions of *Ash-Wednesday*, confronted with an unusual number of preliminary pages before finally arriving at the first of the six included poems. There, at last, the reader is greeted with three first verses, each beginning “Because” and proceeding with the thrice-stated “I do not hope,” which is surrounded by (the thus repeated) “to turn.” Eliot makes the point that I have been essaying to adumbrate, for he returns to these verses but with a difference in opening the sixth poem: the only (but significant) change is from “Because” to “Although.” “Turn” is thus firmly established as a thematic focus, as well as a rhetorical strategy: there occurs, in fact, a *turn* within the poem as the speaker—or speakers—moves to a
revitalized understanding. “Turn” becomes what Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems is all about: the turn from one point of view, even falsehood, to a more coherent, reasonable, and satisfactory one, catholic in nature, and universal. At the same time, this “play” on words alerts the reader to attend to words as words, thus preparing the way for, among other comparisons, effective and responsible words and their satirized counterparts at the beginning of the fifth poem.

“Turn” is not the only term squeezed in Ash-Wednesday. Another, no doubt surprising word that figures thematically and bears enormous implications far beyond its simple appearance is the coordinate conjunction “and,” whose importance figures, for example, in the repeated, and striking, words “Teach us to care and not to care.” The conjunction similarly functions in the crucial description of the “Lady of silences,” who is the Blessed Virgin. As represented in the second poem, She embodies paradox, Mother of God and Sister of us all, our necessary mediator like Her Son, the Incarnation of the Divine in human form—which Eliot calls the “impossible union” in Four Quartets. The “Lady of silences” is thus represented as, for instance, “Calm and distressed,” “Torn and most whole,” “Exhausted and life giving.” Conjunction is, later, the point represented in the sixth poem’s penultimate verse, part of the speaker’s earnest concluding prayer: “Suffer me not to be separated.”

Of importance is the further fact that we do not, and cannot, at first grasp the full or even satisfactory implications of such a simple matter as the quiet little word “and.” Only in the fullness of poetic time—perhaps with Four Quartets in mind—do we adequately grasp this significance, and that fact is both appropriate and meaningful.

We glimpse that significance in returning, briefly, to the fifth poem of Ash-Wednesday and its rhetorically positive opening verse paragraph, with its sophisticated theological content presented in straightforward language smacking, in fact, of prose. As we have seen, repetitions appear to clutter the lines, whose diction is as ordinary and mundane as the ideas are extraordinary—and that, we eventually understand, is exactly the point. These repetitions exist alongside critical differences, most notably “Word” and “word”—a traditional Christian notion, frequented by Lancelot Andrewes, among many others—but also “Word,” “word,” and “world” (to say nothing of “whirled”). A good many of the other words in the passage acquire heft and charge from their appearance elsewhere in Ash-Wednesday: “lost,” “spent,” “unheard,” “unspoken,” “still,” “light,” “darkness,” “centre,” “silent.” None of these, I dare say, is new, but
rather here recycled. The passage thus consists of bits and pieces found elsewhere in the text(ile) bearing the title *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems*.

Furthermore, the passage occupying our attention may be seen as one effort—among others—toward “restoring / With a new verse the ancient rhyme,” as Eliot puts it in the fourth poem: a recovery and a re-turn. By “rhyme” Eliot has in mind similarities-with-differences that extend well beyond echoing words; he means, as I do by the same term, those that recognize, and center around, analogies, parallels, critical relations, the revelations of the “mythical method” that he finds in his friend James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), and the attend-ance of otherness in the “one,” even the conjunction of seeming contradictions.19

Eliot is working toward *Four Quartets*, in other words, our passage opening the fifth poem of *Ash-Wednesday* a clear anticipation of the developed practice that joins poetry and prose, poetry and philosophy (and/or theology). Critical is the way in which it is all done in language ordinary and familiar, generally much less predisposing than in the earlier poems. The ordinary is just the point, for as Eliot writes in *Ash-Wednesday*, “the Word [is] within / The world and for the world.” Jesus came as the Word, in time, and thereby made the ordinary, like the extra-ordinary, count equally—extra-ordinarily.

*Four Quartets* names Eliot’s most important essays. In “Burnt Norton,” first of the poems, published separately in 1935, eight years before the whole was perfected, Eliot approaches close with words about words—they constitute the subject of the final section in each of the *Quartets*. These critical verses directly state the matter that *Ash-Wednesday* has dramatized. In the later work, the indirect becomes direct (as Incarnation becomes in *the Incarnation*). The passage below rhymes with that we have considered in the fifth poem of *Ash-Wednesday* (as it conclusively refutes the ascetic-minded and Stephen Dedalus-like speaker’s “turn” from various sorts of “movement” in that work’s first poem: like music, words move “Only in time,” and “Only by the form, the pattern, / Can words or music reach / The stillness, as a Chinese jar still / Moves perpetually in its stillness.” The point is different from “the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,” for it has to do with “co-existence.” Ultimately, as we shall see in due course, the point is that “All is always now.”

These verses echo as well, anticipate, repeat with difference, and thus rhyme with words opening the final section of the final poem, “Little Gidding”: Eliot defines “rightness” of phrase and sentence as “every word [being] at home, / Taking its place to support the others.” In this “easy
commerce of the old and the new” is “The complete consort dancing together” (italics added). These important verses attend, rhyming with, the quite different representation of Elizabethan rustics dancing around a summer bonfire (“East Coker” III). The pattern of which Eliot speaks works in writing as in dancing and as in all realms of human life and work. That pattern that Four Quartets names, reveals, and functions by means of is “Incarnation,” “The hint half guessed, the gift half understood” (“The Dry Salvages” V). Incarnation, as pattern, is not, of course, the end of the story; the Incarnation goes beyond Incarnation—as the New Testament does the Old—and in so doing, represents the “intersection” of pattern with movement, the Word with words, and, ultimately, the work of the Holy Ghost in the world (from pattern, then, to intersection via movement).

II

Journey of the Magi, published the year of Eliot’s formal embrace of Anglo-Catholic Christianity, is an important poem; its relative brevity belies that significance. It is Eliot’s first contribution to the Ariel series of poems put out by Faber and Gwyer, later Faber and Faber, with whom he worked as poetry director. It is Eliot’s first poem, of any length, post-conversion.

That the poem exists as the narration of a journey deserves notice, for it thus participates, however mildly, in the ancient tradition deriving from Homer and The Odyssey of a geographical journey as a vehicle for change in understanding.20 Eliot, as is typical, adds a major twist or two to an “ancient rhyme,” the Magi including the speaker who as Magister undergoes a significant deconstruction of point of view. Because this “journey toward understanding” is one to the site of the Incarnation, the poem becomes, literalizing a metaphor, a journey to Understanding, understood as the Second Person of the Holy Trinity.

The poem is about the Incarnation in a lowly stable in Bethlehem: the “impossible union” of God and man in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, at once fully divine and fully human. It thus represents the beginning of epochal change in human history—the last of Eliot’s Ariel poems, the unfairly denigrated The Cultivation of Christmas Trees (1954), functions as the other bookend, ending with allusion to “the Second Coming.” Thanks to the Incarnation, “a full juice of meaning”
is revealed as existing within every time and every place, universal and timeless, truly catholic: God delivered meaning to us, and for us, here and now, the Divine is always intersecting with the ordinary, the familiar, and the commonplace, the extra-ordinary within the ordinary, beginning with this seemingly ordinary birth in commonplace circumstances—nothing special. In parallel fashion, poetry—which, in “modern” times, averred Eliot, must be “allusive, indirect, and difficult”\textsuperscript{21}—yields “a full juice of meaning” if squeezed and squeezed, subjected to intense and scrupulous comparison of words and phrases and sentences, with the “ordonnance” of such carefully and responsibly observed and appreciated.

Eliot penned a book review on Lancelot Andrewes for \textit{TLS}, which was published on September 23, 1926. In early July, he had written to the editor, Bruce Richmond, that he had “by no means forgotten Andrewes; as a matter of fact this article will be a pretty serious matter for me as I shall have to clear up my mind and try to come to some conclusions, in connection with Bishop Andrewes, affecting my whole position.”\textsuperscript{22} This letter, now available in the third volume of the \textit{Letters}, appears of critical importance, affirming not just Andrewes’s importance for Eliot but also the timeliness of his writing vis-a-vis his embrace soon of Anglo-Catholicism.

By 1920, seven years before his official adoption of Anglo-Catholicism and baptism into the Church of England, Eliot knew enough of the seventeenth-century Divine to bring his voice into the poem “Gerontion.” In “Gerontion,” which is, as I have argued elsewhere,\textsuperscript{23} a companion piece to \textit{The Waste Land}, serving as thesis to its satirized antithesis, Eliot brings in words from Andrewes’s Nativity sermon preached before King James I on Christmas Day 1618. The sermon takes as text Luke 2:12–14, with the following passage in it, much of it repeating the Gospel, serving as Eliot’s source:

And this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger....Signs are taken for wonders. “Master, we found fain see a sign,” that is a miracle. And in this sense it is a sign to wonder at. Indeed, every word here is a wonder..., an infant; \textit{Verbum infans}, the Word without a word; the eternal Word not able to speak a word; 1. a wonder sure. 2. And the...swaddled; and that a wonder too. “He,” that (as in the thirty-eighth of Job He saith) “taketh the vast body of the main sea, turns it to and fro, as a little child, and rolls it about with the swaddling clothes;”—He to come thus into clouts. Himself!\textsuperscript{24}
In “Gerontion,” we then read:

Signs are taken for wonders. “We would see a sign!”
The word within a word, unable to speak a word,
Swaddled with darkness.25

It is important to see how Eliot is using Andrewes here. His interest lies not in quoting him, in reproducing him word for word, that is. Rather, he deliberately changes “the Word without a word” to “The word within a word” for his own immediate poetic purposes. These have to do with the contemporary participation in the pattern figured by Andrewes and the Bible before him. Eliot is not minimizing the Word or in some sense secularizing it; instead, he is talking about—or, rather, Gerontion is, for “he” is the speaker here—ordinary, non-sacred words, not the Logos but the word such as it appears in this very poem—which may be, nevertheless, an instance, however removed, of the Word at work in the world: in other words, the Word within a word by means of what this poem reveals.

Lancelot Andrewes next appears in Eliot’s verse in 1927, the year of the poet’s so-called conversion, in Journey of the Magi.26 The poem is disarmingly engaging and apparently forthright, lacking both the allusiveness and the indirectness that Eliot had predicted would characterize modern poetry. It does not appear to be difficult at all, although appearances notoriously deceive. As given in Matthew 2:1–12, the story is entirely familiar: that of the three Magi, or wise men, later represented as three kings, led by a star to the birthplace of Christ. Here complete sentences have replaced the fragments of Eliot’s previous major poems. There is again a speaking voice who “tells” the poem, but he is not elliptical. We can easily imagine a man speaking thus: no cipher here or persona, really.

As Eliot acknowledged, the opening five verses are from Bishop Andrewes, whose words in the Nativity sermon preached before the King in 1622 are as follows:

A cold coming they had of it at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey, and specially a long journey in. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off, in solstitio brumali, “the very dead of winter.”27

Eliot’s verses are presented as a quotation (unidentified in the poem), but as will be readily apparent, the words differ considerably: “‘A cold coming we had of it, / Just the worst time of the year / For a journey, and such a long journey.’” Indeed, the Magus says that “‘The ways [were]
deep and the weather sharp’: it was ‘The very dead of winter.’ The most obvious difference in the two passages concerns Eliot’s change of Andrewes’s “they” to “we,” which seems both odd and proper: whereas the preacher is commenting, Eliot is dramatizing, his speaker the Magus. And yet, the poem begins with and as a quotation, with the pronoun changed as if to accommodate the nature and identity of the speaking voice. All this leads to the question why Eliot has chosen to open with a quotation in the first place.

Close attention to the words shows them to be somewhat at odds with those that follow in the poem. They continue the tone, in fact, of the whiners of the fifth section of *The Waste Land* while recalling that tendency toward a note of “whimper” on which “The Hollow Men” ends. Nothing of this tone or texture appears in the unquoted lines, which make up the rest of the poem. How to interpret these five quoted verses?

Let us return to Andrewes’s words, specifically those preceding the ones I quoted earlier—he is describing the conditions the Magi encountered on their way to Bethlehem:

1. First, the distance of the place they came from. It was not hard by as the shepherds—but a step to Bethlehem over the fields; this was riding many a hundred miles, and cost many a day’s journey. 2. Secondly, we consider the way that they came, if it be pleasant, or plain and easy; for if it be, it is so much the better. 1. This was nothing pleasant, for through deserts, all the way waste and desolate. 2. Nor secondly, easy neither; for over the rocks and crags of both Arabias, especially Petraea, their journey lay. 3. Yet if safe—but it was not, but exceeding dangerous, as lying through the midst of the “black tents of Kedar”, a nation of thieves and cut-throats; to pass over the hills of robbers, infamous then, and infamous to this day. No passing without great troop or convoy.28

Then follow the sentences I quoted above. Throughout, obviously, Andrewes engages in no such special pleading as does the quotation that opens *Journey of the Magi*. What Andrewes is up to with his concrete account has been well stated by Nicholas Lossky:

The difficulties encountered by the magi are there to bring out the quality of their faith, soon to be contrasted with the laziness and lukewarmness of Western Christians when it is a matter of making an effort to make their faith concrete…. [T]he end to be attained is still both theological and pastoral: it is a matter of making his congregation grasp the self-emptying, the *kenosis* of Christ, who “emptied Himself” for the Incarnation, just as at this point nature is at its most empty to receive Him.29
Perhaps a clue to Eliot’s intentions lies in the first word of the lines that immediately follow the quotation: “And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory, / Lying down in the melted snow. / There were times we regretted…” (italics added). Not only is the tone different from that of the quotation—note that “regretted,” for instance—but the attention of this speaker lies with the (accompanying) animals, not the Magi’s own inconvenience and suffering: other-directed replaces egotistic, with its descriptive self-centered lament and complaint. The quoted speaker’s words “The very dead of winter” establish thematic rhyme with the poem’s later revelations.

That the poem opens with quotation bears considerable thematic weight. For once, the speaker completes things—that have begun before he speaks. Via intra-textual reading, we compare this poem with earlier ones and recall, in particular, that the previous major poem, “The Hollow Men,” ends with quotations to which the principal speaking voice is unable to respond. Indeed, the quotations that break in from outside are themselves mere fragments. Here, though, in *Journey of the Magi*, the speaker does the completing, at the same time “turning” the representation in the appropriate manner and direction.

Moreover, and by no means least in importance, at the moment, is that conjunction with which the second and main speaker opens: it suggests a continuation of account, along with a shift of speaker, the first not exactly cut off but the matter turned outward, rather than inward, by a speaker intent on a different kind of representation. Sentimentality and subjectivity yield, if not to objectivity, to a reliable depiction, one that embodies a change in the speaker, not just of the speaker, that is, from the other speaker, but from his own earlier, less “enlightened” self. The Magus has found voice and so speaks, delivering the (good) news. *Journey of the Magi* is an altogether remarkable poetic achievement, modest and humble in demeanor, other-directed in texture.

The decision to visit the site of the Incarnation from the perspective of a Magus is not, for Eliot, at all surprising. The Magus joins, however uncomfortably, the list of so-called wise persons with whom the poet has always been enamored. The “magisterial” voice we hear in Eliot’s essays, certainly including those in *The Sacred Wood*, falls in line with the knowledge and authority of which he speaks there so approvingly. It is, of course, a delicious irony that the Magus who speaks in our poem, a wise man, knew “nothing” before encountering the inseparability of
Death and Life that the Incarnation revealed once and for all. His was, in every sense, a journey toward understanding.

Understanding is every bit the matter in Journey of the Magi. After a lengthy description of the difficulty of their journey, delivered in a tone that solicits sympathy, the Magus narrows his narrative to arrival. The manner of his description remains the same, and so pointedly different from the lyrical response of the quoted speaker in the poem’s opening few verses: he attends, as the Incarnation teaches, to the details, the physical details available to attentive observation, the ordinary, the commonplace, the quotidian—his are not idle remarks but thematically charged: “a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,” then the observation of “Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,” with “feet kicking the empty wine-skins.” “But there was no information, and so we continued / And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon / Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory” (italics added). “Information” stands out: a difference from both wisdom and understanding. The “place,” moreover, the Magus describes, following a parenthesis, as “satisfactory,” surely a neutral term that avoids the first speaker’s whining judgment and, indeed, any judgment about the unexpected nature of what is found.

Opening the third and final verse paragraph, the Magus announces, with deliberation and definition, “This was a long time ago, I remember.” His memory, as has been well established, is solid and sure, and there is no indication that time has dulled or distorted his sense of things. On the contrary, time has helped to make a difference. The Magus then says, even more emphatically: “And I would do it again” (although they were told earlier, on the journey, “That this was all folly”), “but set down / This set down / This . . . .” Then follows what he (still) considers to be the essential matter, concluding his speech, on the point of effects and consequences; the paragraph ends with “I should be glad of another death.” This last, different verse itself gives birth to the speaker’s humanity, at once engaging the reader’s sympathy and quietly reaffirming the way of Christ as difficult and demanding beyond expectation.

The passage is rich and fecund. The Magus reports now having “evidence,” different, of course, from “information,” but still merely, purely empirical. There was never doubt: a birth had occurred—that was also a Birth. Furthermore, that Birth represented consequences: “for us.” The “Hard and bitter agony” at once recalls and contrasts with the difficulties of the journey then completed. Birth and Death become entangled, and the Magus makes it clear that it is “our death” he means and is talking about.
The powerful, affecting words stand out: “I had seen birth and death, / But had thought they were different.” The very idea and the very fact of Death—its utter, ineluctable facticity—is evidently what the Magus means, that matter with a capital “D” that is patently more than the (relatively simple matter of) the death of a particular individual or individuals.

Evidently, this is his major point: Birth means Death. This is the way now revealed, the way of Incarnation, the way that Lancelot Andrewes focused. The focus resides, precisely, in what Birth means, and so Death emerges as the essential point the Magus has to report about the birth of Christ Jesus, the origin of the Christian religion. Is anything at all suggested about Death leading to Birth?

Contrast also asserts itself with the religious practices that Christianity opposed and replaced: “the old dispensation / With an alien people clutching their gods.” Back “in our places, these Kingdoms,” the Magi, bearing witness, now understand their neighbors as “alien people.” The Magus also sees them as “clutching their gods” (italics added). They have, in other words, direct and immediate contact, and these people “clutch,” in an apparently desperate attempt to ward off the new and different. The new God is much different: He cannot be clutched, and He offers little comfort—or success—to any who would try to clutch Him—or not.

Furthermore, the new God means more than death to the old self—even if He brings about a change in behavior and conduct such that, via comparison, with what truly matters, you are able to glimpse the necessity, and the way, that a lyrical and self-centered response counts for little, a point that Four Quartets fully exploits with its lyrical sections reflective of questionable if not faulty understanding. The Death meant here is not the sort of death that The Waste Land represents as the essential way of life in the modern world. This is, instead, Death with (again) a capital letter: Birth brings Death, for the Word leads to Death. They are not “different,” as one had supposed. That was precisely what the wastelanders did not see or understand.

This is, indeed, news: if good news, it is because it is, above all else, bad news to “the old dispensation,” and, more, to us, hypocrite lecteurs, mes frères, mes semblables.

In Journey of the Magi, Eliot (at last) gives us the Hanged Man, whom Madame Sosostris did not find in her Tarot cards in The Waste Land. Clairvoyantes could not find Him, but the poet does—although He still had no part, apart from His apparent absence, in “The Hollow Men.” He now appears—unspeaking, silently—in terms of the difference He makes.
The speaker, as we have observed, embodies that very difference: not just in the way he has come to regard those still under the old dispensation but also in the way he tells the story of the Magi’s journey to Understanding. In addition, he pulls no punches, ending his account by affirming that the new dispensation is, purely and simply, contrary to human wishes: “I should be glad of another death”—still wishing it were all otherwise. But it is not.

The Magus is thus pointedly different, finally, from the voice we hear in the first five verses of the poem. That voice, it now appears, saw, and understood, only the precious little that he recounts. Clearly, the journey, the arrival, and the Birth made little difference to him. Perception is more the problem than the solution, according to *Triumphal March*.

The voice of the Magus speaking in *Journey of the Magi* is not, however, despite the echo of “magisterial,” that commanding voice of *The Sacred Wood*. There, Eliot himself adopts the role of Magus, not a magician, to be sure, but one who knows, even a wise man. He speaks for—and as—Tradition, the tried, tested, and sanctioned voice of the ages. Differently, in *Journey of the Magi*, we, in truth, have not so much voice as such but embodiment, which means we are in the presence of an entire sensibility, privileged to have access to a personal and moral stance that clearly exceeds the (merely) intellectual. You might even say that the speaker in this later poem is not really a medium at all, for he has been—and reveals how he has been—affected, and effectively changed, by the experience he recounts. The vessel that was hollow, albeit stuffed, in the major poem of 1925, has now been filled—a telling way.

Appropriately, we cannot but conclude, because Christianity involves the whole person—hence the familiar, if abused, notion of being “born again”—more than point of view is engaged, and changed. The Magus who speaks here is, indeed, different, representing a new way of seeing, and living, one entirely and everywhere congruent with that that Bishop Andrewes so vividly and at great length holds up for his royal audience’s (and our) close attention.

