

“The Pattern is Movement”: Images of Timelessness and Patterns of Response in T.S.
Eliot’s *Four Quartets*

Elizabeth Aalseth Dellinger

Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
English

Thomas Gardner
Anthony J. Colaianne
Karen Swenson

May 2, 2017
Blacksburg, Virginia

Copyright 2017 Elizabeth A. Dellinger

“The Pattern is Movement”: Images of Timelessness and Patterns of Response in T.S. Eliot’s
Four Quartets

Elizabeth Aalseth Dellinger

ABSTRACT

T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* is full of beautiful and resounding imagery, yet the art of unfolding these images, discovering the movement and drama taking place in and between them, often remains elusive. In this thesis, I approach this problem by offering a detailed reading of Eliot’s four poems, tracing the repetition and subtle movements of these patterns of images and the connections between them. I show how in each poem, Eliot develops a set of images that uniquely depicts the entrance of the timeless into time; these images offer ways of framing the problem of responding to revelations of deeper reality, which I take to be the poem’s central drama. At the same time, across the whole of the four poems, this reoccurring drama—the issue of the intersection of the timeless with time and the poet’s response to this intersection—continues to develop, becoming more complex and layered in each of the poems. Unfolding the different but parallel movements that are enacted across the four poems gives us a better understanding of the way the poems work together as a whole, harmonizing with one another to expand and deepen the individual images and momentary expressions of emotion each poem conveys.

“The Pattern is Movement”: Images of Timelessness and Patterns of Response in T.S. Eliot’s
Four Quartets

Elizabeth Aalseth Dellinger

GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* is a complex and intricate series of poems. In this thesis, I draw on the work of key critics as I offer a detailed reading of these four poems, tracing the repetition and subtle movements of Eliot’s patterns of images and the connections between them. I show how in each poem, Eliot develops a set of images that uniquely depict revelations of deeper reality, the entrance of the timeless into time—I view the response to these revelations as the central problem of the poems. At the same time, across the whole of the four poems, this reoccurring drama—the issue of the intersection of the timeless with time and the poet’s response to this intersection—continues to develop, becoming more complex and layered in each of the poems. Following these pattern of response across the four poems gives us a better understanding of the way the poems work not only individually, but as a unified whole.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
1. <i>Burnt Norton</i> and Reflected Light.....	6
2. <i>East Coker</i> and the Dance.....	18
3. <i>The Dry Salvages</i> and the Clanging Bell.....	33
4. <i>Little Gidding</i> and Transforming Fire.....	47
Works Cited.....	61

Introduction

In 1930, T.S. Eliot described in a letter how “between the usual subjects of poetry and ‘devotional’ verse there is a very important field still very unexplored by modern poets—the experience of man in search of God, and trying to explain to himself his intenser human feelings in terms of the divine goal” (Gardner, *Composition* 29). Five years later, in 1935, Eliot developed *Burnt Norton*, which would be the first of his *Four Quartets*, though it seems unlikely that Eliot conceived the idea of the four poems as a whole until he was developing *East Coker* yet another five years later (Gardner, *Composition* 18). *East Coker*, *The Dry Salvages*, and *Little Gidding* were published in 1940, 1941, and 1943, building on the images, form, and ideas of *Burnt Norton*. Together, the four poems reach into the “unexplored” gap that Eliot identified in 1930, enacting a spiritual drama. In each poem, this drama is instigated at a place of intersection of the divine, a reality beyond the edges of human experience, with the human; the poem unfolds there an act of human response.

The patterns and structure of the poems have received the attention of numerous critics, most notably and thoroughly that of Helen Gardner. In *The Art of T.S. Eliot*, she points out the way the four poems are centered around the framework of the four seasons and also of the classical elements of air, earth, water, and fire (44-45). In *The Composition of Four Quartets*, she explores Eliot’s work in a different way, looking at the structure of the poems through the sources and experiences that influenced Eliot. All four of the poems are centered around places that were significant to Eliot, and Gardner states that the poems, “are meditations on the experiences of a lifetime, and any study of their sources must begin with biography” (29). At the same time, she insists that an “autobiographical framework” is not an adequate lens through which to understand structure of the poems (*Art* 46). While perhaps informative, neither the

repeated themes of seasons and elements nor the biographical approach to the poems that Gardner focuses on explain how the poems work, how a drama unfolds both within each poem and across the poems as a whole. That is what my thesis seeks to offer.

Another aspect of the structure of the poems many critics have noted is the parallel between Eliot's poetic form and music, expressed, for example, in the title, *Four Quartets*. Paul Murray comments that "Eliot's poem, by aspiring to the condition of music, has become a medium for the expression of experiences which might otherwise have remained incommunicable" (Murray 18). Form turning toward music in its attempt to express emotion otherwise "incommunicable" is highlighted by the five part structure of the poems—Gardner explains in depth how in each of the poems, the five movements work in parallel to develop a "statement and counter-statement, or two contrasted but related themes, like the first and second subjects of a movement in strict sonata form" (*Art* 37). However, it is not only the repetition of structural elements which makes *Four Quartets* musical—it is also the repetition of images echoed throughout the work. Harry Blamires, trying to instruct a reader in how to approach the poems, says, "The poem is *about* echoes; the poem *utilizes* echoes; the poem *is* echoes" (3). Gardner further elaborates, "One is constantly reminded of music by the treatment of the images, which recur with constant modifications" (*Art* 48).

This repetition of images is intricate and constantly unfolding. Indeed, as Eliot writes, "the detail of the pattern *is* movement" (*Burnt Norton*, italics mine). This essay attempts to trace the repetition and subtle movements of images in *Four Quartets* as a musical form of thinking, an approach to what Eliot described as a spiritual problem conducted through the echoing, chiming language of a man "trying to explain to himself his intenser human feelings in terms of the divine goal" of bringing together the realms of time and of the timeless. I draw on the work

of key critics who have begun to work on unfolding this poem, but the shape I sketch out here, based on my attempts to explain to myself the intellectual and emotional implications of Eliot's continual weaving and reweaving of core images, is necessarily my own.

This repetition in *Four Quartets* occurs not only in repeated images and their “constant modifications,” but also in the patterns that the images form in each of the poems. In each of the four poems, Eliot develops a distinctive set of images, terms, and ideas—ways characteristic of framing the problem of responding to revelations of deeper reality, which I take to be the poem's central problem. At the same time, across the whole of the four poems, this reoccurring drama—the issue of the intersection of the timeless with time and the poet's response to this intersection—continues to develop, becoming more complex and layered in each of the poems. While *Burnt Norton* prompts the initial exploration of a moment that seems both in and out of time, the following three poems not only respond to and echo *Burnt Norton*, they also frame the exploration in their own terms. These similarities and differences are difficult to hear and difficult to keep track of, but they are central to the musical thinking by which *Four Quartets*'s spiritual drama unfolds. What I offer here is one reader's sustained attempt to record and respond to these larger movements, to make meaning along with Eliot. Unfolding the different but parallel movements that are enacted across the four poems gives us a better understanding of the way the poems work together as a whole, harmonizing with one another to expand and deepen the individual images and momentary expressions of emotion each poem conveys.