III

With—and thanks to—the Incarnation, all things are newly seen, the “ancient rhyme” continuing from Incarnation (minus the). Perception is no longer the only game in town, nor the most reliable, as *Triumphal March* will dramatize. There is another way of seeing, altogether
different, affective, and life-changing. It literally up-sets, challenging, de-mythologizing, de-familiarizing, re-orienting. *Journey of the Magi* implies all this, in short space, and humbly.

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” had represented the disjuncture between *ways* of seeing / to *ways* of living. The women of the salon, in the drawing-rooms coming and going, “Talking of Michelangelo,” contrast vividly and powerfully with the men in “one night cheap hotels,” the “men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows,” stoking their pipes and contributing to the somnolent scene in which apparent peace is belied by the very condition that helps to create and perpetuate it. The contrast is there, in the poem, but in the representations within the poem the twain does not, and shall not, meet. Realms remain separate. One does not venture to bring to the fore, to the “superior,” that world totally, sadly apart. And Prufrock does not “fare forward.”

A flicker of recognition appears in *The Waste Land*, but there, too, the poem alludes to the difference, rendered indirectly. Allusions, created by some semblance of the “mythical method,” are largely responsible for the reader’s recognition, unseen by the wastelanders locked in the prison-house of their own egos. Eliot offers “hints” and prompts “guesses” aplenty regarding an alternative to Prufrock’s contrasting worlds and to the sorry plight of the “Unreal” cities in *The Waste Land*. But an effective, responsible, and affective alternative never emerges. It is not clear that an alternative is even possible, or now available. Wishes there be, of course, and temptations abound. Eventually, though, Prufrock is “sightless,” certainly the wastelanders are, including the speaker of Eliot’s poem. “The Hollow Men,” three years later, recognizes the essential fact: we are, and remain, “Sightless, unless” sighted by the “Multifoliate rose.” In other words, we stand in abject need of the sight afforded by the Subject of *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems*, the Blessed Virgin, Holy Mother, Holy Sister, who in seeing Herself and thus receiving God, conceived the Word, His Incarnate Son.

The Magus accepts—following a *journey* that figures the “Way” of what Eliot himself refers to as that of the “intelligent believer.” I quote his barely disguised autobiographical analysis in his 1931 essay on the seventeenth-century French writer Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées*—the words carry heavy charge, leaving no doubt in what Eliot centers his Christian belief, or the way in which he came to that belief:

> To understand the method which Pascal employs, 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 the moral world within; and thus, by what [Cardinal] Newman calls “powerful and concurrent” reasons, he finds himself inexorably committed to the dogma of the Incarnation. To the unbeliever, this method seems disingenuous and perverse; for the unbeliever is, as a rule, not 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 those 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 great 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.31

These words declare part of what Journey of the Magi dramatizes: Christianity is a matter of (the) way. Not only is the way determinative, but belief is itself a creation of “way,” a process, a journeying, observing, measuring. And that is what is required of Eliot’s reader.

* * *

This is where the story we are following in this book ends, although it is by no means the end of the story that Eliot has to share with us. There is more to come. The end of the story awaits our next book, a commentary on Four Quartets. Here, now, we prepare for that, with no suggestion that we can (ever) leave this part of the story behind, by turning to the (other) Ariel poems and Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems. But first, we will veer from that direct path to look more closely at the poetry Eliot penned prior to “conversion.”

Notes

4 Morse, 24.
9 Ibid., 11–12.
12 Ibid., 14.
13 Ibid., 14–15.
14 Ibid., 15.
27 Andrewes, Works, I.257 (Nativity Sermon 15).
28 Ibid.
2

The Present Unattended: “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and The Waste Land

Abstract: A closer look follows at the verse Eliot wrote before his formal conversion. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915) and The Waste Land (1922) neither require nor particularly gain from “squeezing and squeezing” their words; they are, however, important to the attempt to understand the specifically Christian character of Eliot’s post-conversion poems. Indeed, these poems reveal interests, desires, and themes developed, “purified,” and fulfilled in the works from 1927 to 1954. Viewed from “the end,” especially Four Quartets (1943), “Prufrock” and The Waste Land take on new meaning, in general and in particulars, as they alert us to the necessity of attending to speaking voices and tones.

I Failing to fare forward

How should one begin?
Should I presume?
How, indeed? Two of J. Alfred’s many, plaguing questions. He has so few answers and worries so much about what to do, what to say.

The problem he faces is one of understanding, and being understood. Suppose that he said, in one of those rooms “where the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo,” one of those salons in which eyes “fix you in a formulated phrase” and then pin you “wriggling on the wall” for all to examine and dissect—suppose that he said, alluding to “Lazarus, come from the dead,” that he has become acquainted with a very different kind of world, been witness to scenes of degradation and despair.¹ And suppose, further, that “one, settling a pillow by her head,” in marked distinction, “Should say: ‘That is not what I meant at all. / That is not it, at all.’”

The problem is not just one of understanding; it is also one of connection between conception and execution (as “The Hollow Men” says of “the Shadow,” always “falling between”);² between what one says and what one means: “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” exclaims Prufrock, in one of his more poignant—and potentially significant—lamentations.

Eliot’s readers may (still) understand little more than Prufrock.

We misunderstand if we persist in supposing that The Waste Land is all about burning with desire. It has more to do with indifference: the response of the “typist home at teatime” (as much to blame as, if not more than, the lustful “young man carbuncular,” the “house agent’s clerk”); that of Lil and her so-called friends in the pub, indifferently gossiping about the aborting of human life; the desperately bored women and the insouciant Thames Daughters; those who think of the past while failing to see its living in the present.³

The reader’s dilemma in the earlier poem, which mirrors the title character’s, begins as early as that title: in what sense or senses is this a “love song”? The title has, I suspect, misled countless readers from the beginning, for it points toward Prufrock’s supposed amorous and sexual interests, present in the poem to be sure, but mainly as a distraction from the nonsexual thrust of his desire. Love may well be involved—how, in fact, could it not be, at some level and to some extent?—but it cannot be said to constitute Prufrock’s—or Eliot’s own—critical interest. There is simply too much—so much—going on in this remarkable early work that will not reduce to the merely personal, individual, courtly, or sexual.
Prufrock does, in fact, appear to love truth and feels the responsibility and burden of communicating clearly and effectively the exact quality of his vision, his point of view, and such experience as contrasts with and stands in judgment of the (merely) social, separate, and artificial world that he mainly inhabits. The poem is a satire on the salons of early twentieth-century England (and so rhymes with Pound's 1920 poem *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*); it is less clear that the poem is also a satire on Prufrock himself. It is not unusual to find Old Possum indulging in such indirection as irony embodies.

Staying with the title a bit longer, we have to contend with that most unusual name, which does not appear, of course, elsewhere in this dramatic monologue. Familiarly, we pass quickly over the name, figuring it as apt for this putatively proper, staid, uptight man—or manikin—who worries that his hair “is growing thin,” the collar of his “morning coat . . . mounting firmly to the chin,” obsessing over the *daring* possibility of eating a peach, and concluding that he “should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (italics added), no more assertive, no more likely to “Fare forward” (*Four Quartets*) than the lateral-moving crab, a mere follower like the evening and like a “tedious argument”—he uses “I” in saying what he is not, but omits it in describing what he is:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord, one that will do  
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,  
Advise the prince, no doubt, an easy tool,  
Deferramental, glad to be of use,  
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;  
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;  
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—  
Almost, at times, the Fool.

This is by no means the whole story; it is, after all, Prufrock’s own self-analysis.

The name “Prufrock,” about which scholars have long offered surmises, may well rhyme with such a “frock coat” as this figure might wear while suggesting the alleged prudence that he reveals in holding tight his mouth. But surely the first thing you would think of concerns its oddness, indeed its distance from the ordinary, the real. Where else have you ever come across the name “Prufrock”? It is made up, rather like the way this “love song” is made up. Eliot is alerting us to “Be mindful” (*Ash-Wednesday* says it in Provencal, with a nod to Ole Ez: “Sovegna vos”).
The question is, and will remain, understanding: how does one understand this odd title, this strange “love song,” this speaker who, himself, worries so much about his understanding and his being understood?

The setting—or at least a large part of it—is entirely familiar and subject to little misunderstanding. It is the drawing rooms of Regency London, replete with wealth, glamour, and pretensions to appreciation and understanding of art: “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo.” The diction and the off-rhyme accentuate if not create a difference between appearance and reality, the crudeness of the verse deflating (somewhat) the pretensions regarding “high” art, perhaps already signaled in the expected but hardly erudite reference to the entirely familiar—and popular—Michelangelo (rather than, say, Franz Hals). Here, you must “prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet”: faces alone, not whole persons, made up for the occasion. Apparently polite and highly civilized, this “society” barely masks vicious and at least metaphorically murderous intent just below its highly polished and expensively maintained surface (where there is “time to murder and create”): eyes are critical, not self-critical, and “you” are reduced to what appears—can be perceived—on the surface and then offered up, like a head on a platter, in a prepared and sanctioned formula, nothing more, nothing less:

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall…

Prufrock, his prudence and his manicured appearance notwithstanding, is reduced to no more than an insect, set up for inspection, dissection, and dismissal. It may be polite, but it is also clinical, social but hardly communal.

Obviously, Prufrock is familiar—all too familiar—with this satirized world. He also stands apart from it and in potential judgment of it, for he knows, having journeyed through them,

…certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells;
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent…
This is a world apart, lacking the finery that masks equally “insidious intent” in “room[s] where the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo.” Prufrock’s question is—his dilemma—whether to bring that picture, painting its existence, to the drawing-room, the salon, offering a comparison in which, as Eliot put it in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “two things are measured by each other.”

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?

Which “world” is better? It is a question.

Prufrock struggles, wriggling on the pin of his own vision and the burden that is perhaps its inevitable and ineluctable accompaniment, unable to “fare forward.”

Prufrock appears acutely conscious of time. The second verse informs us that it is “evening” (famously described as “spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table”). The possibility of an anodyne offering escape here adumbrated appeals to the questioning, apparently indecisive Prufrock. It is, in fact, we soon learn, “a soft October night,” the “yellow fog” as feline as Carl Sandburg’s. The recurrent refrain is a version of the twice-stated “And indeed there will be time,” Prufrock’s attempt to convince himself, evidently, that he need neither hurry a decision regarding the unidentified question he harbors nor rush to his appointment. “There will be time, there will be time” for him to prepare himself, time for the socialites “to murder and create,” “Time for you and time for me, / And time yet for a hundred indecisions.” Does he, he wonders, among other things, “Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?” Especially poignant is Prufrock’s lamentation “I grow old…. . I grow old . . . .”

What Prufrock’s question is—“Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’ / Let us go and make our visit”—we never learn. Commentators have long debated it, most often surmising that it has to do with love-interest in one or more of the women in the salon. I suspect it is a different sort of question altogether, but whatever it is, it plagues Prufrock. What it is, seems to matter less, in any case, than the problems attached to asking (it). Apart from reassuring himself of perhaps endless, infinite time stretching out ahead of him, Prufrock wonders, “‘Do I dare?’ / and, ‘Do I dare?’”

Looming large is the possibility—even the likelihood—of being misunderstood. What if “one,” the generalness of identification perhaps
giving the lie to a possible love-interest or sexual encounter, “settling a pillow by her head, / Should say: ‘That is not what I meant at all. / That is not it, at all.’” All of Prufrock’s hesitations, indecisiveness, and worry come flooding back, debilitating him. By this point, he has relinquished the desire to plunge ahead: going is mixed up with divulging, communicating.

Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it towards some overwhelming question…. (Italics added)

The question has lost even its rhetoricity, become simply declarative. The faint echo of Andrew Marvell’s famous love poem “To His Coy Mistress” lies in temptation, implying the possibility of a suggestive amorous or sexual interrogative belied by tone, diction, and context.

The woman—whoever she is—joins the thematic insistence on misunderstanding; in fact, Prufrock repeats the possibility (at least) that she would have responded to him, “‘That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant, at all.’” Neither he nor she, then, is capable, apparently, of conveying meaning. Prufrock directly acknowledges his dilemma in declaring: “It is impossible to say just what I mean!”

Can, or does, the poet, Eliot, that is? There is no escaping, any more than the waste land, “the intolerable wrestle with words” (Four Quartets).

Still, Prufrock’s desire persists. He can no more let go of his perceived burden of responsibility than his vision can let go of him. There is always distraction, particularly the “arms bracelet and white and bare,” all the more alluring “in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!” There is, too, the “perfume from a dress,” which, he thinks, “makes me so digress.” An even greater temptation lies in simply letting be, saying nothing, after all, which is easier, certainly more in keeping with the “soft October night,” which “sleeps so peacefully.” In such a situation, it is, indeed, hard to decide to “disturb the universe.” After all, at least according to the last line of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” when “human voices wake us,” “we drown.”

What if—I may begin to sound like J. Alfred—his problem lies in his desiring? Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems approaches conclusion with the prayer that we learn “to care and not to care”—both, that is, at the same time. Prufrock only cares; he does not also “not care.”
In fact, Prufrock cares so much, far too much. He cares about the “world apart” that he has experienced. He certainly cares about the social world in which “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.” He cares about what people think of him, what they will think of him, how he appears to them, especially how he looks. He cares, too, about getting his point (of view) across, about saying what he means, and about being properly understood. The objects of Prufrock’s care reflect considerable difference in weight and significance, of course, but in any case, he cares so much, full, therefore, of so much desire, notably including that not to be misunderstood, that he nearly drives himself mad with worry, frustrating action on his part.

Memory mixes with desire in Prufrock’s over-wrought consciousness. Memory and desire are, of course, inseparable from considerations of time, and in “Prufrock” time, memory, and desire are thoroughly mixed. Prufrock’s “discourse” moves, spasmodically, it sometimes appears, among past, future, and the conditional. What is left out is the present, where desire may uniquely be absent.

With so much attention given to the past and the future, along with that “what if” and that “I should have,” Prufrock leaves precious little room for the present moment. What is there, actually before him, counts for little, absorbed as he is with the “overwhelming question” that he postpones into the indefinite future, whose existence he evidently feels sure about.

We might say, then, about J. Alfred Prufrock that there is no is-ness. This fact helps account for the critical tradition in which he appears as such a shadowy figure, with little if any physical heft. Perhaps his strange, and strange-sounding, name points to just this virtual non-existence. He certainly lacks individuality, and all specificity.

Whether Prufrock may be said to lack being, he cannot be said to possess understanding, and without that, he cannot (expect to) love. In these terms, J. Alfred Prufrock emerges as an anti-trinity, void of love, understanding, and being. Except for that admittedly unmistakable voice that keeps on talking, wondering, lamenting, fearing, desiring, and caring, we would not suspect an existence. That evanescent “you” to whom Prufrock refers at the opening, inviting him/her/it to accompany him “then,” may be the closest thing in the poem to a person. In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” things are hardly as they seem, beginning with the title. No present moment apparent in Prufrock and his consciousness becomes no one present. Prufrock is a creation of memory, desire,
supposition, and conditionality. We may drown upon being awakened by voices, but those voices have to be “human.” J. Alfred Prufrock, a place-filler, lacks the capacity to make a difference. In more than one sense, in the only senses I am capable of imaging, he has no present, and lacking that, he has no presence.

“That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory: / A periphrastic study” in a worn-out critical fashion, “Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings.”

Still, “You say I am repeating / Something I have said before. I shall say it again. Shall I say it again?”

I am mirroring, willy-nilly, Prufrock’s wrestling, it being “impossible to say just what I mean!” or so he claimed. The voice in Four Quartets, not defeatist, says something quite different, in part at least because the speaker there means it. Prufrock appears really to “mean” desire.

“The Hollow Men,” three years after The Waste Land but the same year in which Eliot added his dedication to Ezra Pound—“il fabbro miglior,” Dante’s tribute to Arnaut Daniel—says that “the Shadow” falls “between” “the idea / And the reality,” as between “the conception / And the creation” and “the emotion / And the response,” among other acts thus aborted. In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” something comes between the perception and the communication of that perception. It is rather complicated, since the perception (obviously) occurred in the past and the communication is never a matter of present or immediate expression but always put off into a time stretching potentially endlessly into the future. No present expression and no meaning reciprocally create one another. Meaning is, says Four Quartets repeating, and concluding, “Quick now, here, now, always— / A condition of complete simplicity” but “Costing not less than everything.”

And so I shall say it again—do I dare?: having no present and thus no meaning, Prufrock has neither love, nor understanding, nor being. (Where is there “love” in the poem except in the title?)

What Prufrock “means”—that is to say, what he desires—is as incomplete as those abortive efforts in both The Waste Land and “The Hollow Men.” True, he has had an “experience,” evidently an eye-opening, if not exactly epiphantic, one. However minimal, slight, and reduced, it is a version of the “journey toward understanding” that Homer represented via Odysseus’s descent to the Kingdom of the Dead. At best, though, Prufrock encounters the “living dead,” who really differ from the women of high society mainly in their lack of veneer. “Encounters” misleads, for Prufrock
in truth only perceives—and Eliot’s Ariel poem *Triumphal March* (1931) declares: “The natural wakeful life of our Ego is a perceiving.” Prufrock sees, that is, but only in the literal sense. Apart from his worries and his lamentations, Prufrock’s words are governed by perception, his poem all about what he has perceived and how he will in turn be perceived if he shares his perception. His inner world matches perfectly the outer world that he knows so well and to which he would return: there is little beyond perception. It is hardly an accident that the volume in which “Prufrock” appears—Eliot’s first book—is called *Prufrock and Other Observations*. Everything here depends upon, literally hangs upon, what you perceive.

Prufrock tells us about his pallid, paltry ersatz-journey toward understanding in the most general of terms, reporting what he has seen: he has “gone at dusk through narrow streets / And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in short-sleeves, leaning out of windows.” At least, the salon women carefully fix their “specimen” to the wall, even if they represent it in “formulated” terms. So lacking in particulars is Prufrock’s description of that “world apart” that he speaks of “certain half-deserted streets,” with the ur-general “muttering retreats / Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels / And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells.” These are types, rather than particular, concretized representations. As a consequence, we can but sense Prufrock’s perception only as filtered through his consciousness, which turns these “types” away from their present-ness into objects of his desire. He evidently wants to tell this story, possibly to shock, perhaps to wreak some sort of revenge; it may even be part of a narrative that he is writing and considering “pitching” to an editor in the drawing-rooms. However that may be, Prufrock desires to speak, to tell (some) others about what he has seen as it has registered in his consciousness.

That desire is, though, also abortive, in large part because it is not attended by “not-caring.” The “you” to whom—which?—Prufrock refers in the opening verse of the poem has just the potential needed for productive response: it could be the necessary critical eye (that Pound provided Eliot with in editing *The Waste Land* and that the “hollow men” lack), but it never speaks, or gets to speak—Prufrock appears to acknowledge some such capacity in ending his “love song” by acknowledging that when “human voices wake us,” “we drown.” “Necessary coniunction” represents the “impossible union” (*Four Quartets*) functioning in the pattern of which *the* Incarnation stands as the paradigmatic instance in time and human history. There are always (at least) two.
Prufrock slumps under the clear need for such a critical voice as he so much fears in the women of the salon. He is right, of course, to doubt the validity and the value of any such assessment as would come from their well-lipsticked mouths. They see no better than he does. He himself sees, though, in the most general terms, obsessed with his appearance and the women's perception of it (not him). Having no functional “other” within, Prufrock can hardly serve as “other” to or for those women. He knows very little about what he has seen, a mere observer, by no means a participant (no Lazarus nor Hamlet); he cannot be a successful mediator between worlds, which must, then, remain totally separate and separated.

Only desiring, above all desiring to speak, Prufrock is debilitated, reduced, essentially, to voice, disembodied. The title figure in “Gerontion” is, similarly and differently, a mere “head,” having lost his “passion” and the senses. Prufrock lacks even the substantial voice with which Gerontion speaks as the medium of Western tradition. The “I” that says “Let us go then, you and I” lacks (all) substance.

And that “you” again, in that famous opening line? With the help of the passage denoting the “journey to Emmaus” in the final section of The Waste Land, we may begin to cobble an intriguing suggestion. There, in a scene recalling Jesus’s visitation with His disciples following the Resurrection, we encounter enigmatic verses involving three, a speaker and two “others,” themselves reminiscent of the “you” that Prufrock addresses:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
—But who is that on the other side of you?

This passage itself anticipates that in the second section of “Little Gidding,” an encounter with the “familiar compound ghost,” a figure incarnating paradox. The speaker here assumes “a double part,” and then hears “another’s voice cry: ‘What! are you here?’” “We were not,” the speaker explains. “I was still the same, / Knowing myself yet being someone other.” They were “too strange to each other for misunderstanding” and (so) find themselves “In concord at this intersection time.”

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The “third,” I will suggest, is the critical voice “attending” inside us that is absent in Prufrock’s situation. He has a critical vision to share, but without the necessary critical voice that should be a part of him (and is perhaps the voice of the Dead), he is unable to speak, and so does not. The critical voice is part of a “compound” (represented in the later “ghost”) whose other part is the “you” that Prufrock does address, the only addressee in his monologue. The critical part is, indeed, “on the other side of you.” Moreover, whereas the “familiar compound ghost,” representing both critical and non-critical “voices,” speaks to the speaker, rendering necessary (self-)judgment, Prufrock can only (hope to) communicate with other persons, not realize his own “fallen” ways. Although, in later reflection, to be sure, he does rebuke himself, it is less for a moral failure or fault than for a road not taken. In any case, there is no present (-moment) awareness of debilitating sin. It may be that when the voices of the Dead do awaken us, we drown, the water hardly the friend that is the burning, purifying criticism that seeks to “prevent…us everywhere” (in the words of “East Coker”).