As I read *Four Quartets*, Eliot unfolds the following drama. The key image of *Burnt Norton* is one of reflected light. This reflection occurs first on an imagined walk through the rose garden of an abandoned manor house, where a revelation takes place—a moment where light is reflected so radiantly that it appears to be a vision “out of heart of light,” reflection provides a

glimpse of deeper meaning existing outside of the time-bound nature of human existence. The fleeting vision of brilliant light is not the “heart of light” itself, but merely a reflection of that deeper reality. Consequently, this moment of revelation is transitory. With its end comes a sense of exile, prompting response—the beginning of a search for glimpses of this reality outside of human finitude. As this response of searching unfolds, the image of reflected light provides a new way to see time: as reflection of linear light provided the instigating timeless moment in the garden, memory serves as a way to bend and refract time’s linear nature. *Burnt Norton* depicts the response of the search for the reality hinted at by these transient and ephemeral reflections, but ultimately, finds that these intense glimpses of the “heart of light” leave the rest of the expanse of time seeming empty and meaningless.

In *East Coker*, I see Eliot responding to *Burnt Norton* and this problem of time and meaning through the development of the image of dance. The first part of *East Coker* contains a vision of ethereal dancers who appear on a summer night in an open field. Though the dance is only possible because of the rhythm that time provides, still the dancers are connected to a meaning beyond human existence through the way their dance symbolizes the sacred: “a dignified and commodious sacrament.” This image hints at the possibility of the renewal of time and humanity’s place within time, but as the poem continues, it arrives at the further realization that we are unable to comprehend this intersection of time and the timeless through our own time and experience derived knowledge. As a result, within the framework of the poem, our response must be one of waiting; this waiting is done in the darkness of our own lack of knowledge and lack of ability to see true reality.

The Dry Salvages develops yet another approach to the problem of limited human existence using nautical imagery. Eliot portrays the expanse of time as a vast, chaotic,

unpatterned sea; a life adrift on this sea is one of constant loss. Yet in the midst of this sea echoes the sound of “the tolling bell,” announcing a reality beyond the boundaries of the chaotic sea. This image of the clanging bell is both like and unlike the images of reflected light from *Burnt Norton* and of dance from *East Coker*—while it announces an intersection of the timeless with time, the announcement of the bell is “calamitous,” pointing to a reality that is not only a deeper life, but also calls for a type of death found in acquiescence to God’s will. As Eliot explores the implications of the bell’s clanging voice within time, he arrives at the conclusion that “the time of death is every moment.” With this in mind, the response *The Dry Salvages* offers is the necessity of continuing to move forward without concern for the end—in the language of the poem, to “fare forward.”

Little Gidding brings the cycle of poems to a close using fire as an image of revelation. While the initial appearance of this fire has parallels to the vision of reflected light seen in *Burnt Norton*, the fire of *Little Gidding* is described as “pentecostal”—divine flames that descend into the realm of human existence. This fire both purges and destroys, but also simultaneously transfigures and renews. In the fire, the constant death depicted in *East Coker* is paired with constant transformation. The response enacted in *Little Gidding* is the embrace of these transforming flames. Despite the tension of living within the constraints of human existence while searching for reality beyond these constraints, the embrace of constant death and renewal of transfiguring fire allows us to “move in measure, like a dancer”—motion unifying the patterns of human reality within time and the deeper reality of timelessness, tying together the attempts at response to the spiritual problem that Eliot has explored throughout *Four Quartets*.

Chapter 1: *Burnt Norton* and Reflected Light

In *Burnt Norton*, Eliot first approaches the problem of temporal existence and the search for a meaning, sensed but not understood, outside the boundaries of human finitude. *Burnt Norton*'s imagery originates from Eliot's experience visiting an old and burned manor house in 1934 (Kenner 247). Framed by an imagined walk through the abandoned gardens of the house, the poem explores the nature of time through the lens of motion. The poem's series of images and meditations seems, at first glance, to follow little pattern, despite returning to the idea of patterns repeatedly. However, throughout the poem, two types of motion are explored. There is motion that is linear, dominated by division into past, present, and future; at the same time, there is also motion that is nonlinear. In the same way that country couples in Part I of the second of Eliot's *Four Quartets* (*East Coker*) will dance "Round and round the fire / Leaping through the flames, or joined in circles," *Burnt Norton* showcases a pattern of motion that circles the "heart of light," searching for glimpses of a deeper and unobtainable reality. However, while the "heart of light" itself is unreachable, its reflections can be seen in various ways. In *Burnt Norton*, nonlinear motion and reflections that distort the linear nature of time offer a way towards experiences of the "heart of light." This overarching image of reflection repeats throughout *Burnt Norton*, an approach to the problem of limited human existence that not only gives a framework to this first poem, but also constructs a groundwork that the following three poems respond to and deepen through their different modes of exploration.

Part I

The first section of *Burnt Norton* provides imagery that resounds through the entire poem. The first ten lines of Part I meditate on the interrelated nature of the different aspects of time. Lines 6 and 9 repeat the phrase "what might have been," concluding that "what might have

been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present.” Time, when viewed from inside time, is linear. It is ruled by the divisions of the present and before and after. However, the mind can consider what was (time past) and from this imagine what could have happened—“a perpetual possibility / Only in a world of speculation.” These existences, remembered or imagined, bend the linear nature of time in the mind. They are like surfaces that the consciousness existing in the present reflects off of, allowing a moment of escape from time’s linear march.

With line 11, the poem shifts from a broad and abstract discussion of time to an entrance into one of these existences that “might have been.” This memory-like non-memory begins with the sound of footsteps:

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

The footfalls do not just sound, but they echo. These imagined echoes must take place not in the physical passageway, but in the mind of whomever the speaker is addressing, just as echoes would with a memory. An echo is a reflection of sound waves, repeated to the listener as they bounce off of a surface; here, the listener (the part of “we” that is not the speaker) experiences the speaker’s words as an echo as well—the speaker says, “My words echo / Thus, in your mind.”

These echoing words in the mind of the listener produce not merely sound, but also movement. Eliot says the words echo in the listener’s mind,

But to what purpose

Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves

I do not know.

The words of the poem stir up the dust from the rose leaves, though the speaker does not know “to what purpose” he disturbs this accumulated dust. However, by disturbing the dust through echoes of an existence that “might have been,” he creates movement, opening a space where time can be distorted and the mind can therefore escape its linear constraints and engage in the search to comprehend time.

The bowl of rose leaves seems to be dried and old, dusty, clearly existing within the deteriorating effects of linear time. It is juxtaposed against the rose garden where the echoing footsteps lead, which Steve Ellis calls “the eternal rose garden” (101). While some critics have discussed how the garden could represent “what might have been” for Eliot in regards to Emily Hale (Ellis 103), it clearly also has a larger implication that can embrace “what might have been” even for all of humanity. The description of the garden as “our first world” brings to mind the Garden of Eden, the first abode of humankind. The image of the Garden of Eden, too, points to “what might have been,” since the Bible tells that in it the first humans disobeyed God and brought sin and death into the world. The garden that Eliot and the reader enter parallels this original place of the fall of mankind. Ellis writes that the narrative of the garden and our exclusion from it “becomes the universal story of time’s denials and contradictions as a symptom of our exclusion from reality, of our existing where we are ‘not’” (103).

Entering the garden, echoes are still significant. The bird’s echoing command in line 19 (“find them, find them”) could be interpreted as instruction to find the echoes mentioned just before, that “inhabit the garden.” In line 23, the speaker and listener (“we”) discover “they—” mysterious figures who are “invisible / Moving without pressure.” Ellis points out that “although

the mystical ‘they’ of this first section are referred to as invisible and ‘unseen’, and only glimpsed as reflections, it is in fact the ‘we’ who move in a counterpoint pattern with them who are ghostly and ‘unreal’, shadows more than substance, the genuine ‘reflections’” (Ellis 101). The garden is a world where reality shifts, where “our” existence seems to be less real than that of the “invisible” figures. According to Hugh Kenner, “We are very nearly stepped into some world where happenings are simultaneous, the past actual, what might have been really so, our first world still here” (253). This is a world outside the constraints of time, or very nearly so.

The climax of the walk through the rose garden occurs when “we” and “they” reach the empty pool. Here, we see the way the memory of the manor house’s overgrown garden is layered in the mind with the mystical garden that “might have been.” The pool is drained, unused: “Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged.” And yet, being in the “eternal rose garden” (Ellis 101), it is not merely a broken and empty pool. Eliot writes:

The pool was filled with water out of sunlight

And the lotus rose, quietly, quietly,

The surface glittered out of heart of light.

The pool is filled—not with water, but with “water out of sunlight,” while the lotus rises gracefully in the light-water, an image of stillness. Most significant is the “water’s” glittering surface—a vision of light so brilliant it appears to be shining “out of heart of light.” This description parallels the story of the hyacinth girl in the first section of “The Waste Land.” In that poem, the speaker recalls the moment when he saw the hyacinth girl and was unable to speak; in fact, he claims to have been “neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing, / Looking into the heart of light, the silence.” In both poems, the speakers experience a glimpse of “the

heart of light”—a moment where they see a sort of reality so deep and beautiful that it cannot be expressed.

But in *Burnt Norton*'s rose garden, the moment quickly ends. With the passing of a cloud, the vision of light is cut off. The light was not the deeper reality itself, but a reflection of that reality, light creating an image by reflecting in a dry pool. With the cloud and the ensuing command of the bird to “go,” the moment is over: “Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind / Cannot bear very much reality.” The rose garden has returned to being merely the neglected garden of a burned mansion, because humanity is not capable of comprehension of the depth of this “reality.” In imitation of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, we are exiled from the vision of the rose garden. With this vision and subsequent exile, the pattern of the poem is established—the reflection of light becoming the instigating force in both the search for the “heart of light” in *Burnt Norton* as well as the catalyst for the different approaches taken to understanding this moment in the rest of *Four Quartets*.

Part II

Burnt Norton's second part offers explorations of time and the world, searching for ways to escape linear time and gain glimpses of the “heart of light.” Following the exile from the “reality” found in the rose garden, we begin an exploration of the world outside the garden—the world entrapped by time. Part II develops the motion of ascent, rising to a perspective from which the world is seen from above. This occurs first in fifteen lines that begins with “Garlic and sapphires in the mud”—in the very dirt of earth—and rises up as we “ascend to summer in the tree,” moving toward the pattern “reconciled among the stars.” This lines use an unusual amount of end rhyme in comparison to the rest of the poem. Though following no particular pattern, these rhymes, occurring in regular, short, lines, are reminiscent of the echoing pattern of

footsteps found in the first section. The rhymes emphasize the sense of movement and progression.

Through this upwards movement, this part of the poem demonstrates a world that, viewed from the level of the stars, moves smoothly in its set patterns. Preston writes that this movement “is a vision of the ordered universe in which movement from one part of it to another seems so effortless that it is not movement at all, and it is the whole of which we are conscious” (15), while Kenner describes the view seen from this perspective by explaining, “A harmonious circling order comprehends all movement” (254). The reason for this “harmonious circling order” is the image established in these fifteen lines, which also provides the basis for the rest of Part II. Kenner describes how “The axle-tree appears to be that of the turning heavens, its lower end...embedded in our soil” (254). In this way, the turning of the earth is connected to the movement of the heavens and turning of the stars above. This picture develops the motion of circling—everything turns around one axle.

The image of the axle-tree sets the stage for the second part of Part II, which is a more abstract meditation on “the still point of the turning world,” and the search for this still point. The “still point” is something that is separate from the constant pattern of motion contained in the world; this point is

Neither flesh nor fleshless;

Neither from nor towards...

Neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,

Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,

Neither ascent nor decline.

Looked at through the image of the axle-tree, it is the point of intersection between the world and a reality outside of the world—in this way, it is very similar to the moment in the garden when the “heart of light” became visible. Kenner says of the experience in the garden in Part I, “It is some apprehension of the still point, where past and future are gathered, that has occurred” (254). Viewed from within the “still point,” demarcations of time become meaningless, because the real motion is a pattern of circling around a point. Ellis explains, “Any experience of timeless reality reveals our earthly coordinates of time and place to be provisional and insubstantial; the *Quartets* insists throughout that the division into past, present and future is itself merely conventional” (102). Delineation of time into past, present, and future is a linear model; it is the way time appears from within time—the opposite of “the still point,” where “the dance is.”

Moments of understanding the “still point” involve a consciousness that moves outside of time to see the deeper reality; as line 85 states, “To be conscious is not to be in time.” However, humankind’s location within time make the “still point” unobtainable, for “time past and time future / Allow but little consciousness.” Despite striving for the consciousness found at the “still point,” humanity is still trapped within the linear appearance of time. Just as in Part I humanity was exiled from the garden because “human kind / Cannot bear very much reality,” here in Part II,

The enchainment of past and future
 Woven in the weakness of the changing body,
 Protects mankind from heaven and damnation
 Which flesh cannot endure.

As Kenner explains about the exile from the garden into time, “It is as a concession to our weakness that we are shut up in the present moment” (253). The limitation of consciousness

caused by “enchainment” within the delineation of past, present, and future keeps us from the intensity of a reality that we could not withstand.

However, lines 86-89 point out that time is necessary to remember certain moments. The poem says:

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

These moments are part of time, the linear past. However, even within time, they can be remembered. Memory creates a reflection of these moments—not the moments themselves, but their past light reflected into the present and future. Memory uses time itself to step out of time. In Part I’s language of echoes, time becomes the sounding board off of which the deeper reality echoes. The “heart of light” (or, as Part II calls it in line 73, “a white light still and moving”) is reflected by time through memory, allowing glimpses of its light even in our earthly, time-bound state. Time may “allow but a little consciousness,” but through reflection, it does allow a little. “Only through time time is conquered”—only within time can memory operate, bending time’s linear appearance through reflection and bringing us “a little consciousness” of the light.