II Mixing memory and desire, or facing nothing

The voice is plaintive, hardly reliable, increasingly desperate, seeking water or merely the sound of water: “If there were the sound of water only.” That voice is to be distinguished from Eliot’s. After all, he has titled the previous section of The Waste Land “Death by Water,” which, of course, rhymes with the clairvoyante Madame Sosostris’s earlier warning to “fear death by water.” The speaker in “What the Thunder Said,” however, elides, as it were, “Death by Water,” returning to the motif with which “The Fire Sermon” ended: shared by Saint Augustine and the Buddha, the focus there is “Burning burning burning burning,” which word actually concludes this part of the poem (“burning”). In the notes he added to The Waste Land, Eliot himself said, referring to St. Augustine’s Confessions, in a tone hardly direct: “The collocation of these two representatives of eastern and western asceticism, as the culmination of this part of the poem, is not an accident.”

Asceticism constitutes a recurring issue in Eliot’s writing, and for many commentators it names his ultimate position on and in the world. Whether this is one of those “falsehoods” that the speaker at the end of Ash-Wednesday prays not to be mocked by is a point of concern throughout the present book.
For the quenching of metaphorical thirst, at least of both the sexual and the spiritual sort, water may be just the opposite of what is needed, the idea of it one of many “falsehoods” to which we too readily subscribe. I suspect that our assumptions concerning water’s palliative and restorative effects are so ingrained and widespread that we gloss over the verses in “What the Thunder Said,” not really reading them.

In that case, we miss the character of the speaker and so mistake not only this section but the whole of The Waste Land. The poem is, as I have argued elsewhere, a satire on modern misunderstandings (the allegedly explanatory notes that Eliot added just another part, in another voice, of the satire).9

Reading “What the Thunder Said,” especially if we do so both intra-textually and inter-textually, we note the rhyme of the mountain setting with the representation in the first section, titled “Burial of the Dead,” of “the mountains”: “there you feel free.” They are a source of retreat, a place of supposed relaxation and perhaps recovery, as well as an echo of Romantic aspiration and longing (think, for example, of Wordsworth on Mt. Snowdon, Byron’s Manfred nestled, however precariously, among the Alps). But in the modern world, in our waste land, the mountains offer anything but relief or escape; there is certainly to be no freedom felt. Rock is most prominent here, at least next to the dryness and lack of necessary sustenance (of any sort, literal or figurative). Rock becomes, here, the antithesis of the living, though not so much the enemy as the available alternative.

In Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems, completed after his conversion to the Church of England and published in 1930, rock again figures prominently, but quite differently. It does not carry the significance of “the rock” as in Eliot’s 1934 pageant play of that title, but rock does bear metaphorical force and intensity. At the end of Ash-Wednesday, the speaker prays that we be taught “to sit still / Even among these rocks, / Our peace in His will.” He repeats, emphasizing now the rocks’ function as conveyors of difficulty, “even among these rocks.” We are not, in other words, to avoid them but to “sit still” even among them. In The Waste Land, without water and even its sound, one simply “can neither stand nor lie nor sit.” There seems no hope, at all.

Satire works by means of—indeed, it demands—a thesis standing opposite the exploited antithesis. The Waste Land is no exception. Although, as I have shown in T.S. Eliot and the Failure to Connect, the 1920 poem “Gerontion” may well function as that thesis, there are signs of
alternatives within Eliot’s greater, more famous poem. If water is not the answer to the speaker’s—and the wastelanders’—plight, then what is?

The answer may well surprise.

The manner in which Eliot provides an alternative to the waste land within the poem of that title is itself (appropriately) indirect, the way, incidentally, he said modern poetry must be (along with “allusive” and “difficult”).

Begin at the end, with the last words: “Shantih shantih shantih.” In his notes Eliot says, referring to “a formal setting in the [Hindu] Upanishad,” “The Peace which passeth understanding is our equivalent to this word.” The idea nicely sums up, while concluding, The Waste Land (much as does Stephen Dedalus’s mistaking “Darkness falls from the sky” for “Brightness falls from the sky” in James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man)\( ^{10} \): the poem takes its leave on the idea not of going through but somehow transcending “understanding.” Later, Four Quartets will embrace Understanding itself. And Ash-Wednesday concludes with the affirmation that “our peace [resides] in His will,” the acceptance of which may require, as it may proceed from, Understanding. The wastelanders, differently from the poet, embrace that which bypasses understanding.

Without understanding, the speaker in “What the Thunder Said” merely raises the question whether he will set his “lands in order” while declaring that “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” referring to the bits and pieces, flotsam and jetsam, of texts some of which are in a foreign language. Fragments are no more than random pieces, of a puzzle; a pattern is another thing altogether. Faced with fragments, the wastelanders can but lament, with the third Thames Daughter in “The Fire Sermon,” “I can connect / Nothing with nothing.” Squeezed, these last words may reveal quite a lot. While the wastelanders would avoid the renewal of life that comes with spring, engaging in abortion and seeming to prefer death, they, paradoxically, avoid at all costs, it appears, confronting the nothingness that is death (the essayist G.K. Chesterton, master of paradox, said that you know nothing until you know nothing).

Then, there is the familiar opening of The Waste Land, with the ironic echo of Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales. The medieval poem represents diverse characters, warts and all, on religious pilgrimage in celebration of the springtime that modern wastelanders prefer to avoid: “April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain.” The wastelanders’ preference
is clear: “Winter kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow, feeding / A little life with dried tubers.” Anticipating the ending section amongst the rocks and no rain, these verses represent Eliot’s version of the “mythical method” that he described as informing Joyce’s Ulysses (also 1922), in which a moment from another time and another place “attends,” intersecting with, a present moment and implicitly passing judgment on it.¹¹ No more than Joyce, Eliot himself says nothing positive, not directly, that is. Judgment is nevertheless rendered, as it is, I am suggesting, by other rhetorical devices such as those I have noted just above.

I have said in passing above, and have argued at some length in a recent book, that “Gerontion” stands as a full thesis for the satirical antithesis that The Waste Land parades. Without rehearsing my arguments in T.S. Eliot and the Failure to Connect, I can here simply state that that lesser known, earlier poem is a dramatic monologue featuring “a little old man” who speaks both for and as tradition, post-Renaissance and post-Reformation. He is now but “A dull head,” his dispiriting words but “Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.” The “dry season” is the modern world, the waste land, in fact, and Gerontion is nothing more than “a dry brain” because the contemporary world offers no human, intellectual, spiritual sustenance. Eliot carefully details what has gone wrong, the extent to which The Waste Land chronicles fully. There can be little doubt, in the following verses, that Gerontion refers to God and, especially, the Second Person of the Trinity, that mediator between God and man who is Himself both man and God, fully human and fully divine at the same time:

I that was near your heart was removed therefrom
To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.
I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
Since what is kept must be adulterated?
I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:
How should I use them for your closer contact?

Christ Himself is our necessary intermediary, there being no direct way to God Himself. As the “impossible union” of (apparent) opposites (Four Quartets), Jesus Christ employs tools of mediation to accomplish His work of mediation. These powerfully and significantly include works of beauty and things appealing to the five senses (here specifically called out). Having lost his “passion” as well as the senses, Gerontion is now but a brain, a brain, moreover, gone “dry,” partly at least because no longer nourished by those senses.
The last verse I quoted just above is especially resonant and yields “a full juice of meaning” upon being squeezed and squeezed. For years and years, I read the line as pointing toward the speaker’s contact with God via the senses; but I have come to realize that, while Eliot is indeed suggesting that the senses provide a way of contact between God and man, it is not lowly humankind that initiates that effort: “your closer contact” must refer to God’s attempts to reach us, ours being not a creative effort but a responsive one. God does speak through the Word, the Logos, who is the Christ, but that Word may speak without words.

The best—because most responsible—commentary on the opening verses of The Waste Land comes via comparison with Eliot’s own words, specifically a rhyming passage in “Little Gidding,” last of Four Quartets (1943). The passage concerns “the use of memory,” said to be for “liberation,” defined as “not less of love but expanding / Of love beyond desire.” That means “liberation / From the future as well as the past.” The crucial gerund at the end of the second verse (“expanding”) recalls the tumble of gerunds ending the lines at the beginning of The Waste Land, the word acquiring force and significance unavailable to the simple noun “expansion,” which, in comparison, feels abstract. Moreover, the verses from “Little Gidding” clearly establish that Eliot is far from taking an ascetic stance; he does not call for “less of love,” nor avoidance (somehow) or transcendence of desire, either. The issue is not less, though it is not quite more, either; rather, it is a transformation, in this case a purification such that desire is wholly absorbed in an “expanding” love that does not replace desire but goes beyond it, becoming more capacious. As such, it is oriented not toward the future, like desire seeking possession and consummation, nor like memory, hankering for a return to a past irrecoverable. Expanding of love, rather, is oriented in the present, with what “is,” not what “was” or what “will” or “can” or “should” be—un-Prufrock-like, in other words.

Elided in the wastelanders’ mixing of memory and desire is the present (moment). They have no prospects of liberation from desire or memory, locked as they are in the prisonhouse of their own egos, which one of the poem’s closing images represents via their quest of a “key”: “each in his prison / Thinking of the key, confirms a prison.” Idealizing the past, a point of view that Eliot had roundly rejected in his influential essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” published in The Sacred Wood two years before The Waste Land, is fruitless, and undesirable. The frequent allusions in the poem to a seemingly brighter past—perhaps beginning...
with that ironic echo of *The Canterbury Tales* at the opening and certainly including the poetically magnificent start of “The Game of Chess” as well as the potent picture of Elizabeth and Leicester happily sailing down the unpolluted, undefiled Thames in “The Fire Sermon”—may signal imprisonment in past glories: desire thus truly mixed with memory.

To unmix memory and desire is not to separate them absolutely from one another. They need always be related, be compared. But to mix indiscriminately past and future is surely no way through the waste land—although it may suggest a way out. In that case, memory might be seen as driving desire, which we see variously in *The Waste Land* but always in an undesirable light. In addition to the Thames Daughters “rais[ing their] knees / Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe,” there is the pathetic famous pub scene where desire is shown leading to undesirable consequences, thence to the poem’s most ruthless denial of living, which is abortion, here literally represented. It is, of course, figuratively represented elsewhere in the poem, most notably in the scene at the midpoint involving the “typist home at teatime” and the “young man carbuncular,” whose burning lust meets her indifference and produces nothing. There, the blind Theban seer Tiresias, who experienced life as both man and woman, remembers the scene being played out as it has been for all time; he perceives, and remembering, foretells what will happen and foreshadows it. He is an observer, no desire apparent; the bank clerk, meanwhile, shows no memory, only desire, and the object of his desire, the weary young woman home from a day’s tedious work, exhibits neither memory nor desire, which are mixed here only in the diverse responses of this uneventful trio of personages. The story is less tragic than bathetic: the young man “Bestows one final patronizing kiss, / And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit…” whereas the young woman, “Hardly aware of her departed lover,” merely “smoothes her hair with automatic hand, / And puts a record on the gramophone.” He thus is seen as continuing to “gropes,” his way pointedly unlit; she, meanwhile, hardly maintains a record of the event just past, her gramophone “record” a substitute recording.

The moment comes and goes, and nothing is left of it, or if there is, as with Lil, it is (literally) killed off. Nothing attends the moment, which is as arid and barren as the waste land itself. The moment in the hyacinth garden early in the poem captures the point magnificently: “You gave me hyacinths first a year ago; / ‘They called me the hyacinth girl.’ ” Our speaker’s response is qualified, and more: “Yet when we came back, late,
from the hyacinth garden, / Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed.” He adds, significantly, not living nor dead, “I knew nothing, / Looking into the heart of light, the silence. / Oed’ und leer das Meer.” The italicized last line comes from Richard Wagner’s Romantic opera Tristan und Isolde; it translates as “Desolate and empty the sea.” Eliot chooses hyacinths because they symbolize the resurrected god of those fertility rites that he mentioned in (overwrought) notes to The Waste Land.

The moment passed in the hyacinth garden is not an “attended” one, but rather, to refer to “The Dry Salvages,” “the moment in and out of time, / The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight.” It is, in other words, an epiphantic moment such as the Romantic Stephen Dedalus imagines himself experiencing on the beach in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and that the Romantic Wordsworth describes as a “spot of time” on Mt. Snowdon at the close of the autobiographical poem The Prelude. Such a moment is, precisely, both in and outside time, the latter fact signaling transcendence and escape from this world into another, changeless, unmoving one. As such, it is an apparent “falsehood.”

The speaker’s response to the “event” in the “hyacinth garden” is like so much else in The Waste Land: fragmentary, elliptical, mixed. He records being unable both to speak and (even) to see, stunned, silenced, blinded. At least the last condition results from looking “into the heart of light,” another evidently false move. Eliot used Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness for allusive and rhyming purposes in “The Hollow Men,” but it does not take that text to realize that human beings need look into “the heart of darkness,” if for no other reason than that darkness is the via negativa as well as the indirect way that the speaker here in The Waste Land bypasses. As a result, he is blinded, not enlightened, and he is unable then to communicate (like Prufrock). He says, of course, that he was “neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,” which, at least at first blush, appears to hold some promise. The problem, however, is twofold here: first, returning from his perhaps epiphantic experience, the speaker says he “knew nothing,” but “nothing” is not “Nothingness,” that darkness that lies deep and menacing in the human heart, nor is it the “nothingness” that Odysseus, for one, suffers through in his visit to the Kingdom of the Dead in The Odyssey. What, exactly, the speaker means by knowing “nothing” is deliberately left vague, probably because he is himself unclear about just what happened. Second, although a reader versed in Eliot’s poetry might be on high-alert following the words that
the speaker was “neither / Living nor dead,” the neither/nor construction actually proves representative of yet another “false” point of view. As both Ash-Wednesday and Four Quartets ably and amply attest, the desirable position is not “neither/nor” but “both/and,” that “impossible union” that is also a “necessary coniunction,” says the later poem. “Both/and” signifies Incarnation, “The hint half guessed, the gift half understood.”

If they guess at all, the wastelanders, including the principal speaker of Eliot’s poem, at best get it half-right. Like the speaker returning from the “hyacinth garden,” they understand even less. The inseparability of darkness and light is an idea foreign and alien to them. In like manner, they think of water as they do light, mistaking ways and ends, thus failing to grasp that the way out of the waste land is not the way out, but the way in, through, and by means of the very condition they seek relief and escape from. Burning, more burning, is the solution they should be seeking, not rain or water, which appears promising but causes death.

And memory and desire, which the wastelanders mix? Mixing blends, erasing difference and distinction. The thing about “union” and “coniunction” is that it brings together as one while maintaining difference and distinction.

“Burnt Norton” offers succinct and insightful commentary via the following rhyme with The Waste Land: “Desire itself is movement / Not in itself desirable, / Love is itself unmoving, / Only the cause and end of movement.” The immediately following words are just as important, just as elucidating: “Timeless and undesiring / Except in the aspect of time / Caught in the form of limitation / Between un-being and being.”

The “still point of the turning world” that “Burnt Norton” refers to a bit earlier is not the “mix” of memory and desire but that present moment, the moment of the present, which, because of the Incarnation, is “attended”: “Quick now, here, now, always— / Ridiculous the waste sad time / Stretching before and after.”

Notes

3

“For thy closer contact”: “Gerontion,” “The Hollow Men,” and Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems

Abstract: “The Hollow Men” (1925) continues efforts begun in The Waste Land to disabuse us of notions and falsehoods to which we persist in clinging. The later poem looks toward the self-criticism that the wastelanders assiduously avoid. It also posits the need for mediation while suggesting the virtue of child-like simplicity. The path opened leads to Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems (1930), which focuses the necessity of mediation, figured most prominently in the paradoxical “Lady of silences,” the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Word “within / The world and for the world.” The six poems constituting Ash-Wednesday, featuring a range of speaking voices and requiring that the reader “be mindful,” exemplify Lancelot Andrewes’s influence, spotlighting the necessity of “squeezing and squeezing” individual words.

Even amongst all these rocks (and nothing else), teach us “to sit still,” rather than search for a “key” for a way out that only confirms our imprisonment in one “falsehood” after another. Instead, now, of “the peace that passeth understanding,” “Our peace in His will.” And instead of “fragments shored against my ruins,” the prayer “not to be separated.”

Readers often—arguably, most often—approach The Waste Land, “The Hollow Men,” and Ash-Wednesday with the same sort of misunderstanding that governs their grasp of fundamental Christian dogma, perhaps most notably the Incarnation. Without intending it (usually), such readers harbor, as Eliot himself said in “The Dry Salvages,” a half-understanding of the “impossible union” of God and humankind, transcendence and immanence, that defines Incarnation. It is hardly surprising, then, that so armed they fall into one or more of the yawning chasms that await readers of many of Eliot’s poems, which seek to disabuse us of one or another lurking and dangerous “falsehood.”

I “Gerontion” and “The Hollow Men”

The problems laid out in The Waste Land, extending the point of view evident in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” are daunting, but identifiable and, at least theoretically, answerable. These revolve around the matter of perception and misperception, and they include the reader as well as the wastelanders themselves (who are likely one and the same). Like them questing for escape from apparent imprisonment, we seek a key to unlock the poem’s secrets and free us from lack of understanding, but that very aim confirms our imprisonment in lack of understanding.

What you think, and how you think, what you see and perceive, and what, differently, you actually understand, names the problem that Eliot everywhere confronts in the poetry. “The spirit killeth,” though “the letter giveth life,” he said in a footnote to his essay “Baudelaire in Our Time,” included in Essays Ancient and Modern (1936). In the great poem of 1922, Eliot explores our dying in the waste land of modern culture, the mix of memory and desire that drives us, our mistaken and dangerous craving for easy escape. “The Hollow Men” continues, while extending, the effort, playing on—and disabusing us of—the familiar assumption that hollowness is a problem to be fixed, a condition to be overcome, a sad and pathetic condition, in fact, that leads to “whimpering” when we should be faring forward. Of course, the stand-out symbol of such
unPrufrock-like decisiveness, Guy Fawkes, performed nothing more than an abortive act, his attempt to blow up Parliament in 1605 now celebrated for the pathetic failure that it was. As usual in Old Possum’s poems, irony piles upon irony, which is itself founded on and in (more) irony.

I shall begin here, not with “The Hollow Men,” but with “Gerontion” (1920), and not immediately with that poem that I have described as a companion-piece to The Waste Land. Instead, I start from the troubling statement by Old Possum himself in propria persona, writing to his friend, the distinguished scholar of eighteenth-century literature, Bonamy Dobrée. I call the statement “troubling” because it represents a significant challenge to the point of view that I offer as Incarnational. The passage in question occurs in Eliot’s letter to his friend in 1936, after Dobrée had said he regarded “with horror” an epigraph from St. John of the Cross that Eliot had used for his Sweeney Agonisties (1932): “Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings.”

(Even such an informed and astute scholar as Ronald Schuchard mistakes Eliot’s meaning when he describes Eliot’s way then as “necessitat[ing] moving through the dark night of sense and desire, and purging the memory and the will, in order to attain the divine union” [italics added].) Wrote Eliot to Professor Dobrée, at least initially appearing to clear up confusion by affirming the complexity of the question and proceeding to disavow modes of crippling and “killing” asceticism:

The doctrine that in order to arrive at the love of God one must divest oneself of the love of created beings was thus expressed by St. John of the Cross, you know: i.e. a man who was writing primarily not for you and me, but for people seriously engaged in pursuing the Way of Contemplation. It is only to be read in relation to that Way: i.e., merely to kill one’s human affections will get me nowhere; it would be only to become rather more a completely living corpse than most people are. But the doctrine is fundamentally true, I believe. Or to put your belief in your own way, that only through the love of created beings can we approach the love of God, that I believe to be UNTRUE....I don’t think that ordinary human affections are capable of leading us to the love of God, but rather that the love of God is capable of informing, intensifying and elevating our human affections, which otherwise have little to distinguish them from the “natural” affections of animals.

It is, to state the obvious, a strong and precise statement. That it has everything to do with “way” is also readily apparent.
The best gloss on this important statement may be a rhyming passage in “Gerontion,” to which poem I now turn. The speaker is “the little old man,” who here offers a truncated history of Reformation and post-Reformation events and implications, an abbreviated and suggestive allegory (a form that results of the Reformation effectively eclipsed)—the picture painted is appropriately and necessarily complex and complicated (I quoted it earlier). Although hardly recognized as such, these remarkable verses, amounting to half a sonnet, should be set beside The Waste Land, for they show just how we got to that (rocky) place.

These succinct verses also serve to divest us of another major familiar assumption, one to which, as I confessed earlier, I long fell victim. The danger appears in the last line, which can be read in two quite different ways. The easier one is that Gerontion asks—along, as it were, with Eliot’s friend Bonamy Dobrée—how may I use my passion and all my senses to approach closer to You, the premium thus being on “my” initiative and efforts. But the other “way” is different, and it is, I now understand, the one that Eliot has in mind here and in the letter to Dobrée: how may I use my passion and all my senses for the closer contact with You, which You initiate in, through, and by means of Your various mediations, including “created beings” and all my senses.

It makes all the difference in the world whether you believe that your job is—like the Blessed Virgin—to receive God’s Word and respond to It or, like the wastelanders, to impose self-control (Damyata) and work your way “upward” to God by means of your own, “enlightened” efforts. It is not at all easy to accept the “condition of complete simplicity,” which goes far toward explaining, and justifying, Eliot’s frequent resort to children and the child-like in representing it (as in the concluding verses of “Burnt Norton” from which I have drawn the quotation).

I turn now to “The Hollow Men,” via a well-known passage in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” which I do not recall ever seeing adduced in this context. I refer to Eliot’s self-styled “suggestive analogy, the action that takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide.” The analogy concerns the “catalyst,” and Eliot works out the analogy in the following manner:

When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently
unaffected: has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.8

The passage is suggestive for “The Hollow Men,” in which Eliot seeks to insure that his reader not mistake “hollow” for “empty” (he refers, well into the poem, of the “Multifoliate rose” that he then describes as “The hope only / Of empty men” [italics added]).9 Constructed as a composite of four previously published poems and a hitherto unpublished fifth and final section, “The Hollow Men,” with epigraphs from Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (“Mistah Kurtz—he dead”) and a popular ditty referring to Guy Fawkes (“A penny for the Old Guy”), represents men as hollow instruments that may become positive forces for good. At the same time, the poem stands as a counterstatement to “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” with which it rhymes. By 1925, more than five years after his most influential essay, Eliot no longer subscribes to the notion of the medium as an unaffected and objective entity, a point affirmed, as we have seen, in Journey of the Magi. Things are more complex, Eliot opposed to separations.

Here, as a matter of fact, he recurs to the point we have noted in “Gerontion.” That is, with an intense focus on “eyes” and the utter necessity of seeing clearly, particularly into one’s own “heart of darkness,” Eliot emphasizes that the direction of assistance is “from top down.” The presentation may remind us of The Waste Land as well as “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”: “We grope together / And avoid speech / Gathered on this beach of the tumid river” (which, according to many commentators, is the River Styx, the “hollow men” awaiting passage across to the Kingdom of the Dead). Immediately follow lines positing an alternative, not of escape, not of turning into a scarecrow such as has been mentioned earlier in the poem as a “disguise” to avoid critical eyes. Instead, we read, in the first words of the first verse—the only words of the line carrying rhetorical and thematic heft—that we hollow men and women are “Sightless, unless / The eyes reappear / As the perpetual star / Multifoliate rose,” which is “Of death’s twilight kingdom,” and that is “The hope only / Of empty men” (italics added). The way is straight to Ash-Wednesday, which identifies the Virgin—the intercessor and intermediary—as that “rose.” We need corrective eyes and corrected vision—for, as we have
observed, mere seeing, the act of perceiving, what comes into us from physical sight alone, leads only to fools’ gold.

Hollowness we may then begin to regard as not an altogether regrettable condition. Certainly it is preferable to Gerontion’s situation, who is merely “head,” that “head” now turned in a wrong direction, as well, therefore, as to having oneself “stuffed” with “falsehoods.” In fact, the “hollow men,” immediately into the poem, are said to be “the stuffed men,” their capacity eclipsed by that unfortunate filling, our “Headpiece filled with straw.” We, in fact, “whisper together” and “Are quiet and meaningless.”

Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats’ feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar[.]

The rhyme with and recall of earlier verses, especially in *The Waste Land* (notably the dryness), reveals, via comparison, an evident worsening of the wastelanders’ situation.

To be different, to be able to make a difference, the “hollow men” must confront that “Shadow” that “falls between” “the idea” and “the reality,” as between “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, “the essence / And the descent.” Completion is prevented, abortion reigning. In similar fashion, the Lord’s Prayer is only begun, interrupted by wastelander-like whining that “Life is very long.” That the poem’s last verses hearken back to the tone and texture of the child’s game with which this last section opens, emphasizes the value and the virtue in child-like “understanding.” While it is not, of course, Wordsworth’s paean to the child as “the best philosopher” (Intimations Ode), it is nevertheless a recognition and acknowledgment of simplicity and wonder (about which more, later, in dealing with the Ariel poem *The Cultivation of Christmas Trees*). Here, then, is the ending of “The Hollow Men,” which ending is about ending, the poem a “response” to the “emotion,” an alternative to “the desire” and “the spasm” alike, rather than an abortion that merely “falls between”: the thrice stated “This is the way the world ends,” which is then followed by the oft-quoted “Not with a bang but a whimper” (Eliot’s italics).
Required, for clear-sighted recognition of the heart’s own darkness, is “eyes,” but here, “In death’s dream kingdom,” the eyes “do not appear.” The point is repeated later: “The eyes are not here / There are no eyes here / In this valley of dying stars,” a valley said to be “hollow” like its inhabitants, “This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms.” That this “valley” in which we exist is “hollow” means that it too is capable of serving as necessary medium.

In fact, although there are no “eyes” as such, the poem pointedly declares, rather, that “the eyes are / Sunlight on a broken column / …a tree swinging.” “And” there are voices “In the wind’s singing / More distant and more solemn / Than a fading star.” In other words, in place of “eyes,” these other “things,” serving in their place, acting as the medium for those seemingly absent “eyes.” As Ash-Wednesday puts it, “the light shone in darkness,” and so, even if “the Word [is] unheard,” “Still is the unspoken word,” “the Word within / The world and for the world.”

II Clearing the way: Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems

Which brings us to the most disabusing of all of Eliot’s poems, the enigmatic, brilliant Ash-Wednesday, another composite, often labeled his “conversion poem.” We would go wrong if we ignored, or minimized, the fact and the importance of Eliot’s subtitle, his only one, in fact, in all his poems. The first three poems were published separately, between December 1927, within weeks of Eliot’s baptism into the Church of England, and the autumn of 1929. The six poems were published together for the first time on April 24, 1930 (the first American edition did not come out until the 26th of September that year).¹⁰

As I have mentioned, one would also be remiss in failing to note the unusual number of pages you have to turn to reach the first poem (a physical act that mirrors the thematic charge of the word “turn,” appropriate for Ash-Wednesday and Eliot’s own recent conversion, and reflecting the deep and abiding influence of Lancelot Andrewes, who “squeezed and squeezed” this word, among others, in his Lenten and Easter sermons). One would be similarly remiss in failing to note a link between Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems and the preface Eliot wrote for his translation of St.-John Perse’s Anabasis, published within a month of his own poems, adorned in the same jacket design by Edward Bawden,
and including an important preface by Eliot extolling the “logic of the imagination” operating in Perse’s challenging and difficult work.11

Eliot’s six poems, especially taken together, reflect the same “logic of the imagination,” and despite sharing, to be sure, significant themes, strategies, and purposes, must not be too closely bound up and made nearly seamless. It is a major error, for instance, to assume a neat, logical progression, just as it is to assume that the six poems feature but one main speaker, a single, consistent voice or vision. To regard the voice in I as Eliot’s own is to mistake antithesis for thesis, falsehood for truth. It is a similar error to equate or identify the (medieval, romantic) “Lady” with the “Lady of silences,” who is the Virgin Mary. In like manner, one would go wrong in failing to compare the philosophico-theological excursus on the Word that opens V with the following pathetic and bathetic verses perhaps the work of a poetaster who does little more than perpetuate noise threatening to drown out the Word. Perhaps most significantly for an adequate grasp of Eliot’s thinking and art in these poems, it is a sad mistake, committed by a great many commentators, to suppose that the strikingly beautiful, sensuous verses in VI represent a mere temptation and a distraction, indicative of the lures of “the world” from which the poet is said to urge us to turn. No more than the Word does Eliot turn away from the world, well aware that the Word exists precisely “within / The world and for the world.”

Representative of Eliot’s thinking and his art in Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems is the opening poem (which, upon first, separate publication, bore the title “Perch’io Non Spero,” from the medieval Italian of Guido Cavalcanti). Here the speaker begins, “Because I do not hope to turn” (in the sixth poem, as I have noted, “Because” becomes “Although”). The speaker declares, in fact, that he “no longer strive[s] to strive,” which could be a positive that we should embrace, but here tone suggests there is only resignation that itself appears tainted and untrustworthy. Before long, the speaker utters the following words, which should convince a reader of his unreliability: he flouts the Incarnational understanding that time and place are always “attended,” and he renounces and rejects precisely such “outside” assistance as “The Hollow Men” worked to show as essential. Finally, he is himself, despite no longer “striving,” determined to create for himself and by himself “a way out”: he “know[s],” he confidently says, that “time is always time / And place is always and only place.” He adds, clarifying the nature of his (mis)understanding, that he thus knows that “what is actual is actual only for one time / And only
for one place.” Furthermore, he “rejoice[s]” that this is the way it is, and goes on to state, unequivocally and without either reservation or guilt, that he “renounce[s]” both “the blessed face” and “voice.” He concludes, with less resignation than assertiveness, “Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something / Upon which to rejoice” As Eliot himself says in IV, this time quoting the medieval Provencal poet Arnaut Daniel: “Sovegna vos,” that is, Be mindful.

In Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems, the necessity to “Be mindful” is palpable, Eliot committed to revealing “falsehood,” sometimes even implicating us in it. In this “time of tension between dying and birth” that is human existence, we are constantly assaulted by noise, noise so widespread and raucous that it often becomes impossible to hear anything else, perhaps especially to hear the voice that the speaker in I renounces. The fifth poem of Ash-Wednesday focuses on precisely this matter, and does so in a poetically significant and rather daring manner. The opening verse paragraph here derives from Lancelot Andrewes. The passage, in fact, employs Bishop Andrewes’s intensely verbal and linguistic procedures employed in writing and reading alike, resulting in what Eliot calls his “squeezing and squeezing the word until it yields a full juice of meaning which we should never have supposed any word to possess.” Another point that Eliot makes in writing about Andrewes is applicable here, Eliot’s “way” in this passage mirroring Andrewes’s in many of his sermons; modern readers are apt to mistake both point and manner in the verses opening the fifth poem of Ash-Wednesday, which to many seem mere word-play at best, jibberish at worst.

The striking, exacting passage in the fifth poem of Ash-Wednesday, unlike in tone and texture anything elsewhere in the poems, differs, in fact, from anything Eliot had written heretofore, and anticipates his manner in the later and great essay-poem Four Quartets. As we saw earlier, it is a theology of the word that becomes a theology of the Word. “The Word” may, in this noisy world, be “unheard,” and being “unheard” may “Still” be seen and read, appearing, then, “without a word” “within / The world and for [that] world.” In all this, silence becomes an unexpected and unfamiliar virtue, pregnant with meaning and significance: it does not translate as absence, quite the contrary. (There is, too, the “necessarye coniunction” both beginning and ending the ante-penultimate verse here (“And the light shone in darkness and”), a strategy that Eliot also employs in Four Quartets, as we have observed.)
As rich and resonant as it actually is, this passage acquires even greater meaning and significance when read in comparison with the succeeding verses, an obvious comparison and contrast. If the earlier verses at first blush seem merely verbal, these later verses may at first appear welcome for being familiar, simple, and clear. Comparison, though, reveals them to be anything but bland, redundant, trite, and—ironically, given probable initial response to the earlier passage—little other than verbiage: for example, “Where shall the word be found, where will the word / Resound,” “Not on the sea or on the islands, not / On the mainland, in the desert or the rain land”). I will not insult my reader’s intelligence, or try her or his patience, by detailing (or quoting) any more of the woeful versifying here, constructed on inexact rhyming, internal rhyming, vague diction, and unrelieved triticism. Suffice it to say that the voice here is rhyme-happy—ironically so, again, for that voice can neither make solid rhymes nor recognize the rhymes (in the larger, nonverbal sense) that it is the poet’s job to restore. The fourth poem of *Ash-Wednesday* has affirmed, in fact, the need to “Redeem the time” while pinpointing the aim of “restoring / With a new verse the ancient rhyme.” In no sense of “rhyme” does the second passage in the fifth poem succeed—even if it does *appear* to succeed the exacting discourse on and of the Word. The Word, I suggest, is silent in these words, but not absent.

Where will “the Word be found”? *Ash-Wednesday* represents the answer, an answer in keeping with the hints given in “The Hollow Men” and developed here. The later poem focuses on the Virgin Mary as the medium of the Word “within / The world and for the world.” Whether it is “the greatest achievement of Eliot’s poetry,” it is surely, as Barry Spurr has written, “the finest Marian poem, in English, of the twentieth century.”

In pointed contrast with the lack of silence, indeed the over-abundance of noise, in the world, the Virgin is represented throughout *Ash-Wednesday* as silent, for example in the important passage in the fourth poem describing the “silent sister” who is “dressed in white and blue,” who is “Between the yews” and “behind the garden god, / Whose flute is breathless”; she “bent her head, and signed but spoke no word.” She thus appears *between*, that is, mortality and immortality, which yews traditionally symbolize, this critical intercessor and intermediary. That she is depicted as “behind the garden god,” who partakes of some of Her same essential characteristics, points to Her true catholicity, the paradigm for the pattern. She “spoke no word”—while speaking the Word, which “speaks” via metaphor, that is to say, indirectly.
The Virgin is most fully described in the second poem (first published as “Salutation,” an apparent allusion to Beatrice’s greeting of Dante in the *Vita Nuova*, which words, in her “salutation,” incarnate virtue and in so doing proffer a world where blessedness prevails). As the “Lady of silences,” She is to be distinguished from the “Lady” earlier in this second poem, who, though, represents the great effectiveness of the Virgin as exemplar and intermediary—the “Lady” a precursor of the “Lady of silences,” like Incarnation in relation to the Incarnation. The shortness and compactness of the verses recall “The Hollow Men,” perhaps deliberately: “Lady of silences / Calm and distressed / Torn and most whole…” Nowhere in Eliot’s poetry, in any case, does that “necessarye coinunction” appear *and* function more significantly: the “impossible union” as paradox, the paradigmatic instance of which is the Son Whom Mary bore, “Blessed sister, holy mother.” She is as well the Rose toward Whom “The Hollow Men” looked hopefully; here, that *one* has blossomed into a full garden, Eliot’s capitalizations leaving no doubt as to the doctrinal weight She bears or the effects She promises (for example, “Grace to the Mother / For the Garden / Where all love ends”). I am tempted to say that the poet need not say it again, or to say more.

But of course, he does—because he has to, given our capacity for only *half*-understanding alongside the incapacity for hearing the Truth. That Truth appears in and as the Virgin and Her efforts, speaking the Word in silence, as She gave Birth to the Word by receiving—that is, accepting—the Word. Speaking no word, She effectively makes “the fountain” spring up and “the bird” sing down. This effectiveness amounts to a “token of the word unheard, unspoken.” Not to be minimized is the Virgin’s consummate role in interceding with the Father on our behalf. These verses follow immediately the representation of the sad, bathetic lyrical response to the word’s ineffectiveness amidst prevailing noise, and, picking up words and phrases from there, serve as pointed response, returning the reader to this poem’s opening theological excursus and, in effect, fulfilling it: will She, “veiled,” pray for “Those who walk in darkness, who chose thee and oppose thee, / Those who are torn on the horn between reason and season, between time and time, between / Hour and / hour, word and word, power and power, those who wait / In darkness?” The earnestness with which the question is laden appears in the repeated beginning of the continuing concern: “Will the veiled sister pray / For children at the gate / Who will not go away and cannot pray: / Pray for those who chose and oppose”? The question is as urgent as poignant;
that Eliot frames a question at this point surely bears significance, to which the last poem will respond. Meanwhile, in the fifth poem, the question is repeated, albeit with tonal difference: “Will the veiled sister between the slender / Yew trees pray for those who offend her / And are terrified and cannot surrender / And affirm before the world and deny between the rocks”? The question, at the last, appears in the concrete and particular circumstances that “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” The Waste Land, and “The Hollow Men” introduced: “The desert in the garden the garden in the desert / Of drouth, spitting from the mouth the withered apple-seed.” The wastelanders did not, and could not, see “The desert in the garden in the desert,” aware of each place, like the speaker in the first poem of Ash-Wednesday, as unattended by its apparent opposite (as well as that other Garden of dire consequence).

The final poem of Ash-Wednesday rhymes with “The Hollow Men” and affirms the presence and the work of the Word here, in the world, whether or not there be “eyes” or even the Virgin Herself (Who will, however, reappear in the closing verse paragraph). Appropriately, the verses become beautiful, among the most beautiful in all of Eliot’s poetry, as he represents humankind as “in-between,” pulled toward both immanence and transcendence. Here, “in this brief transit,” where “dreams cross” (“The dreamcrossed twilight between birth and dying,” where we “waver . . . between the profit and the loss”), a sighting opens up and out, prefaced, first, by the speaker’s “Bless me father” and followed by the admission that he does “not wish to wish these things.” Still, they appear, and they rain beauty: “From the wide window towards the granite shore / The white sails still fly seaward, seaward flying / Unbroken wings.” Following extra white space, the poem continues, with the acknowledgment that the human heart, like the lilac and the “sea voices” are “lost.” The “spirit” is “weak,” and it “quickens to rebel,” attracted and drawn to that which matches its condition, “the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell”; the spirit also “Quickens to recover / The cry of quail and the whirling plover.” The eye that thus sees is blind, to be sure, but/and it “creates / The empty forms between the ivory gates / And smell renews the salt savour of the sandy earth.”

The “sails” are now possessed of “wings,” and they are “unbroken.” And the reader will soon be prayed, not to put on wings (like Stephen Dedalus), but instead to “sit still / Even among these rocks, / Our peace in His will,” a response unknown to the wastelanders. But the reader, also “lost” of course, may rejoice.
These verses at poems’ end are critical to a right, responsible understanding of Eliot’s thinking and his art. They are often mistaken as representing a distraction, even a falsehood, from which the poet is said to urge his readers to turn. But in fact, Eliot urges no turning away from the world, but if anything a turning toward it, recognizing it for what it means, which is precisely its service as means, an “attended” manifestation of the unspoken Word. The answer to our dilemma as “in-between” creatures lies not in either/or choice but in the both/and represented in “impossible union,” “necessary coniunction,” and the full understanding of Incarnation.

Notes

5 Ibid., 155.
8 Ibid., 48.
On Turning and Not-Turning: *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems* and *A Song for Simeon*

**Abstract:** *Ash-Wednesday* places special burdens on the reader, developing strategies begun in earlier poems and moving toward fulfillment of efforts and effects, requiring mindfulness of the poems’ disparate voices and their falsehoods. Rather than turn from the world, Eliot dramatizes the Christian call to turn toward the “Lady of silences,” thence the world: the world redeemed via the Incarnation entails God’s working in, through, and by means that include falsehoods and evil. To *Ash-Wednesday*, the Ariel poem *A Song for Simeon* (1928) stands as counterpoint, being for the aged Jew who speaks the poem and in whom the effects of the Incarnation are dramatized. Eliot turns an apparent spiritual autobiography into a dramatic mirror in which Simeon may see himself.

I “Sovegna vos”: voices and the reader

To a degree largely unrecognized, Eliot seeks in *Ash-Wednesday* to bring his reader into the poems, have him or her participate actively in its articulation of meaning and significance. The poems represent no “clinical” effort, no distanced or objective or impersonal effort; the goal is, in every sense, to affect—as the Magus has been affected in the first Ariel poem by the Incarnation. This effort involves, and in fact begins with, the reader’s having, in the first editions of *Ash-Wednesday*, to turn page after page after page before encountering, and in order to encounter, the verses themselves: front free endpaper, a blank page, another blank, the half-title, the title page, the dedication “To My Wife,” and the half-title again. The effort brings the reader in while both hinting at the necessity of physical effort and material necessity and, at the same time, alerting us to the matter of turning, which is essential to the titular day in the Christian calendar, perhaps a token of the poems’ being as a “conversion” piece (Eliot’s first long poem after joining the Church of England and formally embracing “anglo-catholicism”), and at the beginning, end, and heart of *Ash-Wednesday’s* poetic and thematic interests. The reader is called upon to do much more, of course, and that includes essentially replicating the poems’ own motional efforts by attending to (different) voices, facing difficulty, encountering falsehood and being disabused of it, discovering the presence and operations of essential pattern. “Sovegna vos,” *Ash-Wednesday* says at one point, speaking in Provencal and evidently addressing the reader directly and with concern and care: Be mindful.¹

*Ash-Wednesday* begins in a sort of stuttering voice, the “I” present but not exactly accounted for. We do not know, at this point, whether the “I” is to be identified with the poet, as in Romantic poems, or with a dramatic figure like J. Alfred Prufrock. The “I” fades in importance to the words, the twice-stated “turn,” the thrice-stated “hope” and “Because,” a conjunction though not a coordinate conjunction. The words gain in importance when we arrive at the sixth and last of the poems and discover a beginning that rhymes with the first verses, identical to them, in fact, except for that pesky conjunction, which becomes “Although.” The reader is thus alerted to the play of similarity and difference and is therefore being engaged in acts of distinguishing and comparing. The differences in conjunction are subtle but significant: “Although” suggests an understanding absent in the facticity present in the first “speech.”

¹ DOI: 10.1057/9781137444462.0006
The question of who is speaking remains unanswered, although words themselves have asserted their prominence.

“Sovegna vos.”

The first three verse paragraphs in the opening poem, originally published separately and then titled in Provencal “Perch’io Non Spero” (from the ballata of Guido Cavalcanti, another of friend Pound’s favorites), begin with the conjunction “Because,” as does the fifth paragraph. The voice soon sounds resigned to this lack of hope, no longer “Desiring this man’s gift and that man’s scope.” Thus “he” says [I will henceforth, for sake of convenience only, so refer to the “speaker”], “I no longer strive to strive towards such things.” And, he adds, there is no reason, really, to “mourn / The vanished power of the usual reign.” In other words, no longer turning, he has become his own still point. And he seems increasingly proud that things are, indeed, as they are.