Part III

The poem’s third part descends into an entirely different realm. Kenner makes sense of some of the imagery by explaining that this section takes place on an underground metro platform (255). The platform is illuminated by “dim light,” neither the full light of the sun nor full darkness. The people moving through this space wear “strained time-ridden faces.” The description of their motion and appearance is reminiscent of the “Unreal City” found in Eliot’s

“The Waste Land.” This section of *Burnt Norton* creates a contrast between the previously explored “reality” of the “still point” and the shadowy unreality of “time-ridden” lives.

The characters peopling this dim underground world are “distracted from distraction by distraction” and are filled with “tumid apathy with no concentration.” They are not involved in the search for deeper reality and light, but are dispassionate, simply distracted by whatever comes into sight. The poem describes how they are

Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind

That blows before and after time,

Wind in and out of unhealthy lungs

Time before and time after. (105-108)

They are trapped in the linear progression of time, ruled by “time before and time after,” but they seek no escape. Instead they are merely blown along, not thinking any more deeply than the dim appearance of the world. The end of the section says “the world moves...on its metallated ways / Of time past and time future.” Again, the image of being caught in time is linear motion: here, an underground train.

The alternative is to seek the deeper reality, and here that is presented in the invitation to “descend lower.” The descent into darkness seems counterintuitive, if the goal is to seek “the heart of light.” But as line 116 makes clear, this is a descent into a world “that is not world.” Therefore, this descending process of self-abnegation is an attempt to escape the world that the people on the dim platform just accept without thinking. Line 124 says the way to seek is in “abstention from movement.” However, we already know that humanity is exiled from the true center of reality, the “still point.” This abstention, therefore, must be an abstention from blindly accepting the linear movement of time that the world embraces. Instead, to reinsert the image of

the axle-tree from Part II, achieving stillness that cannot be at the center but is within the rotation around the center brings the seeker into circular motion. This non-linear motion is a reflection of the “still point,” and is the pattern that allows for glimpses of the “heart of light.”

Part IV

The short fourth section returns again to the surface of the world and the light of the sun. Just as in the first section a cloud came across the sun, ending the reflection of light in the pool that allowed vision into the “heart of light,” so here in Part IV, “the black cloud carries the sun away.” With the passing of the sun, even the plants that rely on the sun turn away from humanity. It is as if they recognize mankind’s transience, something to which they cannot “clutch and cling,” even though they are transient as well. The plants recall the foliage and flowers of the Part I garden, though they are different. The sun’s disappearance and the sunflower, clematis, and yew’s rejection reasserts the sense of exile that was introduced at the end of Part I.

However, in this exile, there is a flashing moment of light:

After the kingfisher’s wing

Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still

At the still point of the turning world. (134-136)

This light is a reflection, as the kingfisher’s wing catches a beam of sun and glints brilliantly for just an instant. Kenner points out, “[The sun] subtly becomes (for Eliot does not name it) a type of the still point where every variety of light inheres, which transient phenomena reflect” (257). The flash of the kingfisher’s wing is a reflection of the more permanent light, the “still point of the turning world,” the deeper reality. The sun itself is not these things, but the way in which it is a constant light source reflected on the transient movements in our world makes it a picture for

the way that the “heart of light,” too, can sometimes appear in reflections in the time-bound world.

Part V

The fifth section expands that transience explored in Part IV to other concepts—words, music. These, too, are in motion:

Words strain,
 Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
 Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
 Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
 Will not stay still.

Of course, the poem itself is composed of words that will not stay still. The way that “words or music reach / The stillness” is “only by the form, the pattern.” *Burnt Norton* demonstrates this by the way that words, phrases, and images circle and reappear non-linearly, in different manners and contexts. Through this Eliot strives to create space where stillness can be explored, where the limitations of past, present, and future are questioned. The poem establishes a pattern of stillness that is movement, like the “still point” of the axle-tree in Part II, and like the instantaneous but perpetually still (because its motion perpetually exists in the poem’s words and our minds) moment of reflection on the kingfisher’s wing in Part IV.

The last few lines of the fifth section come full circle (recalling the circular pattern of motion sought throughout the poem), returning to the imagery of the garden used at the beginning of the poem:

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
 Even while the dust moves

There rises the hidden laughter

Of children in the foliage

Quick now, here, now, always.

The dust harkens back to the dust that was stirred up, blown off of the bowl of rose leaves by the echo of words, in Part I. There, the purpose of that action remained to be seen. Here, the action having producing motion, we see the result. The moving dust is caught “sudden in a shaft of sunlight.” Though the poem does not describe the effect, the reader can imagine the image of dust illuminated by sunlight, becoming dancing pinpricks of gold, reflecting the light. Its movement allows for reflection, and the dust is transformed. The poem does describe the result of this moment of transformation—the sound of “hidden laughter / Of children in the foliage,” which was heard in part I in the rose garden, is heard again. Through the stirring up of the dust and its reflection of sunlight, the moment of the vision of the “heart of light” from the rose garden is glimpsed again. It is “now, here, now, always”—a unification of “now” and “always” that acknowledges time, but is not centered on the linear motion of time.

The very last two lines, too, come back to time and to our entrapment within its linear motion. They lament, “Ridiculous the waste sad time / Stretching before and after.” Humanity can never completely escape seeing time as “stretching before and after,” laid out in past, present, and future. To one who has glimpsed the reflection of the deeper reality of the “heart of light,” this view of time appears “ridiculous,” as “waste sad time.” Though *Burnt Norton*, then Eliot develops a set of images—movement in nonlinear circling pattern and glimpses of reflections that bend our view of linear time—and through these, he guides his reader into the beginning of a search for visions of reality’s light.

2. *East Coker* and the Dance

Burnt Norton explores the moment that allows us a glimpse outside of the linear veneer of time, that unites seeming paradoxes, and that makes the time “stretching before and after” seem to be “ridiculous...waste sad time.” *East Coker* responds to this problem by delving into this expanse of time before and after, probing into the “ridiculousness,” darkness, and seeming endlessness of human limitation in the face of such a moment of vision. As Helen Gardner says in *The Art of Four Quartets*, *East Coker* is a poem of response (168)—response to the moment of illumination, but also to the experiences of life and of time that this moment throws into sharp relief. *East Coker* begins to ask how the moment “in and out of time” can be reconciled with human life: life expelled from “too much reality,” caught in the ceaseless and seemingly meaningless patterns of life and death. The poem questions whether existence in time negates the potential of meaningfulness; whether the seemingly infinite distance separating the timeless and sacred from the finite and bounded allows the potential of hope for deeper reality. Eliot explores this question through the image of dance—an image that builds upon the paradox of stillness and motion developed in *Burnt Norton*, gracefully tying together the motion of time and the stillness of waiting into the search for meaning and deeper reality.