The second verse paragraph shows an accentuation of the voice’s condition, “turning” having modulated into questions of “knowing”: “Because I do not hope to know again.” He will not, he says resignedly, “know again / The infirm glory of the positive hour.” Indeed, he says he does not now “think,” and knows, further, that he “shall not know / The one veritable transitory power.” What that is, is not identified. In the last verses of the paragraph, further modulation occurs as “thinks” turns into the rhyming “drink”: “Because I cannot drink / There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is nothing again.” This last assertion contrasts with “positive hour,” further adding to our suspicions regarding the speaker. If, as many readers have (falsely) reckoned, the speaker is somehow growing into an asceticism allegedly required of the Christian religion to which the poet recently turned, the resignation here represented as demoralizing and debilitating regret can hardly be welcomed by the reader though embraced by the speaker.

The third verse paragraph cinches the case. It begins with the speaker declaring that he knows that “there is always time,” furthermore that “place is always and only place” and, still more, that “what is actual is actual only for one time / And only for one place.” In truth, this is a daring, as well as false, statement, at least according to Christian reckoning. Whether a reader—even a Christian reader—would be alert to the falsehood is, I think, open to question at this point. A reader who knows the later Four Quartets would, however, know better, and should readily see the speaker’s falsehood. The Incarnation means that every moment, every place, is attended—just as each person is intersected, represented,
for example, in the “familiar compound ghost” of “Little Gidding.” Another time “attends” every moment, another place every place: “the intersection of the timeless moment / Is England and nowhere. Never and always.” Despite, then, the confident (if resigned) assertion of the first speaker in *Ash-Wednesday*, there is time and, place and.

The speaker in *Ash-Wednesday* claims that this anti-Incarnational condition is fine; in fact, he says, “I rejoice that things are as they are.” And why not? It is so much easier not to have to sort through complications and untie knots, in going straight through, without having to worry about intersections, at which you have to stop—and think, and drink—as well as often to yield, certainly to exercise judgment and make decisions. Renouncing, though, “the blessed face” (identified later in the poems with the Virgin) and “the voice” (perhaps that of the “Lady,” who resembles Mary), the speaker goes on to say that he rejoices precisely as a consequence of not hoping “to turn again.” He rejoices, he finally acknowledges, because of “having to construct something / Upon which to rejoice.” As we suspected earlier, the speaker is now in the business of engendering, spider-like, the bases of his understanding solely out of himself, with no outside help wanted or needed. He is, in the final analysis, the antithesis, as it were, to the poems’ thesis.

Will Eliot’s reader—whether or not Christian—be able to see through the speaker and his falsehoods? He or she may not know at this early point in *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems*, linked but in so many ways not an identity; the reader may, then, not be expecting to turn from the speaker. It may well be that that capacity comes only at the end—not the end of the poems, at that, but the end of Eliot’s poetic writing, in *Four Quartets*. As he says there, in “Little Gidding”: “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” (italics added). Eliot’s poetry may, thus, follow the pattern he seeks precisely to describe.

End-ing does indeed become an and-ing.

But the voice early on in *Ash-Wednesday* by no means lacks insight and understanding, even though it is partial (perhaps only “half”-right). In fact, he then proceeds to “pray to God” for mercy “upon us.” (Interestingly, nowhere else in *Ash-Wednesday* is prayer addressed directly to God, but rather through the mediation and intercessions of the Virgin Mary.) The speaker immediately, and suspiciously, turns from the plural to the singular, now praying to “forget / These matters that with myself I too much discuss / Too much explain,” complicating his earlier statement.
that he does not “know.” He next repeats his opening refrain and adds, “Let these words answer / For what is done, not to be done again / May the judgement not be too heavy upon us,” returning to the plural. I find no acknowledgment, or even hint, of remorse or repentance, only the apparent desire not to do again whatever ill and wrong he has before committed. Moreover, the speaker signals that it is by his “words” alone that he expects to be judged, that may, in fact, serve to justify him: his “words” will “answer” for both past and future, will perhaps atone for them.

And yet—this unreliable speaker, whose turns can be dizzying despite his claim not to turn at all, then utters what is apparently another prayer, one that will figure prominently at poems’ end as a signal thematic and doctrinal statement: “Teach us to care and not to care / Teach us to sit still.” In a very real sense, the speaker sits still, occupying a still point, or at least he thinks he does. It is, in any case, whatever it is, one he has had “to construct.” At poems’ end, we encounter these same words again, being asked thereby to compare as well as to be mindful; we will then see them in a new and quite different light, a light not at all of our construction.

The second poem in Ash-Wednesday is a turning from the first in appearance, poetic texture, and sound of voice. The voice-meaning-speaker may be the same as in the first poem, but the discourse is very different (even different from “itself,” since the long second verse paragraph, of which each line is made of but two feet, contrasts vividly with the earlier address to the “Lady” with its account of “three white leopards” that have “dissembled” the voice’s body). Possibly, though, the separations dramatized here are a consequence of the speaking voice’s various renunciations in the first poem, his turn from turning; in that case, he might be said to have misunderstood what was asked of him in “turning.” Things have seemed to turn away from him. In due course, we will return to the scene of the “dissembled” body and the following, extended description, not of the “Lady,” but of the “Lady of silences” as “impossible union” of apparent opposites.

The “I” of the first poem may or may not appear in the third poem, which is more like the first, in any case, than it is the second. Here the “I” is represented as being on a turning stair, on which he observes “The same shape”—whatever that is—twisting, turning, struggling with “the devil of the stairs who wears / The deceitful face of hope and despair.” The scene on the stairs is horrible in appearance, in marked contrast
with the pastoral scene labeled as “distraction” that opens to the sight of the “I” “At the first turning of the third stair.” Perhaps because the “I” is attracted, he repeats, “Lord, I am not worthy,” a promising occurrence. It is very nearly vitiated, however, by the ensuing request, “but speak the word only.” Especially in the context of these poems, that request lacks humility, seems rather to be importuning, as it seeks—desires and needs—that words be spoken. In *Ash-Wednesday*, though, “the Word within / The world and for the world” speaks “without a word.” The speaking voice does not understand, subscribing to or being a victim of one falsehood after another. Still, the turning that he observes, both of the figures locked in combat and of the place and situation in which they find themselves, is a joining that helps to give the lie to the speaker’s “way” of renunciation and self-construction apparent in the opening poem.

The “I” that we have been observing, as he observed, now virtually disappears. The fourth poem, in an altogether different register (one more or less followed in the remaining poems), is a joining together of a Lancelot Andrewes-inspired theology of the Word, followed by a pathetic and bathetic lyrical attempt lamenting the pervasive noise that makes hearing “the word” nearly impossible. This poem moves on to query whether “the veiled sister” (i.e., the Blessed Virgin) will Herself pray for all of us so much in need of outside help. Described in the second poem in no uncertain terms (as an “and-ing”), She now emerges as our “necessarie” *between*, intervening on our behalf who are pointedly represented as ourselves being variously “between.”

The sixth and final poem brings *Ash-Wednesday* not so much to a close as to a beginning. It returns to the first poem, but with a difference, in replacing “Because” of the opening three verses with “Although.” With its last line—“*And* let my cry come unto Thee”—it emphasizes the combinatory, participatory, and continuing texture of the whole effort while embodying a voice’s (now-different) prayer that his prayer somehow “come unto Thee.” Humility thus replaces demand, and recognition of the need for mediation replaces self-reliance, self-construction, and a desire for the direct and the immediate. The matter of “turning” comes to a head in this poem (which has caused so many readers to fall into the same trap of falsehood that grips the speaker in the first poem).

The matter is bigger, and other, than a single voice, personage, or character. Consistently, and purposefully, *Ash-Wednesday* has turned away from the speaker and his falsehood, in the second three poems, to the
Virgin, the Word, and now “the world.” The matter concerns one’s relation to the world, especially if committed to the Word. The world bears the power to distract, as we have seen, but, in the final poem, we find both its attractions and the indisputable fact that things of this world are “lost.” The pull is in two contrary directions at once—the stairs go both up and down. The poem thus directly figures the human condition as tensional.

The picture painted here by a voice invisible is almost universally said to be one of the most beautiful and appealing in all of Eliot’s verse. This “is the time of tension between dying and birth,” the poem says (not an “I” says it, note) after the following account. In addition to a rhyming return to “The Hollow Men,” the recurrence and prominence of the preposition “between” achieves importance as does the coordinate conjunction opening three lines of the passage, at which we looked in the previous chapter. The fourth verse here carries special poignancy and power: beginning with a request of an intermediary (“Bless me father”) and proceeding to capture the contrary and simultaneous pull that may be, in effect, a turning and a not-turning: I do not wish to wish these worldly things, which are themselves “lost,” as I am, but yet I do so. “Gerontion” had made the point, that is, the proper response, perfectly: “How should I use them for your closer contact?”

The world and the Word, which is within and for the world.

Rather than turn from the world, as has so often been many supposed, Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems turns us back toward the world and at the same time shows us the pattern or still point within the world that is the Word from outside it now intersecting with it since the Incarnation; the moment now “attended” as a consequence of the Word taking on human flesh in the Person of Christ Jesus, the Son of God and of the Virgin Mary, our “Blessed sister” and “holy mother.”

The dramatized and embodied necessity is that prayed for at poems’ end: both the prayer “not to be separated” and that to learn to “care and not to care.” That they are one and the same helps to make and to cement the point.

The conjunction means that we do both, whether or not at the same time: care and not care. But that leaves matters still open and unclear. In fact, at least three distinct readings appear possible. Of course, it could be simply that Eliot has in mind the necessity to “be mindful” about what one chooses, caring about this, not-caring about that. On the Incarnational model, it may be that caring and not-caring should
occur in the same moment, rather than be separated. A third possibility is that caring and not-caring should both be present regarding a “thing,” although not necessarily occurring in the same moment; strangely enough, in that case, emphasis would, in Incarnational fashion, fall on the present, now, not-caring figuring as following caring and future-directed. I rather suspect, after squeezing and squeezing Eliot’s words and meditating long and hard on them, that not-caring should, in his understanding, intersect with caring, perhaps even purifying it (but certainly not purging it).

Let us return, a last time, to the possibility of caring and not-caring at the same time. At first blush, it seems impossible to care and not to care at once. And yet…Unless, of course, Eliot means some sort of Hegelian synthesizing, such that thesis and antithesis combine to produce a third, medium-like, which transcends the two blended “figures.” But, contrary to Heraclitus, the way up is not the way down. And God does not remain, or become again, a merely transcendent figure in taking on human flesh. In Christ Jesus, God is fully divine and fully human, at the same time.

So, then, how to care and not to care, at once? “Little Gidding” says that memory’s use is “For liberation—not less of love but expanding / Of love beyond desire, and so liberation / From the future as well as the past.” This expanding of love “beyond desire” is clearly related to, and perhaps clarifies, the matter of caring and not-caring.

As noted, the untrustworthy speaker in the first poem of Ash-Wednesday prays, “Teach us to care and not to care.” Under the influence of some sort of Eastern asceticism, he cannot be expected to mean by the identical wording what we read at the end of the sixth and final poem. A sticking-point may well be that copula, the coordinate conjunction. From the vantage-point of Four Quartets, we understand the significance of the “necessary coniunction” and of the Incarnational pattern suggested by it. That pattern, though, while a matter of universal, rational structure, (yet) requires, for apprehension, says “The Dry Salvages,” the efforts of “a saint”: “something given / And taken, in a lifetime’s death in love, / Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.” The mystery of caring and not-caring participates in the larger mystery that is the Incarnation—Eliot does not recur to it in Four Quartets. It may well be that such mysteries lie beyond the capacity of language to represent. And, thinking of Eliot’s account of the “dissociation” of thinking and feeling that, he says, set in the seventeenth century and continues, I suggest that we may be able to feel the possibility, even the need, of caring.
and not-caring at the same time—if that is, indeed, what the conjunction “and” conveys. There is no doubt that, trying to put Eliot’s words in other words, trying to clarify and elucidate, we find our words inevitably slipping and sliding and carrying our thinking off the mark—a humbling recognition, if nothing more.

But we keep on trying (as Eliot knew we would). One thing is certain: meditational or devotional reading is required, understood as that engagement of the whole person that Eliot once described as “the most difficult” of all ways of approaching texts. That entails staying longer with the words than is usual, even in close reading; you do not, then, jump (too quickly) to meaning, or leave the words behind. Such reading incarnates, it is surely safe to say, caring.

Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems begins, as noted, with “Because” and ends with the milder, humbler “Although,” which signals such complication as the reader is called upon to negotiate, the poems speaking through him or her (too) but only if, like Bishop Andrewes in Eliot’s formulation of him writing-as-reading, he or she opens up completely to the poems, “absorbed” in them and (still) responding.

II Further consequences of the “New Dispensation”: A Song for Simeon and “Nunc Dimittis”

The second of Eliot’s Ariel poems, A Song for Simeon, was published on September 14, 1928. Simeon is a devout Jew, age 80, who lived in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus’s birth. We read of him in Luke 2:29–32, where we learn that Simeon had been told by the Holy Ghost that he would not meet with death before he had seen Christ Jesus. The Holy Ghost then guides Simeon to the Temple, where the Infant Jesus is being presented. With the Infant in his arms, Simeon sings what is, in Latin, the “Nunc dimittis.” Simeon then declares that he has seen God’s salvation.

Simeon’s song is one of the three great Canticles of the New Testament, another being the Magnificat, that is, the Canticle of Mary. In the Book of Common Prayer, the Magnificat and the “Nunc dimittis” are sung at Evening Prayer, a (necessary) pair. Eliot’s “song” for Simeon stands as counterpoint to Ash-Wednesday and, in a related but different way, Journey of the Magi.

And as in Journey of the Magi, so in A Song for Simeon, the speaker is not a lyric voice but a dramatic one, whose words must be carefully read.
Neither poem is quite a dramatic monologue, like “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”: there is neither an external auditor, nor a specific occasion for the speaking. Moreover, there stands, enigmatically, the preposition “for” where we normally expect “of.” In what sense this “song” is for Simeon, rather than “of” (that is, “by” him), continues to challenge me. I keep on interrogating the poem (which might be part of Old Possum’s purpose).

In T.S. Eliot’s Ariel Poems, John H. Timmerman surmises that the preposition “for” in the title of the poem marks “the poet, the singer, enter[ing] a history from his own cultural position, participating in that song but adapting it to his particular history.” The point is suggestive. There can be little doubt that Eliot’s choice of “for” matters: as Timmerman puts it, “By the twist of a word, Eliot makes us aware of narrative and historical distances.” There can be little doubt, either, that Old Possum is up to something different from a medium-like, or catalyst’s, mere reenactment of a song. Perhaps the larger question concerns how to read the voice that speaks here, that 80-year-old respected Jewish figure, encountering and beginning to struggle, like the Magi, with the “new dispensation.” He seems, at once, Job-like and reminiscent of the Prodigal Son.

Simeon’s first word—“Lord”—may be an address to the Word—the last in the first line is “and”—but it might be an interjection, not so much bearing a profane tinge as being a familiar, informal expression that may be taking the Lord’s name in vain. That may, however, be over-reaching. Simeon’s last word is “salvation,” the adjective preceding it “thy,” although “my” might have been expected. Between the first word and last lies a minefield of defensiveness, lament, fear, prediction, and so much more. The “salvation” he claims to have seen, in fact, is precisely not one for him, or so he imagines; it is “thy salvation,” the one promised by the Word with all its difficulties, impending pain, and foreseen suffering. The Magi saw in the Birth in the manger “Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.” Simeon says—his last words—that he has “seen thy salvation.” Together, Journey of the Magi and A Song for Simeon probe and explore the meaning and effects of the Infant’s birth, focusing on salvation and its relation to Death. Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems dramatizes the affected penitent’s progress toward assent—and ascent—to and acceptance of the indirect Way by Which the new Word is to be approached and understood.

At this point, the reader—or at least I do—returns to the tiny preposition “for” in the title, never far from the exegete’s mind. I think about
Eliot's growing awareness of the necessity of critical voice—unavailable to Prufrock, present to Eliot himself in the early days through his friend Pound, as acknowledged in his (later) dedication of The Waste Land, and a major theme of “The Hollow Men”: there, figures remain “Sightless, unless” outside help intervenes. I then begin to appreciate the subtle but effective way Eliot is working via his title A Song for Simeon. His “character” sings his song, to be sure, but with even less self-consciousness and awareness than does Prufrock. By substituting “for” for the expected “of,” Eliot turns an exercise in spiritual autobiography into a poem more resembling Browning’s dramatic monologues, in which a speaker reveals—to the reader—far more and other than he intended. In Simeon’s case, the mirror is being held up to himself for him to see himself as he did not—or could not—in speaking his words.

The song Eliot has written for Simeon, the speaker for these verses that both reveal him in dramatic fashion and serve to honor or celebrate him in ironic (if not satirical) fashion, begins, not at all unusually for Eliot, with a seasonal setting that complicates things. There is no intersection of time and timelessness here or hinted at, no anticipation of another dimension such as “Little Gidding” represents as “maytime” (in pointed contrast with “May”). Rather, the “Roman hyacinths” are blooming but indoors, for winter snow lies on the hills outside: “The stubborn season has made stand.” The line seems especially charged: the “stubborn season” is winter, but the spring awaited and anticipated—as the Jews did their Saviour—turns out to be contrary to expectation (like “for” instead “of”). It is “Hard and bitter agony.” Meanwhile, the aged Simeon merely awaits, not spring, but death, his life, he says, in a modified triticism, “light,” like a feather on the hand, “waiting for the death wind,” the wind “that chills towards the dead land.”

Simeon opens the next two verse paragraphs with a request, presumably of the “Lord” addressed in the poem’s first word, to “Grant us thy peace.” In Lancelot Andrewes’s Easter sermon of 1609 the word “peace” essentially means “joining.” In context, Simeon’s words raise questions: the peace, it is implied, comes from God but (only) by means of human request, the opposite of the “Pax vobis” that Bishop Andrewes explicates. At the same time, there seems implied here a sense that that granted peace will relieve us of the necessity—as Ash-Wednesday puts it—to understand that “Our peace [resides] in His will.”

The remainder of the second paragraph in A Song for Simeon seems to confirm our suspicions. For the aged Jew now engages in a series of
reflections cum lamentation, stressing his moral and social rectitude and raising a further question about his motives for those upright actions. “I have,” he says, “walked many years in this city, / Kept faith and fast, provided for the poor, / Have given and taken honour and ease;” with the result that no one was ever “rejected [and sent] from my door.” Indeed, Simeon’s focus now turns to what will apparently be the consequence and the result of his right-doing. A question regarding justice is thereby broached, although Simeon does not frame his concern so baldly or boldly. No reader, I surmise, can feel anything but sympathy for Simeon, and for his progeny: who will “remember my house,” where will my children live, “When the time of sorrow is come?” His conclusion clutches at the heart: “They will take to the goat’s path, and the fox’s house, / Fleeing from the foreign faces and the foreign swords.” This is what—all—that a lifetime’s effort in service and self-denial earns, not just for oneself but for others, presumably innocent, who are his heirs? This is what comes in the “new dispensation”? Of course, Simeon is seeing but half the truth, for he has made no commitment to the Lord.

Accordingly, then, he continues in the same vein, lamenting the impending future, with its desolation, pain, and suffering, and petitioning for “the Infant” to grant “consolation” (italics added): “the still unspeaking and unspoken Word.” The tone in which Simeon utters this description is hard to decipher; I infer impatience, along with a careful sneer: “Before the time of cords and lamentation / Grant us thy peace.” Following two more examples of imminent doom, Simeon says this, indulging melodrama, “Let the Infant, the still unspeaking and unspoken Word, / Grant Israel’s consolation / To one who has eighty years and no-tomorrow.” There is no life after death for him, and the (new) time is but one of “decease,” that word itself powerful and final with its accentuation of ceasing to exist: there will, literally, be nothing left, after all one’s efforts.

“According to thy word” is Simeon’s next statement. He may be referring to a promised consolation, but it may just as likely be that he, intentionally or not, is revealing that “thy word” promises desolation and “deceasing”—although, again, Simeon would then be seeing but half the truth.

In this longish final verse paragraph, Simeon—unconsciously—points to the “and-ing” of the new times, of which he apprehends but “half”: “They shall praise Thee and suffer in every generation, / With glory and derision” (italics added). He proceeds with an account that amounts to
his acknowledgment of separation from the new time and the new truth. He repeats, importantly, “Not for me.”

Those who “praise” and “suffer,” earning both “glory” and “derision,” Simeon says, will rise to “Light upon light, mounting the saints’ stair.” They are the (new) saints, among whom he will never count (there may be his own note of derision here, an interpretation bolstered by the words following: there will be for me, he says, no “martyrdom,” no “ecstasy of thought and prayer,” nor “the ultimate vision”). He prays, next, that he receive “thy peace,” and in a parenthesis reflective of the apparent gratuitousness, he says that the Lord Himself will get but a sword through the heart for His service, sacrifice, and denial. It is a highly charged irony. Beside the Lord thus giving His life, Simeon’s immediately following words are especially revealing: not merely is he thinking of his own death and no more the deaths of others but of “those after me,” generally considered, about whom he shows little compassion. His words contrast explicitly with the Messiah’s sacrifice, His Ultimate Concern and that of His Father in Heaven.

Simeon’s words indeed reveal him. Consider these: “I am tired with my own life and the lives of those after me. / I am dying in my own death and the deaths of those after me.” The repetition but for one word at the end of each of these points to the joining of the two, different words: one “lives,” the other the apparent opposite “deaths.” At the beginning of those two verses, something similar yet significantly different transpires: here, the words are similar, emphasis again falling on “life” and its apparent opposite. In addition, the prepositions differ—“with” in the first sentence, “in” in the second. More important, the first has “tired with my own life;” the second “dying in my own death” (italics added). Simeon thus says that he is tired of his life, tired (with) living. At the same time, “dying in my own death” evidently means that he is dying while (supposedly) living, in part perhaps because he is so consumed with death that he is (only) dying; moreover, “dying in my own death” may also mean that dying and living are, nevertheless, separated for him: he shows, that is, no capacity for understanding that and how living and death might (productively) be joined. Four Quartets says, in the fifth section of “Burnt Norton,” while discussing pattern, words, and meaning that “that which is only living / Can only die.” It thus offers the alternative to Simeon’s point of view, correcting the “falsehood” that rules and consumes him.

Simeon is not a bad man, neither in his song nor in Eliot’s dramatic revelation of and to him, in neither his own understanding of himself,
nor in the mirror that the poem holds up to his song. He is mistaken, to be sure, only partially understanding the Word in its complexity, paradoxical nature, and “impossible union” of the apparent opposites that continue to plague Simeon and the old dispensation. He worries too much about death, his death, that is, but that is a consequence of his half-understanding. The poem holds up, neither to him nor to us, any real moral complicity or ill done to others.

When, at poem’s very end, Simeon asks, “Let thy servant depart, / Having seen thy salvation,” his word “depart” links up with the root meaning of “decease,” accentuating the acknowledgment that he has seen the “salvation” promised by and in the Lord and that it will not be his: departing, he will separate from this world and from any possibility of continuing to “exist” in another dimension. Simeon evidently finds a sense of “consolation,” however strange it may appear, in that departing; if he will not know “thy salvation,” he will avoid “the time of sorrow” and of “cords and scourges and lamentation” as well as “the stations of the mountain of desolation.” He may not know glory, but he will also not know suffering.

Notes

3  The reference is to Jonathan Swift’s depiction of Ancients and Moderns in *The Battle of the Books* (1704).
5  Ibid.
5

The Letter, the Body, and the Spirit: *Animula* and *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems*

Abstract: The first (of two) verse paragraphs of Animula (1930) is an impersonal essay, ending with the statement that living begins after the viaticum (the sacrament given to the dying). Accordingly, the second paragraph, differently, is directed, in prayer, toward others. It treats the “simple” soul, the “growing” soul, and again the “simple” soul now misshapen and reduced by time and unable to “fare forward.” In time, the soul turns away from the world, separated from God and in Hell. Just such separation, including of body and spirit and of simplicity and difficulty, Ash-Wednesday confronts. Its six poems ultimately emerge as united in and by their difference, the Light shining “in darkness.”

I  Viaticum: “Living first in the silence” afterwards

A Song for Simeon may be a dramatic monologue, but Animula, published on October 9, 1929, the poet’s last book before Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems, is unusual among Eliot’s Ariel poems in being an essay, indeed a familiar essay shorn of the personal. As an essay in verse, it anticipates the longer, much more complex, and greater essay-poem Four Quartets. As an impersonal essay, Animula perhaps calls to mind such prose pieces as “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

Animula is impersonal until we reach its second, and last, verse paragraph, which consists solely of a series of requests: they all begin, “Pray…. ” But there is no clear speaker praying “himself,” nor is there indication of an intercessor—like the Blessed Virgin—being invoked to do so on humankind’s behalf. The paragraph ends with this verse: “Pray for us now and at the hour of our birth.” Animula thus recalls and returns us to the matter treated in its predecessors Journey of the Magi and A Song for Simeon: our birth begins our journey to death, a biological fact that Eliot has been probing theologically in the Ariel poems.

A major, if not fundamental and nearly overwhelming, question concerns just the turn I have noted from the very long first verse paragraph to the second. A resonant and powerful suggestion lies in the last verse of the opening paragraph: “Living first in the silence after the viaticum.” The viaticum is the sacrament of communion given to the dying, his or her last sacrament, in fact. The term is from the Latin, meaning “way,” and also refers to money or other provisions made for a journey, as well as to the bonus money sometimes paid to Roman soldiers or sailors. “Viaticum” thus signifies preparation and sustenance made for a journey.

We immediately notice the by-now-familiar collocation of living and death, treated in other Ariel poems and in Ash-Wednesday, in the latter of which, as we have also seen, silence figures prominently. Here in Animula, “Living” comes first in the line, “viaticum” at the end, the no doubt natural order of things. But Eliot writes that living begins in that silence after the viaticum. This part of the Last Rites consists of an act involving both the letter of the Word, spoken by the priest, and the Eucharist as the embodiment of the Word, given to the dying. The Word, then, spoken and silent, gives life to the spirit at the intersection of death with life. The suggestion seems inescapable: the spirit begins to live at this point, not earlier. In other words, thanks to the mediation
and intercession of the priest, communion, and the Word, the spirit is released: in the sense both of being sent on its “way” and coming to live. Before that point, it has been held captive. It is not, though, set free from a body thus “dissembled” or now merely transcended; instead, the person is purified, his or her full and total being transformed and transfigured. This is structurally parallel to what Eliot describes in “Little Gidding” as the “expanding / Of Love beyond desire.” In a sense, the body has come “inside” the spirit, or soul, and in this way begins, at last and first, to live.

And this “act” itself parallels what Eliot describes in Ash-Wednesday as a redeemed writing, which “restor[es] / With a new verse the ancient rhyme.” The soul, Animula says and repeats, “comes from God.” Death “restores” it, then, in a new form, wherein the soul is embodied and at the same time purified and released from its earthly body. The spirit is born with the Word at death and (thus) “restored” to God, in a new form that (yet) is the old “rhyme”; it is, essentially new in assuming a new form.

The poem then enacts the points made syntactically and grammatically by literalizing and materializing them: a blank space simulates the silence that comes after the viaticum, and the following verse paragraph, with its marked differences in tone and texture as well as voice, represents the change to “living.” The urge to pray signals a new body, as it were, for the soul; it is no longer “Irresolute and selfish,” nor “lame” and “Unable to move forward or retreat.” It is now other-directed, its concerns for diverse and various strangers: Guiterriez, Boudin, Floret, “For this one who made a great fortune, / For that who”—pointedly—“went his own way.”

The last verse apparently refers to our familiarly understood birth, rather than that following the viaticum: “Pray for us now and at the hour of our birth.” The “us” here, perhaps suggesting that the newly born spirit requires prayer (although one always is in need) points to the changing soul’s communion with, rather than separation from, universal and common humanity.

Animula repeats, that is, mirrors, the described action, the verses, with their “ancient rhyme,” that is, the Incarnational pattern of “and-ing” and “impossible union” (which is what “rhyme” means) assuming the form of the essay. Thereby, this Ariel poem prepares the way for Four Quartets.

Like Journey of the Magi, Animula opens with an unidentified quotation, consisting of but one verse: “‘Issues from the hand of God, the simple
soul.’” As is well established, the line derives from Dante’s Purgatorio (16:85–88), which Eliot cites in his Dante,3 written while he was working on these poems and also includes in his essay on Sir John Davies (1926). The unusual grammatical inversion of the sentence, entirely Eliot’s, signals that the poet is freely adapting and modifying the borrowed words for his own artistic purposes. In fact, the quotation opening Animula raises the question, as do the other Ariel poems we have considered, of use. It does still more, for, coming from outside the observing voice that speaks the poem, belonging to another and acknowledged as such, it anticipates the poem’s later turn outward, with prayer for others.

The paragraph that includes and follows the quotation is made of four long sentences, and treats, in chronological order, the “simple,” the “growing,” and the “simple” soul again, this time said to derive from “the hands of time.” In the first treatment, the soul, deriving from “the hand of God” (in Dante’s formulation) arrives—having come this “way”—at “a flat world” full of movement and action, poetically rendered by the tumbling proliferation of gerunds, including “changing,” “Moving,” “Rising or falling,” “grasping,” “Advancing,” “retreating.” These acts do not so much accumulate—certainly they are not amalgamated—as exist as different versions of the same unsuccessful effort, linked by “or” instead of “and.” This world being “flat,” nothing makes much difference, the soul indiscriminately “taking pleasure / In the fragrant brilliance of the Christmas tree,” “in the wind, the sunlight and the sea,” “the sunlit pattern on the floor / And running stags around a silver tray,” content, indeed, with “playing-cards and kings and queens, / What the fairies do and what the servants say.” As a result of not distinguishing, the soul “Confounds the actual and the fanciful.”

The “growing soul,” on the other hand, bears a “heavy burden,” which “Perplexes and offends more, day by day; / Week by week, offends and perplexes more.” Daily perplexing and offending turns into weekly offending and perplexing. This results from the “imperatives of ‘is and seems’ / And may and may not, desire and control.” Distinctions are at once made, required, and imposed. The further consequence is that the growing soul finds itself essentially vegetating amidst the “pain of living” and the “drug of dreams.” And so, paradoxically, “and” replaces “or,” the soul not really choosing, or perhaps being able to choose, though it increasingly exists in a world of distinctions. The soul, now, is no longer described as growing but again as “small,” relegated to no more knowledge, and less understanding, than that of the Encyclopedia Britannica.
The final sentence of the paragraph begins with a variation of the opening quotation, requiring the reader’s distinguishing: “Issues from the hand of time the simple soul.” Time shrinks the soul, reducing it, rendering it “lame,” but also “selfish” as well as impotent. It is more pathetic than, while reminiscent of, Prufrock and the “hollow men,” unable to move in any direction, let alone “fare forward,” indeed fearful of “the warm reality,” even of “the offered good.” It cannot but deny “the importunity of the blood,” a thing like the voice we hear in the first poem of *Ash-Wednesday* and like the pictured result of the denial and loss of the senses in “Gerontion.” So fearful, incapacitated, and separated from the senses, the body, and the physical world is it that the “small soul” is a “Shadow of its own shadows, spectre in its own gloom.” More than the situation detailed in “The Hollow Men,” where “the Shadow” is said “to fall between,” in *Animula*, the shadow has come *within*, eating away the “small soul.” As the body goes, so goes the spirit.

It is thus misleading, reductive, and but half-truth to conclude, as B.C. Southam does in his often trenchant and helpful discussion, that Eliot embraces and advocates “the idea of living on, spiritually; after the last sacrament” (italics added). To be sure, the etymology of *viaticum* suggests the making or having of provisions for a journey, and the journey Eliot has in mind is not the familiar, merely physical one taken by the Magi, for example. But to say that Eliot is proposing (simply) a “spiritual” afterlife misses the point of the poem and of his whole understanding of the Incarnation manifested in the poems following his conversion. The spirit is not to be separated from the body, the body from the spirit—or the spirit from the letter.

Let us return another, last time to the final section of the long first verse paragraph and take a look at the lines together. Again, we begin with the significant change to the paragraph’s opening, retaining the grammatical inversion that places emphasis, indeed precedence, on the action, secondarily on the actor (circumscribed inside the prepositional phrase), and only in tertiary fashion, on the subject. The idea is thereby enforced of the soul as malleable, moreover a product of outside forces. “Irresolute and selfish, misshapen, lame,” the “simple soul” is “Unable to fare forward or retreat,” in that regard resembling Prufrock. “Fare forward” becomes, in *Four Quartets*, Eliot’s insistent—and urgent—message to us all: not “fare well,” but fare *forward*, ever-moving, despite the early speaker in *Ash-Wednesday*, who, in *not* faring forward, commits himself to the ineffectual, unnecessary, and false “way” of asceticism,
believing that he needs nothing from outside himself to craft his soul, rather constructing it all himself and on his own. Animula furthermore describes reality as “warm,” at least some offerings in fact as “good.” But the “simple soul” now turns away, “Denying the importunity of the blood,” and ending up like that speaker in Ash-Wednesday (but unlike the escaping transcendentalist Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, who precisely does engage in the “retreat” brilliantly figured in the famous sermon he is forced to endure in the long, central third chapter). In Animula, the soul that has come from God is misused and abused by time (just as Wordsworth said in the Intimations Ode); rather than growth and enrichment has come (only) reduction, the soul narrowed, misshapen, in effect made the virtual opposite of what it might have been, could have been, and should have been. This is that inverse of outward progression that Alexander Pope details in the fourth book of The Dunciad, where all ends “in Self?” Far from time bringing wisdom as we popularly assume and often declare, it brings return and reduction. The only wisdom, Eliot says in Four Quartets, is “the wisdom of humility,” seen lacking, of course, in the “simple soul” here. The interpreter is free to suggest that the picture finally emerging of the “simple soul” is nothing other than that of Hell, one definition of which is separation from God.

The (literal) rhymes in the passage I have just quoted are barely noticed, but they are present, even if but half and slant: blood, good, gloom, room, viaticum. The last word literally extends, its rhyming occurring only in the fourth syllable. The linking of good and gloom feels strange, as does blood and room, thus four syllables not all rhyming with each other but bearing a hint of just that capacity. Rhymes are thus present, but variously imperfect. They stand in need, we may further say, of help—“support,” says “Little Gidding”—from one another.

One thing more, at least: the “growing soul” evidently has little or no awareness of what appears before its own eyes, no more or less than does the “simple soul” become “misshapen,” as well as “lame” and “selfish.” It denies when it should accept, fearing “the reality” that is “warm” with life and promise rather than “faring forward” beyond desire to love. It sees not the way.

The way is, though, apparent in the poem, in, that is, the pattern that the forward motion of the words embodies: in, for example, the play of “or” and “and” and the meaning and significance revealed in, through, and by means of “squeezing and squeezing the word until it yields a full
juice of meaning which we should never have supposed any word to possess.”

Including *the* Word, “the offered good” that is “within / And for the world,” “with a full juice of meaning” suggested in the warmth of “the reality,” effectively the polar opposite of the coldness of Hell that the “simple soul” incarnates, left to its own devices, unaccepting, unresponsive.

II

*Ash-Wednesday* is—and I have hinted at it, at least—a very physical body, full of twists and turns, “things” walking, eagles soaring, body separated and “dissembled,” parts lying about, in need of collecting and restoration. Breathing—that *animus*—is hard in the first poem, where “there is nothing.” And yet, there, “trees flower, and springs flow.” It is man who “cannot drink.” If “wings” there be, the sort by means of which Stephen Dedalus would “fly by the nets” held out to trap him, they are “merely vans to beat the air / The air which is now thoroughly small and dry.” It is, in fact, “Smaller and drier than the will,” contracted, shriveled, no more vibrant than those “dissembled” body parts on which “three white leopards” feasted—precisely at the time of (human) fasting.

In the sixth poem, things are different, healthier. Instead of a confronting either/or, there is tension: life recognized as “the time of tension between *dying and birth*” (italics added, hinting at the “living” that begins “with the silence after the viaticum”). Senses are present and functioning: sight, sound, smell, especially smell, which alone is said to “renew…the salt savour of the sandy earth.” The earth is, here, warm with taste that (also) preserves.

When the speaker prays, in the penultimate verse of *Ash-Wednesday*, “Suffer me not to be separated,” the reader cannot but think of the separation of the body that the second poem has represented. The reader must surely think, as well, of the separation of the body from the spirit that the first speaker in the poem embraces and advances. Then of course, given *Ash-Wednesday*, there is both the separation from sin that is to be pursued (even as “Little Gidding” affirms, “Sin is Behovely”) and separation from God that defines Hell.

Whether finally or not, there is also the second poem’s ending verse paragraph, which treats separation, as well as “division” and “unity.” The words deserve our attention here: “Under a juniper-tree the bones sang,
scattered and shining.” What they said, perhaps surprisingly, is, “We are glad to be scattered, we did little good to each other”—no “support” there. That the bones are happy to be scattered is hardly an endorsement of separation; if they “did little good to each other,” it is because of the implied separation from the rest of the body. Now they embody an overcoming of (that) separateness, being “united,” forgetting both “each other” and “themselves,” perhaps thus caring and not-caring.

With the last two-and-a-half verses, enigma returns: “This is the land which ye / Shall divide by lot. And neither division nor unity / Matters. This is the land. We have our inheritance.” The allusion in these verses is to Ezekiel 48:9, as well as 37:15–22: God speaks to the prophet, declaring the division of the land by and for the tribes of Israel and instructing Ezekiel to unite the tribes of Joseph and Judah, which are at the time divided. As always, Eliot uses the Biblical references for his own poetic purposes and end.

One of the first things you note about these verses, attending to verbal details, is the fact of that archaic and trite little word “ye.” All it may do, though, is reinforce the evident difference in speaker in the last two-and-a-half verses from the earliest, which is the voices of the bones. In between is a third voice, which refers to those bones in the third-person. All three “persons” are thus engaged in these seven lines, though the end to which this is done remains elusive.

The second most noticeable thing is likely the statement that “neither division nor unity / Matters.” Everything we have read in Ash-Wednesday, before and after this passage, concerns the material difference between “division” and “unity,” ostensibly binary oppositions. But then—put this way, the statement appears in a new light: neither of them does matter, not just because they are, like all differences, in fact related but also because there is the primary, fundamental fact that their “inheritance” trumps both options, in fact “united” in and by their very difference. Here too, then, there is no inherent contradiction but, rather, another instance of the prevailing Incarnational pattern, which is of “impossible union,” as Four Quartets explores it.

The Word is—literally—the body: God incarnate, that is, embodied. Eliot signals the relation of res et verba when, in Ash-Wednesday, he uses the same word—“lost”—to describe words and the heart, the lilac, and the “sea voices.” The Word is also the physical, material acts and actions of the Blessed Virgin, Who, whether She Herself “walks,” sets things to walking (like “the years”), and functions “between” the “yews.” She thus
participates in our essential pattern and structure, we who walk, often torn, caught as human beings in an “in-between” condition, a condition of inescapable, ineluctable complexity, difficulty, and fierce and unrelenting struggle—“among the rocks,” on the twisting and turning stair, confronted by the Devil.

Squeezing and squeezing words actually has the paradoxical effect not of reducing—or dissembling—them but of both relating them to one another and materializing them. Words such as that tiny “ye,” as well as the more substantial-appearing “division” and “unity,” acquire a virtually physical presence. This is a consequence not merely of making a material difference in perception and cognition but also by acquiring weight and heft.

Disembodied—and dissembled—ideas, apart from the words of which they are made, feel less weighty, even flighty (Swift connects them with “enthusiasm” and air, including those vapors that rise from a person’s lower parts to, he says, the brain). They thus are both less noticeable, less connected to and rooted in the senses, and palpably less exact than words. Ideas float above (like the whorish island Laputa in Gulliver’s Travels) in a manner that words never mirror. Words, differently, have the capacity to be precise, though, as Eliot says, they do not stay still; they have texture, they occupy a definite and specific space for a while, but they also slip and slide like the human body; like it, they decay. Their mobility, and a certain restlessness, further links them with the body. Words matter so much because they are matter, having the capacity to hurt you deeply and badly. They bite, sock us; they often leave us with a bad taste; you feel their sting, as you also do their enormous power to soothe. At least since the “dissociation of sensibility” (that Eliot claims, set in during the seventeenth century), we do not normally feel ideas.10

Ideas derive from within us; they are born with us. Words precede us; we are born into them.

Words, written and oral alike, seek response; ideas do not, floating inert, ready to be taken up and used. Words are, of course, used, too, but they ask not to be merely used. When in Ash-Wednesday, the “Lady of silences,” signs but speaks no word, She thereby utters the Word, and It draws a response from the fountain, which “sprang up,” and from the bird, which “sang down.”11

Response is all, or nearly all. The Blessed Virgin responded to God, conceiving thereby the Infant. “Gerontion” had said, while emphasizing through the titular speaker the vital loss of all the senses, that they had
been “used for thy closer contact,” meaning that the senses are a means of approaching God—but only as response to His initiation, “thy” contact. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, that the fifth poem of *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems* focuses first on the Word and then on a poet’s lyrical response to the Word. These two verse paragraphs, joined (though separated) by words taken directly from Micah 6:3 (“O my people, what have I done unto thee,” an obviously rhetorical question), consist of nine verses each, and together, represent the poems’ most sustained, direct, and important comparison and analysis of the word’s relation to the Word.

We begin our (final) consideration with reference to Lancelot Andrewes, whose exegeses stand behind Eliot’s formulations regarding the Word, which can at first blush seem mere verbalism, word-play of a pedantic sort. In a recent book, Nicholas Lossky has spelled out the importance and the implications of Bishop Andrewes’s representation of the response I have been discussing while setting the stage for our consideration of the squeezing and squeezing of words that both Andrewes and Eliot practice: there is, he writes in his magisterial study,

> the risk of remaining in the realm of concepts and eluding the physical reality implied by the conception. Andrewes invites his hearers to come face to face with this reality. He commences this subject by recalling that in the virginal conception it was not a matter of an act uniquely divine, where humanity would be passively receptive; humanity participates actively, in the person of the Virgin, by making a gift of the flesh to Christ. (Italics added)\(^{12}\)

_Facing_ the reality is crucial, according to both “The Hollow Men” and *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems._

Fr. Lossky then quotes the following apt passage from Bishop Andrewes’s ninth Nativity sermon (on the Incarnation):

> This we are to hold; to conceive is more than to receive. It is so to receive as we yield somewhat of our own also. A vessel is not said to conceive the liquor that is put into it. Why? because it yieldeth nothing from itself. The Blessed Virgin is, and therefore is because she did. She did both give _and_ take. Give of her own substance whereof His body was framed; _and_ take or receive power from the Holy Ghost, whereby was supplied the office and the efficacy of the masculine seed. This is _concipiet_. (Last italics in the original)\(^{13}\)

Now we return to Eliot’s indebted words regarding the Word, which make clear Its relation to them and both of them to “the world.” The verbal play
is palpable, but precise and possessing “a full juice of meaning which we should never have supposed any word to possess.” To a significant degree, this passage by now should need no elucidating; it is clear enough, as long as the reader attends carefully, takes his or her time, is willing to sit still among the rocks that are the words. I have offered analysis of the passage earlier in this book and do not wish to repeat myself here. Suffice it to say, among a couple of other things, that the last words here cement the Virgin’s connection with the Word, the “silent sister” and “Lady of silences”: “And the light shone in darkness and / Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled / About the centre of the silent Word.” Further, there can be no doubt of the Word’s engagement in and with the physical and material world of humankind; being God incarnate, the Word is not outside that familiar, ordinary, and mundane world.