Part I

In *East Coker*, Eliot goes back to his beginning, making “a journey into a remote past, beyond personal memory”: the village of Somerset, from which his ancestors originated before emigrating to the New World in 1669 (Gardner, *Composition* 42). In this beginning, he also sees an end; in the changing of the village across the succession of generations appears the endless cyclicity of life, of its perpetual beginnings and ends. The space of a lifetime seems negligible within the perpetual cycles of generation and destruction:

Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,
 Old fire to ashes, and ashes to the earth
 Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,
 Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf.

The repeated refrain, “a time for...,” reminds us of the futility of life pictured in *Ecclesiastes*; Kenner comments, “The presence of *Ecclesiastes* within ten lines of the opening serves to remind us that the pervasive somberness is more than personal, that it is a view of the world that has seemed tenable to men of every generation” (266). The personal but distant past Eliot delves into is tied into the passage of time on a larger scale, to the experiences of many lives, to the rise and fall of many “houses.”

Within this sweeping view of the cyclic, unchanging rhythms of time, Eliot pictures himself in the lane outside the village in the late afternoon. The wide lens of the poem narrows to this one point; the poem “contrasts with these cycles and ages a single day; and sets against the inevitabilities of the seasons and of historic change the erratic movements of psychological and mental time” (Gardner, *Composition* 42). The scene in the lane is characterized by a slowness and pervasive quietness that seems to subdue thought, sleepiness that feels like enchantment or a dream. The stillness of the scene in the lane, is, as Reibetanz says, “a stillness very different from the stillness that is dancing, at the still point; this is a numbed and deathlike stillness, which can only “Wait” for the bird of night” (58). The lane is a place for waiting rather than action; it is “shuttered” and dark, heat radiates hypnotically, even the “dahlias sleep,” and “the sultry light / Is absorbed, not refracted, by grey stone.” Without, perhaps, knowing exactly the significance of what he is waiting for, the lone figure waits within the constraints of the lane for what is to come.

While the lane itself may be shuttered, as “summer midnight” approaches, the view into the open field expands into a vision. The dream-like sense of being under a spell that was present in the afternoon lane is continued here through the repeated warning, “if you do not come too close, if you do not come too close.” The ephemeral dancing figures of the vision are described in the archaic language of the 1531 *The Booke of the Governour* (Gardner, *Composition* 42), recalling Eliot’s distant familial beginnings, reminding us of the passage of time. Kenner argues, “This dance, though it comes to us in a vision, is not the one containing “neither arrest not movement” which is located “at the still point of the turning world.” It is merely a Tudor festival of fire, now superseded; an incident in the unecstatic rhythm of peasant life” (264). However, there is an unmistakable parallel between the dance, the motion orbiting the brightness of the fire’s light, and the picture of light and the central “still point” of *Burnt Norton*. Though the dance is infused with the dancers’ humanness—“rustic” solemnity and laughter, dancers with “heavy feet in clumsy shoes”—yet the dancers still spin around the light, “keeping time, / Keeping the rhythm in their dancing.” The rhythm they keep is that of time, and without time and rhythm there could be no dance. The patterns of stars and of seasons, the “times” that again echo Ecclesiastes, the beat of “feet rising and falling,” of “eating and drinking,” of, finally, “dung and death” are all part of the dance.

The dance itself is declared to be a symbol, “signifying matrimonie— / A dignified and commodious sacrament.” The sense of the sacredness of the dance, the whirling around the center of light that vividly echoes *Burnt Norton*’s circling around the still point, is amplified by its alignment with holy sacrament. And yet, the sacred and visionary scene is also lodged firmly in time, in seasons, and in human bodies; Reibetanz points out that in the dance, the bestial and corporeal are combined with the spiritual and holy (61). This alliance reflects the central

question of the poem, the reconciliation of revelation and of deeper reality with the sense of limited existence we experience within time, bodies, and language.

Following the vision, the light of dawn brings the speaker into another day, a return to the “heat and silence” of the previous day. But within the cycle of day and night, within the heat and silence, the vision leaves the lingering suggestion of movement where “out at sea the dawn wind / Wrinkles and slides.” The open field has shifted into an image of the open sea, with the hint of possibilities not yet seen: “I am here / Or there, or elsewhere. In my beginning.”

Part II

The harmony and rhythm of the dance of Part I is contrasted by the immediate sense of chaos in Part II. The seasons and patterns of the natural world are in disarray, as spring and summer intersect with “late November” and flowers appearing out of season “writhe” and “tumble down,” weighted by snow. The stars that, in the parallel Part II of *Burnt Norton*, “reconciled” and “appeas[ed]” earthly patterns of war and conflict (BN) here are themselves involved in conflict—the constellation of the “Scorpion fights against the sun,” the “Sun and Moon go down,” and “comets weep.” Reibetanz connects this depiction of chaos in the cosmos to a “time-honoured convention of portraying macrocosmic upheavals to echo and extend human conflicts” (63), but for Eliot, these dramatic poetic images of a universe out of control, “whirled in a vortex,” ultimately still make a “not very satisfactory” attempt at meaning.

As a result, Eliot makes yet another beginning, leaving behind his “periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion.” He turns instead to the chaotic nature of human life that fails to follow a straight and logical progression—the failed expectations of “the long looked forward to, / Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity / And the wisdom of age.” Time, “stretching before and after” (BN), proves unsatisfactory. Words and poetry, too, are “not...what one had

expected.” The apparent wisdom of the “quiet-voiced elders” does not bring peace, but is merely a choice of distance and disconnection, of a sort of apathy. Whether they face the impending darkness or turn away, their knowledge and perceived wisdom are ineffective for discerning any real meaning. The mention of “the darkness...from which they turned their eyes” recalls *The Hollow Men*, where images of “eyes” echo repeatedly; like the darkness through which old men’s experience-derived wisdom cannot pierce, “the Shadow” of *The Hollow Men* falls

Between the idea

And the reality

Between the motion

And the act...

Between the emotion

And the response.

The “wisdom” of the elders is useless against the darkness, “the Shadow,” the veil between ideas and outside reality. Wisdom drawn from time-bound, corporeal existence is useless in ascertaining meaning from or an adequate response to experiences of such as the moment of light in *Burnt Norton*’s garden.

Hopes of obtaining real knowledge through age and the passing of time, the attempts at defining meaning through “knowledge derived from experience” all turn out to be a deception, pushing blindly and futilely against darkness: “knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies.” Knowledge derived from experience implies that there is a discernible, discoverable pattern to existence. However, as in the vision of the dance around the fire, where the rhythms of time and the repetition of the natural world provided structure for a “pattern” constantly in motion, constantly changing in the flickering light of the flames, “the pattern is new in every moment /

And every moment is a new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been.” The knowledge derived from experience inside human boundaries is not adequate to explain the glimpsed, half-seen, half-sensed depth of reality that lies outside those boundaries.