Moreover, the Word needs not words to accomplish Its ends and purposes. It is, in fact, known in and by means of Its silence. Eliot’s words may seem to undercut his words. Does he perhaps mean only that the Word exists and can perform Its functions and achieve Its ends in the absence of words? That is clearly not the case, for the matter is framed by—and is responsive to—the condition set off by the “If” that opens the verse paragraph. Even if, that is, the word is not or cannot be heard, both “lost” and “spent,” even “unspoken,” the Word is nevertheless present and active, active “without a word.” The Blessed Virgin incarnates this activity—in the world and for the world.

The second verse paragraph of this poem, consisting like the first of nine lines, clearly asks to be compared with that preceding passage. The passage comes as a response to the former, this done by a lyric poet, rather than a theologian or theologically oriented speaker. These verses represent the word in the world, now, here. They are juvenile, sophomoric, the rhyming deliberately and pointedly askew, occurring not at line’s end but within the line, and the diction bland and trite: this amounts to noise and little more. How can the Word be heard in and amidst this blather? If we are tempted to suppose that the occasional internal rhyming is meant to suggest that larger-sense rhyming that occurs within the world, thanks to the Incarnation, we may respond that, so granted, the whole passage fails to rise to the level of responsible poetry, certainly not capable of “Redeem[ing] / The unread vision in the higher dream / While jeweled unicorns draw by the gilded hearse.” Of course, these internal rhymes may be intended to represent the poetaster’s pathetic efforts, which are not at all to be condemned but to be recognized as an incomplete effort.
If the poet’s responsibility now, here, lies in “restoring / With a new verse the ancient rhyme,” he or she has failed in and with these verses. Exegesis can offer very little help, the words lacking that “full juice of meaning” with which they might be filled and charged; instead of working as Incarnational objects, through which the Word speaks, they are empty tokens, mere ciphers, carelessly “ordered,” “lame,” and inert, with little if any capacity to move, to walk. On the other hand, perhaps the Word does speak, even here.

In any case, some readers call this passage good. But no “light” shines through as in the preceding verse paragraph, no capacity to “walk” with the reader. We are left to “walk among noise,” accentuated, by the way, with the lack of full stops (as distinguished from the first verse paragraph), and with that noise and the lack of “silence;” it is little wonder that we so routinely “deny the voice.”

Whereas the first, theological passage asks the reader to squeeze the words as the writer has done in putting them on paper, the second may lure the reader by means of its simplicity and straightforwardness, but it ultimately says little, paradoxically and ironically floating untethered in a miasma of (imprecise) words, the province of the spirit that killeth. Joining the two passages, one precise and effective despite first appearance, the second vague (and spiritual), Eliot asks his reader to “Be mindful.” He also fares forward, looking toward Four Quartets, whose lyrical fourth sections also fail to achieve the precision and responsible expression needed to be clear concerning challenging and difficult matters. What Four Quartets achieves, perhaps uniquely, is the “impossible union” of poetry and theological philosophy, of poem and essay, that Eliot here essayed in Ash-Wednesday. He, of course, manages to make poetry out of that philosophy to a far greater and more extensive and revealing degree than even these nine verses hint at. He refuses to separate.

Notes

1 T.S. Eliot, Animula (London: Faber and Faber, 1929).
3 T.S. Eliot, Dante (London: Faber and Faber, 1929).


One should not, incidentally, be thrown off track by the gnat’s wing of the Virgin’s being described as “spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden” (italics added). Once more, Eliot is calling on us to “be mindful.” While resembling us, Mary is not us, just as the “Lady of silences” is different from, and on another level from, the “Lady” of the second poem here. Nor is the Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit, Third Person of the Trinity, to be understood as like the human soul.


Quoted, ibid. (from Nativity Sermon 9).
“The Ecstasy of Assent” (and Ascent): *Marina, Triumphal March, and The Cultivation of Christmas Trees*

Abstract: The difficulty of Eliot’s “most elusive” poem, *Marina* (1930), lies principally in the complexity of the speaking voice. *Triumphal March* (1931) spotlights the details of its speaker’s seeing, or perceiving—which an Eliotesque voice describes as “the natural wakeful life of our Ego.” The poet affirms the Word speaking through Its silence. Published among new Ariel poems, *The Cultivation of Christmas Trees* (1954) emerges as a substantial and important achievement. At its heart lies the “gilded angel” atop the tree, which the child (along with the child-like) affirms as both “a decoration and an angel.” The poem’s themes—and those of Eliot’s post-conversion verse generally—come together in the image of St. Lucy, the young girl who, for affirming her faith, lost her sight. The poem brilliantly—and humbly—affirms the central Christian dogma of the Incarnation.

I The voice of the Dead: *Marina* and the recognition scene

If *Marina* (1930), the last of Eliot’s Ariel poems (in the first series), is not his readers’ favorite short poem, it is certainly one of most readers’ favorites. A major reason, I suspect, is that so many commentators have found it to be positive and affirmative. I shall question that affirmativeness in the first part of this essay. While it is true that Marina, daughter of Pericles (from Shakespeare’s play of the latter name), returns from the dead, having long been thought drowned at sea, her father, the poem’s complex speaker, dramatically reveals—to us, that is—his apparent complicity in what befell her. He is certainly affected by her “images” upon returning, and in fact pledges, in terms that recall *Animula*, to “Resign my life for this life, my speech for that unspoken.” The terms he uses pointedly also recall *Ash-Wednesday* (as well as *Four Quartets*) in their precise formulation of a “new living” in a world *of time* that is, yet, “beyond” him.

Pericles *pledges*—but can we believe him? The verse immediately following appears to embody his return to the concerns that evidently caused Marina’s horrific plight in the first place: “The awakened, her lips parted, the hope, the new ships.” Or, is “ships” a metaphor, like earlier in *Marina*, meaning “ways”? It can go either way, that is, both ways. Possibly for Pericles himself, who appears guilt-ridden, and probably sympathetic, and maybe well-intentioned, even as he seems himself to be (still) compromised. Perhaps for good reason, one of Eliot’s best readers, Hugh Kenner, called the poem Eliot’s “most elusive.” Its elusiveness, I shall argue, is its elusiveness.

*Marina* is, in fact, the most complex of Eliot’s Ariel poems, more ironic and negative in its saying than is commonly supposed. What it *does*, is an altogether different matter, looking toward *Four Quartets* in strategy and technique. The positive is present, though silent, thus discovered indirectly. Pericles’s understanding is reductive, rather than expansive, and the poem itself requires, as it were, specific knowledge of the Incarnation in order to be responsibly understood. *Marina*’s meaning, that is, is not immanent; it lies, rather, in the silence of the Word, which is present in *attending* the words of Pericles: in other words, within and for those words (if not by Pericles himself).

Kenner is not sure, but he supposes that the poem may “arouse a slight but stubborn possibility that the speaker may be mocking himself with
falsehood.” Other critics have no such doubts. While acknowledging the continuing centrality of death to Eliot’s concerns in Marina, Elizabeth Drew fairly gushes, “It is the only purely joyous poem Eliot has ever written.”3 Bernard Bergonzi waxes just as enthusiastic, perhaps even more so. While treating the poem with distressing brevity and in terms not always clear, he says “the tension” of Ash-Wednesday is “poetically resolved” in Marina, “by far the best of Eliot’s Ariel Poems”:

“Marina” is, in fact, the most exquisitely beautiful of all his short poems, with a unique quality. It invokes the lost and found daughter of Shakespeare’s Pericles, and the seashore images of part VI of Ash-Wednesday, to convey a sense of restoration and harmony; the whole poem presents a “privileged moment” (to use a Bergonian phrase) of serenity and transfiguration in an immensely skillful concentration of imagery, rhythm, and syntax. It contains a perennial motif of Eliot’s poetry—“Whispers and small laughter between leaves and hurrying feet”—and suggests a possible reconciliation between the spirit and the senses, and even, a rare note in Eliot, the possibility of natural blessedness.4

Reduced to the recording of Romantic impressions, the critic reveals, I am sorry to conclude, problems in understanding how the poem works.

Eliot himself said more than once that he intended to signal “the contrast of death and life in Hercules and Pericles,” what he called in another place “a crisscross between Pericles finding alive, and Hercules finding dead—the two extremes of the recognition scene.”5 He refers to the epigraph from Seneca’s play Hercules Furens (which translates as “What is the place, what country, what region of the world”)6 and the “opposite” scene in Shakespeare’s “great play.” Eliot considered it “a perfect example of the ‘ultra-dramatic’, a dramatic action of beings who are more than human…or rather, seen in a light more than that of day,” “the finest of all the ‘recognition scenes’,” in which the title character (and speaker of Eliot’s poem) finds his daughter returned to him after believing her long dead.7 The poem is, of course, full of the sea that the daughter’s name conveys in its Latin origin.

Critical opinion has long been divided on Marina, with some, like Kenner, reading it ironically and negatively, others, many more, reading it as, simply, “joyous.” Kenner is, perhaps, the most critical reader of the poem: “The sleeping and waking worlds are equivocally mingled throughout the poem, and we are not required to suppose someone passing, as Pericles did, from one to the other.”8 Ever cautious, Kenner goes on, “New life, new ships, and the daughter belong to the same
perhaps illusory dispensation.” A related “take” on the poem appears in John H. Timmerman’s *T.S. Eliot’s Ariel Poems: The Poetics of Recovery*. He too is skeptical, even though he finally affirms the poem’s joyousness. He writes, perhaps overly optimistic: “it should be clear that the joy attained and the vision of new life are not separated from agony.” This is, for the most part, astute and promising, as is the following:

This positioning side by side of agony and ecstasy is not completely reconciled in “Marina,” any more than the conflicting metaphorical qualities of water as death-bringer and life-restorer are completely resolved. While “Marina” does indeed celebrate the victorious qualities of water symbolism—restoration, renewal, and hope—the narrator discovers those qualities only after a life of hard and perplexed traveling on stormy seas.

This last sentence might give us pause, however, as does Timmerman’s later account of “*the* timeless moment within time” understood as a transcendence. It is unclear, in fact, whether the critic understands the Incarnation as more than a “positioning side by side” of apparent opposites. In the event, moreover, Timmerman spends so much time on allusions and background that the poem receives too little direct attention and analysis, and what it does receive, appears in a prose that brings to my ear a certain failure to participate in the poetic adventure.

*Marina*’s difficulty lies not in its poetry or its poetics but in its speaker’s incapacity for difficulty, such as Incarnation points to. The speaking voice, who is more a personage than a character, simplifies what is inherently complex and demanding; if aware of what the Magus discovered, he appears unable to abide it. The fog that he mentions three times—at the beginning, the middle, and the end—serves to point his lack of clarity as well as that tensional state in which human being exists, a state in which clarity does not equate with simplicity.

An amazing poem, *Marina* is Eliot’s most self-reflexive; that is to say, the inter-textuality everywhere present in Eliot’s poems is here most prominent and dramatically and rhetorically functional. It is also intra-textual, about which more directly. The poem’s focus on the sea looks both back toward *The Waste Land* and forward to *Four Quartets*, as does the related depiction of water as potentially life-destroying. The second verse paragraph, with its focus sharp on Death, does the same, while rhymes with *Ash-Wednesday: Six Poems* are both local and specific and large and general, particularly in the representation of the daughter as
a paradoxical, both/and creature reminiscent of the “Lady of silences” who figures the Blessed Virgin.

I begin, however, with the word and the idea of “images,” in the opening verse paragraph, which rhymes with the repeated insistence in The Waste Land on modern reduction of assistance to “a heap of broken images,” which the speaker at the end claims, fitfully, to have “shored against my ruins.” In Marina, we read: “What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands / What water lapping the bow / And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog”? Then follows immediately the question “What images return / O my daughter.” In line with the poetic procedure in Ash-Wednesday, Eliot returns at the end to similar—that is, rhyming—language. Some critical differences emerge in this comparison that Eliot is enacting, a creation of intra-textuality: “What seas what shores what granite islands towards my timbers / And woodthrush calling through the fog / My daughter.”

The speaking voice is by no means unaware of doubleness, though he does not understand it; in fact, he leaves the mystery unexplored (as usual). Not only does he aver at one point that “I have forgotten / And remember,” but he very carefully depicts his saved daughter in paradoxical terms, deriving from direct observation and physical contact: “What is this face, less clear and clearer / The pulse on the arm, less strong and stronger— / Given or lent? more distant than stars and nearer than the eye.” A rhyme with “The Hollow Men” may be heard here, as well as with Ash-Wednesday, in both of which the eye serves as a necessary critical organ, along with “face” a propadeutic to (self-)understanding. Within Marina, although there is (unperceived) revelation, there is no critical self-examination—nor the self-reflexivity that the poem itself enacts. Pericles’s daughter here underwent a miraculous experience, and her return has to be viewed as a return from the dead, but the effect on him is far from being what many commentators have desired. This return from the dead engenders in him only a series of “images,” no understanding nor engagement of or with his own self. No eyes turn inward, nor reveal him to himself. The return of the dead does not bring Pericles along with.

Accordingly, despite the overwhelming critical embrace of Pericles’s eventual “prayer” (I am not sure it is a prayer), I am suspicious of the climactic statement, “let me / Resign my life for this life, my speech for that unspoken, / The awakened, lips parted, the hope, the new ships.” Several points keep me from embracing this announcement. First, Eliot
did not take hope unalloyed; it is always “crisscrosed” with fear, doubt, anxiety, though never despair. The “new ships” is similarly troublesome. I take it that in the poem “ship” figures “way,” and if so the plural points beyond the one absolute truth. Furthermore, there is the central idea here of “resigning,” with which I cannot but compare the resignation of the (first) speaker in Ash-Wednesday, a response that Eliot roundly criticizes. To resign is to leave behind, but is there ever a leaving behind, a simple transcendence (instead of an expanding or purifying)? The decision to “resign” thus seems to me unearned, based, apparently, on “images” and lacking the necessary self-awareness, the essential recognition of guilt from which one seeks to turn in penitence and humility.  

To be sure, Pericles has just before revealed—at least to us—problems with the ships he built (and so the way he took). There was the “Bowsprit cracked with ice and paint cracked with heat.” More than that, “The rigging [was] weak and the canvas rotten.” Note, too the present tense: “The garboard strake leaks, the seams need caulking” (the first half of this line derives, nearly verbatim, from a line discarded from The Waste Land). All this adds to my concern about “the new ships” just a bit later: Pericles shows considerable—whether or not inordinate—interest in his work of building; indeed, at the end, which not only parallels the beginning but differs significantly from it, the seas, the shores, and the islands come, as it were, “towards my timbers” (“ships” having here presumably lost its figuration and so meaning only “ships” and no longer also “way”). He may adopt the “new”—but not that “really new” that Eliot had talked about in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”18 That “new,” moreover, seems to apply to his work more than to his understanding, and it is the possibility, then, of greater success professionally, economically that impels him by poem’s end.

Meanwhile, the fog rolls along. At the beginning, the woodthrush, he of two notes at once, is represented as “singing” through it, perhaps by means of it. At the end, quite differently, the pesky woodthrush is represented as “calling through the fog / My daughter.” The bird calls her, in other words, her alone.

Pericles’s denunciation of the ways of Death occupies the visually outstanding second verse paragraph of Marina, which begins, “Those who sharpen the tooth of the dog, meaning / Death.” That one-word verse completes each of the four sentences, the other three being “Those who glitter with the glory of the hummingbird . . . ,” “Those who sit in the sty of contentment, meaning . . . ,” and “Those who suffer the ecstasy of the
animals, meaning....” In *T.S. Eliot’s Ariel Poems*, Timmerman identifies the four representations with the sins, respectively, of gluttony, pride, sloth, and lust. These, he asserts, undergo “purgative cleansing,” being “By this grace dissolved in place.” The reading is unlikely on several counts. First of all, there is no inherent necessity of these links; second, as I have argued at length elsewhere, the Incarnational understanding that is Christian and that forms the basis and the heart and soul of Eliot’s thinking hardly subscribes to the pagan notion of purgation, regarding purification instead as the necessary way to salvation; and third, the verse “By this grace dissolved in place” is unconvincingly adduced to cement the claims being made, on which more directly.

The following verse paragraph is a grammatical continuation of the preceding fragments, their predicate, in fact. Those who “Are become unsubstantial, reduced by a wind, / A breath of pine, and the woodsong fog / By this grace dissolved in place.” Unlike so many commentators, I cannot regard “become unsubstantial,” “reduced,” and “dissolved” as positive. Those readers understand the lines as saying that the variously sinning and sinful are, essentially, etherealized, rendered disembodied (which is contrary to Incarnational understanding). Responsible for these stellar effects and results are wind, the smell of pine, and “the woodsong fog.” How that could possibly be, is not at all clear, no clearer, in fact, than things seen in that same fog. But in any case, the changes—and in *Four Quartets*, Eliot will affirm that “Sin is Behovely,” that is, inevitable—are forced; they do not arise from any turning within.

We come, inevitably, to these words in the penultimate verse paragraph, words that begin by pointing to essential links and association and move to the large matters of time and world that *Four Quartets* will focus: “This form, this face, this life / Living to live in a world of time beyond me.”

The “less clear and clearer” face that Pericles envisions in the fog is neither that that the hollow men studiously avoid nor that face with essential mediating and intercessory power that is the “Lady of silences” in *Ash-Wednesday*. Nor is it that “face still forming” of the “familiar compound ghost” in “Little Gidding” that holds a mirror up to the speaker’s own face, providing the needed (self-)criticism. Instead of the nothingness that the wastelanders fail to confront, here there is something. It is not Death but living.

Eliot states in “Burnt Norton,” though, that “that which is only living / Can only die.” Pericles’s daughter may (or may not) have known Death; the speaking voice in *Marina* surely does not. The “recognition scene” is
well rendered of Pericles and his daughter saved from the seas. Pericles, himself, is reduced to offering a heap of “images,” from which emerges no recognition of Death, though somewhat of living, in part because he has no way of recognizing himself and his own heart of darkness.

In other words, the speaker shows no signs of understanding the vision suggested in the epigraph from Seneca, no clue as to how it “criss-crosses” the story in which he participates—nor of the way that elusive “ships” works at the end of the penultimate verse paragraph. While there is recognition, perhaps acceptance, affirmation remains a question—and with it, of Incarnation.

II  *Triumphal March: on perceiving, understanding, and affirming*


The poem itself is subtle, and remarkable, representing a couple of new departures for Eliot, still interested in “restoring / With a new verse the ancient rhyme.” One of these, the lesser in importance, concerns his rare use of the catalogue, possibly inherited from or at least inspired by his friend Pound’s heavy reliance on it in the *Cantos*. In neither poet are the lists extraneous or gratuitous. Eliot’s constitutes roughly a fifth to a fourth of the poem, which serves at once to materialize and to make strikingly detailed, exacting, and precise, a detailed list of the munitions on parade and preceding the eagerly awaited appearance of the great leader: “5,800,000 rifles and carbines, / 102,000 machine guns, / 28,000 trench mortars.” These details could not possibly derive from the speaker’s direct observation, of course, although he might have us believe otherwise: “I cannot tell how many projectiles, mines and fuses.” Then we return to the catalogue: “13,000 aeroplanes, / 24,000 aeroplane engines, / 50,000 ammunition wagons,” after which comes the word “now,” another token of the speaker’s own observation, prefacing “55,000 army wagons, / 11,000 field kitchens, / 1,150 field bakeries.”22

The speaker is obviously very much a part of the scene (“I cannot tell

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how many...”). Since the poem will move on to juxtapose “perception” with a richer understanding not solely reliant on appearance (and empirical evidence), a reader is free to question whether Eliot (also) has in mind our empirical approach to reading the literal word. Perception is, in any case, already revealed as bogus, what appears to be its product rather than that of another lens.

The voice we hear immediately upon the opening of the poem is different from any other in Eliot. The first words are, in fact, a small catalogue of nouns—that is, things—that the speaker this time does directly observe. It is a combination of aural and visual, with the emphasis on the former, accentuated by the triple appearance of the word “stone”: “Stone, bronze, stone, steel, stone, oakleaves, horses’ heels / Over the paving.” It is not, of course, so much that the speaker hears as that he records what makes the sounds that are thus indirectly adduced. The following verse contains another thrice-used word, this time the coordinate conjunction “and” that here serves to suggest an accumulation of “things,” two of them involving words that record the seen, the other the heard: “And the flags. And the trumpets. And so many eagles.”

The distinctiveness of this voice then manifests itself. It is at once engaged and participating in the public excitement as the crowd of which he is a part awaits the parade that culminates in the appearance of the triumphant leader. Furthermore, the speaker asks a number of questions that oscillate between the merely rhetorical and the quest of observed and verified answers. The nearest voice to this in Eliot’s poetry is probably the importuning, nagging, badgering, and desperate tones in “A Game of Chess” in The Waste Land, the speakers there, though, being characters rather than, as in Triumphal March, the lead voice, the “narrator.” Everything in this poem so far stems from perception (real or enhanced), the speaker demanding assistance in completing his quest of satisfaction: “How many? Count them.” As well, there is “such a press of people”: “We hardly knew ourselves that day, or knew the City. / This is the way to the temple, and we so many crowding the way. / So many waiting, how many waiting?” He then says, as if in response to our likely realization of his reliance on numbers and facts: “What did it matter, on such a day?” The speaker is anxious, as well as curious, full of questions (unlike, we will see, the triumphant leader, when he appears): “Are they coming? No, not yet. You can see some eagles. / And hear the trumpets. / Here they come. Is he coming?” (italics added).