Such a realization poignantly recalls the feeling of the emptiness of time expressed at the end of *Burnt Norton*, and leaves Eliot with a clearer understanding of the human position—not just “in the middle of the way,” partway along a journey, but “all the way, in a dark wood, in a bramble.” There is “no secure foothold,” no hope that through using language or obtaining knowledge we will devise a way forward; moreover, it is a place full of danger—“menaced by monsters, fancy lights, / Risking enchantment.” The risks are high: the risk of distraction, the risk of being misled into the insignificant, the risk of blindly succumbing to a false sense of self-sufficient apathy. This is the folly of the “quiet-voiced elders,” the men who choose “deliberate hebetude” rather than recognize the limits of their knowledge and in that, be forced to face what they fear—“fear and frenzy,” “possession,” “belonging to another, or to others, or to God.” The “old men” fear being out of control, the sensation that Eliot attempted to describe in the first stanza of Part II; they fear “possession” and “belonging”—being immersed in something that will bring them to the periphery of their own autonomy. They live in a position of chosen false security, content with “the knowledge of dead secrets” instead of actual wisdom, ignoring both the darkness into which they cannot see and fleeting revelations of light they cannot understand.

Confronting the boundaries of human experience, the failure of “knowledge derived from experience” to explicate meaning, Eliot comes to a conclusion about the nature of true wisdom—“The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / Is the wisdom of humility.” Humility recognizes the edges of human existence, recognizes that no matter how much it appears that we can see reality, human experience is one of limitation—within language that never truly expresses meaning or

within physical and temporal existence. While experience may give us some little knowledge of the present, this knowledge is no “secure foothold”; it offers only a false sense of security. As the houses and vision of Part I disappear from our sight—“the houses are all gone under the sea. / The dancers are all gone under the hill”—so we, in the context of the poem, are forced to acknowledge the darkness that surrounds us. In awareness of this darkness, we find “the wisdom of humility,” a true reckoning of ourselves and of the value of all our knowledge.

Part III

The disappearance of the houses and the dancers at the end of *East Coker*'s Part II leads to the imagery of Part III—a procession into darkness in which everyone takes part, knowingly or unknowingly, willingly or unwillingly. From the important to the self-important, from “captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters” to “petty contractors,” all join the march into the dark. Even the “Sun and Moon” in their places of importance in the natural world and the catalogues of the significant people and events of the time follow in this inevitable destiny. In line 111, we, too, are carried along “into the silent funeral.” The silence echoes the silences of Part I, the silences of the edges of existence and perception, where all goes dark and beyond which our knowledge is not sufficient to illuminate. There is “no one to bury,” because all the actors in the drama have been slipped beyond the realm of the knowable, of the senses, of the clear “motive of action.” The speaker, recognizing himself as a participant in this progression into darkness, responds not in the way of “old men”—of fear of immersion, of attempts to cling to the half-light of “knowledge derived from experience”—but instead instructs himself to “be still, and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God.”

Eliot illustrates this acceptance of “the darkness of God” in three images—a theater that is plunged in darkness as the scene is changed, a train on the underground that stops in between

stations, and the moment as a patient's mind is submerged into unconsciousness under ether. Gardner comments that in all three situations "the activity required is simply waiting" (*Art* 167); in each of Eliot's images, the darkness and the emptiness is not final, but is a period of waiting for an as-yet-unseen continuation. In the theater, the audience waits as the current scenery, "the hills and trees, the distant panorama / And the bold imposing façade are all being rolled away." They wait because even though this change happens invisibly, "with a movement of darkness on darkness," they know the lights will be relit and there will be a new scene, though perhaps they do not know exactly what that scene will be. On the underground, as the train pauses in the darkness between stations, the initial surprised conversations slowly fail, trailing into a growing emptiness and silence. In the silence, the passengers feel the "mental emptiness deepen" as they think not about where they are going, but instead wait in the moment of uncertainty to feel the lurch of the train starting to move again. Lastly, the patient going under ether is "conscious but conscious of nothing"—unaware of past or future, but merely present and existent at that moment.

This waiting in darkness is "without hope," "without love," and "without thought" of the specific, because the human mind cannot see past the present darkness to see the deeper reality at which hope and love and thought aim. The act of waiting is done in faith, and "the faith and love and the hope are all in the waiting"; faith, love, and hope are fixed on the as-yet-unseen reality beyond the obscuring darkness. Eliot's connection of faith, love, and hope is an obvious allusion to 1 Corinthians 13, where only a verse before mentioning these three qualities, Paul writes, "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." What has been reflected in moments of revelation, what is

glimpsed now only in infinitesimal part, points to the reality that “shall be” but is not yet, the reality for which we wait—“the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.”

Streams that hint in a “whisper,” the ephemeral flash of “winter lightning,” the surprising scent of “wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,” are all, like *Burnt Norton*’s hidden children laughing in the garden, traces of the light that is just out of sight. Through sound, sight, and scent, these glimpses point to the possibility of reality even beyond the perceptive abilities of the physical senses. If the physical senses, like the knowledge derived from experience, are not enough to allow vision into deeper reality, then this points the need to voluntarily enter darkness and allow these senses to go “cold”; the hope offered by the glimpses of light and dancing, the echoes of an “ecstasy / Not lost,” is the renewal of senses and knowledge beyond their current limitations, beyond the boundaries of temporal and physical human reality. These glimpses require and point to “the agony / Of death and birth”—a willingness to journey into an experience in life akin to death, at last culminating in death itself, in the hope of the possibility of rebirth and renewal to reality even beyond human imagination.

The last fourteen lines of Part III, drawn from St. John of the Cross, echo the necessity of this paradoxical willingness to journey beyond the edges of knowledge, possession, and grasped existence—into darkness—in order to “arrive” at these goals in a truer sense. The road toward the “echoed ecstasy” is “a way wherein there is no ecstasy.” You cannot journey toward a destination you know if you hope to arrive at true knowledge, so “to arrive at what you do not know / You must go by a way that is the way of ignorance.” The only way to “possess what you do not possess” is to give up what you do possess that utterly inadequate in light of your destination, “to go by the way of dispossession.” Your very self and being must be laid aside, since “to arrive at what you are not / You must go through the way in which you are not”—the

titles and actions, knowledge and possessions, location and identity by which one defines oneself must be lost in the venture into the darkness, where human structures of knowledge and definition break down. At last, in this darkness, one is left with nothing but humility, where “what you do not know is the only thing you know / And what you own is what you do not own / And where you are is where you are not.” Neither the moment of illumination, in itself only a hint, nor the knowledge gained from a life within human limitations can bring us to our destination; recognizing this through humility, we are compelled to abandon everything we thought we possessed in order to enter the darkness in the faith of finding something more.

Part IV

In part IV, Eliot juxtaposes Part III’s image of journey into darkness, destitution, and humility with the image of a hospital and the patients receiving care there. With these meditations, Eliot ties together themes built in the earlier part of the poem—in a letter about *East Coker*, he wrote that “part IV...is in a way the heart of the matter.” He also added, paradoxically, “But the poem as a whole—this five part form—is an attempt to weave several quite unrelated strands together in an emotional whole, so that really there isn’t any heart of the matter” (Gardner, *Composition* 109). The various emotional strands present in images throughout *East Coker*—the need to recognize our insufficiency and to wait in darkness and humility—are here woven into a further layer of meaning.

The imagery of the hospital develops out of the third of Eliot’s pictures of waiting in darkness in Part III, but in Part IV we encounter a picture that more overtly reveals both the desperate need of the patients and the self-sacrificing nature of the healer who brings the hope of a path through darkness. We find ourselves ill, diseased, “distempered”—in a desperate situation that we are incapable of changing. To be healed, we must be aware of our illness and must

choose to submit to a care that seems to lead away from the very end—the light, the dancing, the ecstasy—that we seek: “to be restored, our sickness must grow worse.” The necessity of humility and of waiting that the first the parts of *East Coker* pictured echo here, but are further complicated by the presence of other characters—the “wounded surgeon,” the “dying nurse,” and the “ruined millionaire.”

While many critics have debated how to interpret each individual figure and image that Eliot mentions in this section of the poem, Gardner argues, “Precise annotation of this kind may destroy the imaginative power of this restatement of the cost of salvation,” instead pointing out the similarities of Part IV with Scriptural passages such as Isaiah 53 and Philippians 2 that portray Christ’s suffering, humility, and self-sacrificing love (*Art* 65-6). The echoes of Christ’s willingness to descend into the darkness of humanity’s temporal existence, to suffer and to experience the ultimate expression of human finitude through death, add to the image of waiting and of darkness. According to the poem, we are not just patients waiting alone and without visible hope in darkness, but an act of healing is being performed on us. We are the objects of a “sharp compassion”—the journey of healing may be painful and dark, but healing is performed by a healer who knows our pain, who has entered our reality and has “bleeding hands.”

The poem seems to put us into a position of darkness and waiting, where we choose to give up our ideas of autonomy and self-sufficiency. But Christ’s humility gives us sustaining hope in this waiting—in the midst of the place where our recognition of the fallibility of our knowledge, experience, and perception of reality left us, the “dark wood... where there is no secure foothold,” we may not be able to see what “shall be,” but we see the figure of the “wounded surgeon” with us in our darkness. Faith rests not on a momentary vision, but on a perpetually present Healer, for “the lyric is a poem on the Passion, thought of not as a single

historic event, but as an eternal act perpetually operative in time, and the Passion is linked with the Eucharist” (Gardner, *Art* 168).

Christ’s humility in his incarnation requires our humility in recognition of our need and dependency. Choosing to call Good Friday “good,” Eliot argues, spites our own conceptions “that we are sound, substantial flesh and blood;” instead, in this choice we pronounce our reliance on Christ’s “dripping blood” and “bloody flesh,” made visible for us through the mystery of the sacrament of communion. Partaking in the sacrament professes the depth of our insubstantiality, of our need and our dependency. From one perspective, this declaration of “the dripping blood our only drink, / The bloody flesh our only food” seems mysterious, ritualistic, and largely incomprehensible. Yet through *East Coker*’s exploration of the intersection of the timeless into time, Eliot offers another point of view: “For the Christian reader, who is accustomed to meditate upon the mystery, a familiar doctrine is made strange, while for the non-Christian reader, who has followed the poet with sympathy so far, a new possibility of meaning is suggested in a language and way of thought he had regarded as obsolete” (Gardner, *Art* 64).

Part V

After the meditation of Part IV, Eliot turns inward, towards his own life and pursuit as a poet, the attempt to utilize words to express real meaning. He reflects that after twenty years, he is still “trying to learn to use words,” finding “every attempt / ...a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure.” By the time something is said, it becomes “the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which / One is no longer disposed to say it.” There are no successes; words, constantly shifting, are wholly insufficient to capture a meaning that is itself continually unfolding. In these attempts to use language, “each venture / Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate,” pushing against the limits of human experience, yet never fully capturing meaning.

Language makes “shabby equipment always deteriorating;” it falls short of bringing definition and order to “the general mess of imprecision of feeling.”

But what a poet can do, according to Eliot in “What Dante Means to Me,” is expand the possibilities of language: “in developing the language, enriching the meaning of words and showing how much words can do, he is making possible a much greater range of emotion and perception for other men, because he gives them the speech in which more can be expressed” (134). While language, as a part of physical, temporal, limited human existence, may never be successful for a “raid on the inarticulate,” it still allows us to more fully feel the weight of our very humanness and all that our experience of human existence entails. Reibetanz remarks that Eliot’s poetry “communicate[s] religious experience in an age when such experience is waning, to foster and revivify religious sensibility when the ability to feel any emotion toward God is dying” (89); through language, Eliot opens doors to emotions that might otherwise remain unexplored for many readers.

And while past poets and writers, “men whom one cannot hope / To emulate,” such as Dante, may have already explored these realms of emotion, their past attempts do not negate the need for continued attempts to create meaning, as Eliot does in this poem and I attempt in this thesis. After all, artistic exploration is not linear or progressive; as Blamires comments, “Virgil does not improve progressively upon Homer...Each poetic masterpiece represents a new start and a different kind of failure” (73). Therefore, comparison is not helpful—instead, “There is only the fight to recover what has been lost / And found and lost again and again.” There is only the continual need to venture out into the attempt to express inexpressible meaning, to accept inevitable failure and to begin once again. “For us,” Eliot writes, “there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.”

In the humility required for this pattern of continual trying, Eliot recognizes that “home”—the seemingly understandable, comprehensible world where time moves in an orderly progression and we are confident of our own location within it, is itself only a beginning. Like every beginning, it is a place “where one starts from,” where one leaves and discovers that the “world is stranger, the pattern more complicated / Of dead and living.” The village of *East Coker*, with its graveyard of “old stones that cannot be deciphered,” becomes more than a representation of Eliot’s personal, ancestral beginning—it also launches him into renewed exploration of the indecipherable pattern, the vast unknowable edges of reality. He realizes that the pattern is not solely about “the intense moment / Isolated, with no before and after,” nor is it “the lifetime of one man only”—the moments so intense that they make the rest of time’s expanse look like “waste sad time / Stretching before and after” (BN). A moment, like the moment of vision in the rose garden, is only a reflection of the depth of the pattern that lies outside that moment; a lifetime is only the collected experiences of one person. But the greater and “more complicated” pattern means there is “a lifetime burning in every moment;” it burns both in the “evening under starlight,” dreaming and looking forward, and in the “evening under lamplight,” reminiscing and looking back.