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Seeing, heretofore represented dramatically, now is directly made a theme: “We can wait with our stools and our sausages. / What comes first? Can you see? Tell us.” The seen is then the list from which I quoted earlier, scrupulously detailing all the munitions on parade. Before the two verses I have just quoted in this paragraph comes a straightforward statement, one of theme, reminiscent, to be sure, of the philosophical voice that asserts itself into “The Hollow Men,” but actually unique in Eliot before Four Quartets. It differs from that in the 1925 poem in belonging to the lead voice, rather than to one-among-several; it directly anticipates the straightforward definition of Incarnation in “The Dry Salvages.” Here is the sentence in Triumphal March, a thematic statement that identifies the nature of what we have been observing, indeed what we (too) have been doing, all this seeing that has been so scrupulously represented (about which more directly): “The natural wakeful life of our Ego is a perceiving.”

With that rather startling statement, we are also, suddenly, in the intersection of another time with that of the poem so far. The poet’s and the reader’s time, that is to say, attends the ancient and presumably Roman. Indeed, the juxtaposition of times continues, as the triumphant leader has still not come into view, only “golf club Captains,” “the Scouts,” and the “societe gymnastique de Poissy,” followed by the “Mayor and the Liverymen.”

Then he is seen, the speaker twice urging us to “look.” And the first thing the speaker notices is the leader’s eyes, to which he turns again very shortly, while noting as well the leader’s lack of interest in questioning (which, of course, contrasts sharply with what he himself has been doing all along): “There is no interrogation in his eyes / Or in the hands, quiet over the horse’s neck, / And the eyes watchful, waiting, perceiving, indifferent.” The last word carries considerable weight, while the word “perceiving” returns us to that striking thematic verse that I quoted above. In fact, the next three verses effectively serve both to emphasize the matter of perception and to clarify its meaning and significance in and for the poem: “O hidden under the dove’s wing, hidden in the turtle’s breast, / Under the palmtree at noon, under the running water / At the still point of the turning world. O hidden.” What is “hidden” is never stated. The reader notes, though, that whatever it is, it is both out of sight and there, in plain sight. What that thing is, is, of course, no thing at all, nothing available to the senses, neither visible nor audible. With the reference to “the still point,” the Eliotic, and quite practical, cat springs from the bag.
Triumphal March juxtaposes, then, not just two widely separated time periods but also seeing-perceiving and understanding of what lies within and beyond the perceptible, and, thus, finally, the earthly, martial leader and that unspoken, unheard Messiah who proved to be so different from what people expected. Here, in the poem, the people get exactly what they expected—and, suddenly, all the excitement vanishes, as if with him in plain view, directly and immediately in the speaker’s sight, not just excitement but also at least much of his interest ceases. After all, the expected and now-arrived figure proves not (so) great, after all—and he is indifferent to what he sees. Ironies mount, accumulate, in nearly a split second.

The immediately following verses, in a new paragraph, stand in sharp contrast to what the speaker reported before the long-looked-forward-to arrival. Action is now represented in perfunctory fashion, plain, almost to the point of disengaged. One event follows another, a mere listing, laconically done: “Now they go up to the temple. Then the sacrifice. / Now come the virgins bearing urns, urns containing / Dust.” This last word is then repeated as a separate line, followed by these verses: “Dust of dust, and now / Stone, bronze, stone, steel, stone, oakleaves, horses’s heels / Over the paving.” Dust here bears weight and significance belied by its being. Alongside it, the triple appearance of the word “now” contrasts with that “dust”: the present moment—and nothing beyond it but death. The repetition of the poem’s opening two verses stands as an ironic reminder of expectation rudely turned into disappointment and even vacancy. The “paving” then feels as if it becomes us become that on which the horses and their militant, triumphant riders march—to their death too, there being nothing beyond the circle of “now” and “then,” this last itself marching on—triumphantly—to its natural end in and as death.

Different is “the still point,” that no-thing hidden from view but nevertheless present, notably in the simplest of things: “the Word within / The world and for the world.” The reader is, I strongly suspect, thus invited to recall Ash-Wednesday, to which Hugh Kenner figured Eliot intended Triumphal March to function as complement:23 The “still point” is not visible to the material eye, but that invisibility does not mean that It is absent or does not exist. The Word exists and functions and can still be heard.

In Triumphal March, the speaker returns to the scene that had commanded his attention, but now in reflection: “That is all we could see.” Instead of questions now come exclamations, perhaps with resignation, even sadness: “But how many eagles! and how many trumpets!”

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This reflection evidently produces a deeper reflection, given parenthetically, another intersection of the contemporary with the ancient. It concerns Easter, “young Cyril,” and both the capabilities of the human consciousness and the political conditioning of it by means such as a massive military parade. Even without reference to its anticipation of and rhyme with depictions such as George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and actual contemporary manifestations around the globe, Hugh Kenner has described it insightfully:

Tucked away in a corner of the poem we discern a promising lad to whose mode of consciousness everything that has been transacted corresponds exactly. “Young Cyril,” when he was taken to church (he had to be taken somewhere, and Easter Day his parents didn’t get to the country), heard a bell ring and “said right out loud, *crumpets.*” The bell was rung at the consecration of the Host, and when young Cyril thought of something to eat he was on the right track. The muffin-man’s casual pedagogy has conditioned him perfectly, and the widely publicized dogs of Professor Pavlov, who salivated when a bell was rung, are no better trained than he. In a city refreshed by the empty passage of opaque spectacles…the young Cyril may be expected to grow into a satisfactorily qualified citizen.\(^\text{24}\)

The poem then moves to conclusion with words expressive of the bathos that accompanies what only appears to be triumphal. In place of the Host, there is the perhaps earthiest of meats, and the (triune) “light”—“the great perquisite of perception”\(^\text{25}\)—sought may be no more or other than that set off by a match to a cigarette—we cannot even tell, in this darkness, whether “he” refers to young Cyril or the general/leader: “Don’t throw away that sausage, / It’ll come in handy. He’s artful. Please, will you / Give us a light?” This last word is then twice repeated, each time as a separate line, and is followed by the final verse in the poem: “*Et les soldats faisait la haie? ILS LA FAISAIENT.*” Irony mounts upon irony as the familiar “interrogation” resumes. Even the (small) light alluded to is imperceptible to the crowd, thanks to the “hedge” made by the soldiers blocking the view.

Still, “the light shone in darkness,” *Ash-Wednesday* declares. *Triumphal March* affirms this truth in a way new for Eliot. *He* is not invisible but very much apparent in the poem (although you cannot, of course, see him). *Triumphal March* may be understood as both another Ariel poem and a further preparation for the greater *Four Quartets* to come (starting, of course, with “Burnt Norton” within four years).

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The poet enters the poem, as if responding to his speaker. We may read as the poet’s the central, tonally quite different line “The natural wakeful life of our Ego is a perceiving.” There is no reason to believe that the speaker of Triumphal March is capable of saying this or the complementary verses “O hidden under the dove’s wing, hidden in the turtle’s breast, / Under the palmtree at noon, under the running water / At the still point of the turning world. O hidden.” The speaker only perceives, that is, sees, hears; he is contemporary with the scene of the Roman general parading through the “City” on the way to the temple. He shows no awareness of the meaning of “Light” at poem’s end, lacking a viable understanding of how the poet reveals the “intersection” of one time period with another, of the way that each moment in time is “attended.” For the speaker of Triumphal March as for the mistaken speaker in the first poem of Ash-Wednesday, “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.”

The poet thus shows his difference. He is by no means indifferent (unlike the “leader”), but, rather, participates in seeing and in seeing in, through, and by means of, notably including “the dove’s wing,” “the turtle’s breast,” “the palmtree at noon,” and “the running water.” There is, in short, pattern, and the poet catches it, finding connections to which his “personages” are blind. The poet, we might further say, speaks by acting in, through, and by means of the words he uses; although he is not exactly silent (obviously), he differs greatly from the lyricist in the fifth poem of Ash-Wednesday, who mainly makes noise, rendering it nearly impossible for the Word to be heard. In the poet’s “intersection” and “attend-ance” here, the Word speaks—is allowed to speak—through the words within the words. Eliot thus actively affirms the Word, Its truth, Its presence, indeed Its timelessness and Its universality.

III The Cultivation of Christmas Trees: observations, elucidations, and affirmations

The Cultivation of Christmas Trees, published in 1954 in a new series of Ariel poems, is, frankly, neither major nor particularly difficult or demanding. That it is nevertheless rich, resonant, and rewarding is a point that I wish to advance. Published by Eliot’s firm Faber and Faber (and in the US, not by his usual publishers but by Farrar, Straus
and Cudahy), the poem is magnificently illustrated by the artist and poet David Jones. Although the poem has never been particularly well regarded—sometimes dismissed, in fact, as allegedly further indication of Eliot’s poetic decline following conversion to Anglo-Catholicism—it forms creditable bookends with *Journey of the Magi*, the first Ariel poem. The voice here may lack a certain elegance, but it is clearly that of one who knows and as a consequence affirms. The speaker is, I would say, rather informal, his language certainly not “pedantic” (to think of “Little Gidding”). A both/and attends, for alongside the informality is a stance of certainty of point of view.

Perhaps one observes first that the poem consists of but two sentences: the first made of eight verses, the second, 26, constructed around four sets of clauses each beginning “So that.” The poem starts off inauspiciously, which is not exactly beside-the-point (although Hugh Kenner thinks the opening has the feel of a “commissioned Pronouncement”): “There are several attitudes towards Christmas, / Some of which we may disregard” (the “social, the torpid, the patently commercial, The rowdy . . . / And the childish”). It is, indeed, prosaic. Six verses follow, identifying those “attitudes” that may be disregarded, in a voice that smacks a bit of the cranky, with just a hint of the puritanical. Still, the word “attitudes” stands out, being somewhat unexpected—more likely, one thinks, would be “views” or “perspectives” or perhaps “points of view,” even “opinions”: The speaker offers, though, a critical distinction, between “the childish” and “the child.” For the latter, but not the former, the gilded angel on the Christmas tree is both a decoration and an angel. There is magic, there is mystery, perhaps known only to and by “the child”—and it matters that it is a Child around Whom the day centers and revolves. We are thus subtly reminded, among the distractions and the falsehoods, of what Christmas is fundamentally about. The speaker, it now appears, is more astute, and understanding, than we likely supposed initially. There is a mixture here, perhaps, of what “Little Gidding” embraces: “The common word exact without vulgarity, / The formal word precise but not pedantic.”

The focus remains for a bit this “child,” said to “wonder” at the tree (capitalized), which echoes “the star of wonder” of the familiar carol. At the same time (which is just the point, I suppose), the capital hints at the Cross that the Child would eventually have to bear, a version of which we all have to bear. At any rate, the speaker then asks that the child “continue in the spirit of wonder / At the Feast as an event not accepted as a pretext.” The desire is that he be able to reside in the capacity “of wonder,” resting
in a certain tension without “irritable reaching” after something other,\(^{28}\) to “wonder” at the Feast as it is, not as “a pretext” for something else. Another important distinction lies here, apparently “hidden” (to think back to \textit{Triumphal March}): to use as a pretext is to indulge in such falsehood as \textit{Ash-Wednesday} prays to avoid; but to see that that real meaning is supposedly “hidden,” to understand the tree as Tree, the angel as Angel, is to see that these “things” are “attended,” that is, both “themselves” and more. The angel is a decoration \textit{and} an angel at the same time, precisely as the Incarnation brings together in “impossible union” body and soul, letter and spirit, immanence and transcendence, man and God.

Then comes the first of the clauses indicative of purpose: “So that the glittering rapture, the amazement / Of the first remembered Christmas Tree . . . ” The statement of purpose does not reach completion until six lines later: “May not be forgotten in later experience . . . ” We observe that this rational grammatical structure, forging links, exists as medium for the statement(s) extolling the opposite, that is, “wonder,” “amazement,” even “rapture.” Order thus carries magic; mystery as experience houses wonder—which needs be “seen,” rather than, to recall \textit{Triumphal March} once more, to be merely and solely “perceived.”

Our first memories of Christmas, says the poem, are child-like amazement, the gift of the “Christmas Tree.” But that gift is not alone in creating wonder. The speaker shows no reluctance to mention other delights of the child, unsophisticated as they are. They are unashamedly \textit{material}, and definitely sensuous, the season one of “expectation,” mentioned explicitly twice, which, when applied to the physical, by no means flouts, compromises, or vitiates the expectation: “the surprises, delight in new possessions / (Each one with its peculiar and exciting smell),” and then there is “The expectation of the goose or turkey” itself accentuated by “the expected awe on its appearance . . . ” The words “expectation” and “expected” bear weight, of course, being “attended” by the surprise that is the Incarnation. The Incarnational terms, pointing to the event in the lowly stable in Bethlehem, suffer no diminution in being used—\textit{now}—since the child understands the gilded ornament atop his first Tree as both decoration and angel. “The expected awe” surrounding goose or turkey, as of “new possessions,” \textit{participates} in, as an analogue of, the great mysterious reality revealed in and at the Birth of the Child in the manger. In like manner, we understand that—and how—“the reverence and the gaiety” exist together, represented appropriately in one line, at the same time, together, in the attuned life.
The poem pulls no punches, the speaker well aware that the child, in its wonderment, is before too long beset like the “growing” soul in later life in *Animula*. May “the reverence and the gaiety” of the child, says the speaker—you observe a change in the language and the diction, the terms matching the difference experience makes, becoming more adult-like—“not be forgotten in later experience.” The speaker then specifies what he means, referring to “the bored habituation, the fatigue, the tedium, / The awareness of death, the consciousness of failure, / Or in the piety of the convert.” This last, he adds, “may be tainted with a self-conceit / Displeasing to God and disrespectful to the children.” The poem’s “unexpected” moments reach a climax here, for the criticism of the “convert”—possibly a semi-autobiographical reference—comes as a surprise; it reflects, I think, humility often dissociated from this poet.

Precisely here, the speaker alludes to St. Lucy, the young Christian martyr (283–304), beatified in the Roman Catholic Church and celebrated in many others, including the Anglican. Her Feast Day is December 13, and she is associated with the shortest day of the year. In writing of her, John Donne focuses on pervasive darkness in his famous “Nocturnal,” where he laments the nothingness that both surrounds and is him. Lucy—or Lucia—is celebrated for what her name implies; accordingly, she often appears with a crown of lights, for she is a medium of light in the darkness of the world, at the very darkest time of the year: that light that *Ash-Wednesday* affirms as shining in that “darkness” and that *Triumphal March* represents at its close as “attending” the light that fires the mere cigarette, a geegaw without saving power. Lucy has become the patron saint of the blind; among her other patrons are writers.

St. Lucy seems an appropriate enough reference for Eliot in this poem—there is the link not only with Donne, whom he admired, but also Dante, whom he admired most of all, and who includes St. Lucy in *The Divine Comedy*. She was no more than a child herself when she refused marriage to a pagan, sacrificing a fortune and, it turned out, her sight. Her faith and her fidelity, her steadfastness and her self-sacrifice, are thus readily apparent, and they exist in her subsequent worldwide celebrations alongside singing, dancing, and feasting. Seeing, and how you see, is just the issue.

Why Eliot chose to introduce her into his poem at the point he did can perhaps never be adequately answered. It is the first and only time “I” appears in the poem—and then possibly as a pun; it comes as the third of four parentheticals: “(And here I remember also with gratitude /
St. Lucy, her carol, and her crown of fire)….” What matters more, of course, than Eliot’s motive in introducing St. Lucy here is the relation of the passage to the preceding verses and to the poem as a whole.

Eliot has changed “lights” or “candles” to “fire,” in keeping, no doubt, with his insistence elsewhere on the salvific potential of purification (not “purgation”) by refining fire. It matters that St. Lucy appears in the poem immediately following verses critical of “the piety of the convert,” which, says Eliot, displeases God and disrespects “the children.” He then “remembers” Lucy—and does so “with gratitude,” the sort of act inspired by the adult’s sight of the decorative angel, indeed of the tree itself: you must not forget, but must remember—and affirm. It would appear that St. Lucy also contextualizes the convert’s piety as well as stands in judgment of it. It would also appear that the speaker is himself sighted, sight-ful, for remembering—and remembering “with gratitude”: he sees (now), the “I” having the eyes that the saint eventually lost, her sight taken from her. By this point, obviously, my observation has become speculation. I cannot, though, forebear saying that, in speaking for and as Light, St. Lucy elucidates Eliot’s poem.

As I said earlier, the reference to the pious convert may well be a self-reference and implicit criticism of the poet by himself. That could explain the presence of the words “with gratitude,” for St. Lucy may help the speaker to needed self-awareness, the consequence (at least partly) of remembering her: as the patron saint of the blind, she brings light—and sight—to one tempted, with conceit, towards sanctimoniousness. One should never be pleased with oneself (despite the cultists of self-esteem). Better, the simplicity, and wide-eyed wonder, of the child, never displeasing to God.

In the next verse, in any case, appears the final “So that”—which, as it happens, has to do with final things, both the end of a human being’s life and “the second coming.” These last eight verses begin (again), informally, with a striking, but acknowledged, lack of precision, perhaps deliberately an autobiographical invocation of the poet Eliot, who was so committed to precision of expression, but again standing exposed as perfectly human, perhaps thinking of himself as no Magister at all: “So that before the end, the eightieth Christmas / (By ‘eightieth’ meaning whichever is the last) / The accumulated memories of annual emotion / May be concentrated into a great joy…” That “joy” is not unalloyed, of course; instead, it “shall be also a great fear, as on the occasion / When fear came upon every soul,” the Incarnation here explicitly invoked.
Whatever the echoes of Eliot, the verses clearly exude Biblical rhymes with Luke’s account of the Incarnation. Beginning and end, life and death, joy and fear thus stand “amalgamated,” brought together as “impossible union” in this indirect, “attended” poetic representation of the paradigmatic “impossible union.” (I will return in a moment to the final two verses of the poem.)

We have come a long way—that is not so far—from the poem’s opening child-likeness, the Christmas Tree, and that “gilded” ornament that was both decoration and angel. Such observations return us, in fact, to the poem’s title (which, perhaps, we may know for the first time). The cultivation of Christmas Trees, says Eliot. Why “cultivation”? one is bound to ask. Because Christmas trees have to be maintained, remembered (like St. Lucy), partly as a judgment on our departures from childlikeness, partly as a critical judgment on ourselves, partly as a symbol of brightness, wonderment, and joy (from which fear is never completely separable).

And those powerful, resonant, apparently enigmatic words at poem’s end? “Because the beginning shall remind us of the end / And the first coming of the second coming.” The words recall the end of “Little Gidding,” more than a decade earlier. They also hearken back to Journey of the Magi, which treats the first coming of the first coming. And so “the first coming of the second coming”?

The critical point is that The Cultivation of Christmas Trees affirms: the beginning is never transcended, never left behind, never to be discarded. As Four Quartets does, with “Burnt Norton” opening in a garden certainly reminiscent of Eden, we start at the start, and always (should) return there, knowing it, then, for the first time. The child thus remains, a part of what we are at our beginning always with us, attending.

It is not that the child intuits more than the so-called surface represents to her or his vision. Rather, the child already understands the decorative angel atop the Christmas tree as both decoration and Angel. Perception deceives unless it be “attended” by recognition of the something that lies beyond the thing “seen”—this poem, then, a further response to Triumphal March.

In clearly representing the angel on the Christmas Tree as “not only a decoration, but an angel,” an Angel “attending” the angel, Eliot in The Cultivation of Christmas Trees affirms the central Christian dogma of the Incarnation. The poem itself deliberately, humbly belies its meaning and significance: to the mere “perceiver,” it is but another seasonal “thing,”

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devoid of real value, but to the responsible reader a medium, like the decorative angel, through which the Word reveals Its presence, another striking instance of the both/and pattern that the Incarnation figures paradigmatically.

*The Cultivation of Christmas Trees*, as a poem, is commentary, not dramatic representation. It looks back toward both *Triumphal March* and *Four Quartets* in the way it makes straightforward thematic and dogmatic statements. Like the latter, the greatest of all Eliot’s poems, *The Cultivation of Christmas Trees* does not merely insert a direct thematic statement but exists as such. Indeed, both it and *Four Quartets* are poems and essays. Affirmation—an essential characteristic of essays—occurs in—and as—*The Cultivation of Christmas Trees* by these direct statements by the poet (of which, uniquely, there is nothing besides). The essay-poem is *his* word, *his* witness.

And that matter, once more, of “the first coming of the second coming” that we seem to have abruptly quitted above? The Second Coming of Christ Jesus perhaps occurs, within the world and for the world, in, through, and by means of the poet’s own words.

**Notes**

6. See ibid., 246.
7. T.S. Eliot, quoted in ibid., 246.
9. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 145.


Note, in passing, that recurring woodthrush, which is a North American passerine bird, monogamous by nature, whose male is very similar in appearance to the female and has a most beautiful, even ethereal-sounding voice, lavishly praised by Thoreau, that combines two notes at once—which is what Eliot’s poem does, thanks to and precisely by means of the Senecan epigraph, that “crisscrossing” that he spoke of on more than one occasion.


Kenner, 260.

Ibid., 259–60.


Kenner, 106.


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