“Here and now” and “here and there,” markers of our temporal and physical location, do not matter. Instead, what matters is the search for meaning, for the pattern of light and revelation that is present in “every moment” in a sort of incarnation. Accepting darkness yet alive to light, accepting inevitable failure yet continuing to try, “we must be still and still moving”—participants in the time-bound, yet timeless dance. Old men, rather than being the fearful and complacent figures of *East Coker*’s Part II, “ought to be explorers.” We, too, as explorers, must continue

Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrol and the porpoise.

The darkness, emptiness, and vastness of the boundaries of our human knowledge are the landscape through which we must travel. This traveling is a kind of waiting; the willingness to enter and to explore it is our path toward “another intensity / ...a further union, a deeper communion.” This is *East Coker*’s response to *Burnt Norton*’s experience of illumination that left the rest of time seeming empty and wasted: that moment of vision was only a beginning of a journey that affects every moment, that ultimately leads to a truer and deeper reality than an isolated moment can give. In what seems like an end—the end of a moment, the end of a lifetime, the end of being able to see as we enter darkness—is a part of the dance, and therefore a beginning.

3. *The Dry Salvages* and the Clanging Bell

While *East Coker* approaches a response to humanity's position within "waste sad time" through the scene of Eliot's personal and historical connection with the village of Somerset, leading to the vision of dance that draws time and timelessness together into meaning, *The Dry Salvages* enacts a response to the problem on an even larger scale. The end of *East Coker*, the understanding that "home is where one starts from" and that we should be explorers, "still and still moving," launched us out onto the sea. *The Dry Salvages* develops this image of the sea more fully. Though the poem draws on Eliot's memories of places that were significant to him—Gardner writes that it is "soaked in memories of childhood and youth," of Eliot's developing years living near the Mississippi River and summers spent at the coast in New England (46-7)—these memories translate into an image of a sea of time that is incomprehensibly vast, empty, and endless. We find ourselves, in our attempt to become explorers, lost in the vastness of this sea. Yet like the moment of timeless light that broke into time in *Burnt Norton* and the vision of dance that illuminated darkness and waiting in *East Coker*, on the sea of *The Dry Salvages* we find another picture of revelation—the clanging of the sea bell that announces the intersection of deeper reality with our world. As in the previous poems, this unique vision of the intersection of outside reality with the limited realm of humanity necessitates the need for response—the drive to "fare forward."

Part I

Eliot begins his image of time in *The Dry Salvages* not with the sea, but with the river. The river gives him a sense of self-consciousness, an awareness of humanness by contrast—"I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river is / Is a strong brown god." Yet ultimately, the river is comprehensible; though it remains uncontrollable and other, "sullen,

untamed and intractable,” humanity’s relationship with the river becomes one of apparent, if still somewhat uneasy, peace. While the river once represented “a frontier,” the edges of knowledge and existence, gradually this frontier has been taken over; first the river, still “untrustworthy,” is put into use as a trade route, and then as the city surrounds the river further, the river becomes a “problem,” only significant because of the need to build bridges across it. At last, this too is accomplished, and the river that was at first a frontier “is almost forgotten / By the dwellers in the cities.” However, despite being forgotten and bridged over, no longer being something that humans consciously struggle with, the river is still powerful; it still marks the patterns of seasons—the same seasons that echo in daily life from childhood to old age:

His rhythm was present in the nursery bedroom,
 In the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard,
 In the smell of grapes on the autumn table,
 And the evening circle in the winter gaslight.

Gardner writes, “‘The river is within us.’ We feel it in our pulses. This is our earliest conception of time; something we become aware of by the change of seasons, and by our own growth” (*Art* 170). While, in the poem, the river is later subsumed by city and no longer recognized as a frontier, it is still present and powerful.

In contrast to the river that seems knowable, bridgeable, comprehensible, even while it retains its own power, the sea is not “within us,” but “all about us.” The sea defines our limits; it is “the land’s edge.” Moore points out that “the river flows through the land, but the sea bounds it, touching it only to deposit the relics, mementos of different times and places, which are its heritage” (41). Eliot does not describe the land as reaching into the sea, but the sea reaching into the granite rocks of the coast; the sea is in motion and “tosses / Its hints of earlier and other

creation” onto the shore. These “hints” are traces of a vast natural world that appears as pieces of a world mysterious and other to us—“The starfish, the horseshoe crab,” and even a whale, fragmented into only the stark image of “the whale’s backbone.” Still other offerings tossed up by the sea are strange in their fluidity and fragility—the “delicate algae and the sea anemone.” These “hints” from the sea come to us fragmented and fragile, mysterious and largely inaccessible, tiny pieces of a vast realm that exists outside of the patterns of human existence.

The sea also tosses back remnants of fragility and fragmentation that are human, “our losses.” From the waves comes “the torn seine / The shattered lobsterpot, the broken oar / And the gear of foreign dead men.” What is broken, shattered, lost, and human but foreign—relics of human life and experience—what was once defined and familiar is returned unfamiliar and purposeless. The sea covers everything near it with an aura of strangeness; “the salt is on the briar rose,” encrusting its petals in jeweled unfamiliarity, and “the fog is in the fir trees,” blotting out the trees’ familiar shapes.

The voice of the sea is not the comprehensible murmur of one god, like the river, but is a chaotic jumble of “many voices, / Many gods and many voices.” Under the “oppression of the silent fog,” the sea voices sound out from unseen origins, their sounds weird and animal-like: a “howl,” “yelp,” and “whine,” the sound of a wave that is both a “menace and caress,” the “distant rote” that sounds from ominous “granite teeth,” and the “wailing warning...are all sea voices.” Gardner describes the sea as “a meaningless perpetual flux, a repetition without pattern, to which each separate voyage adds nothing but itself” (*Art* 171). Unlike the river, the sea is unbridgeable, incomprehensible, and unpredictable. The sea takes all that is humanly knowable and fragments and shatters it, dissolving the seemingly unified pattern of the known into the multiple and the mysterious—from the sea anemone’s waving tentacles that pull away from

touch, to the broken and scattered pieces of the lobsterpot, to the sounds of the many voices that seem to wordlessly cry and warn.

Through the heavy fog and over all the chaos of sea voices comes a sound clear and ancient:

The tolling bell

Measures time not our time, rung by the unhurried

Ground swell, a time

Older than the time of chronometers...

The time of the sea is a vast world beyond our calculations, showing by contrast our fragmentary experience of time. “Anxious worried women” try “to unweave, unwind, unravel / And piece together the past and the future,” combining and unraveling and reweaving these pieces, recalling the image of Penelope weaving and unraveling her cloth to hold off her suitors as she waited for Odysseus to return. In the time “between midnight and dawn,” unweaving the threads of the past that is “all deception,” waiting on an uncertain future that may never come—“the future futureless”—comes the moment “when time stops and time is never ending.” Preston describes how, “numbed by organized routine lives, we awake to the reality, a waste and vastness more terrifying than as we live in it we conceive it to be—and not only this, but a deeper reality” (39). The constant measuring and calculating and weaving and unweaving, attempts to understand and manipulate the various threads we can catch as they twine through time, are overwhelmed by the motionless and yet moving ground swell, by the otherworldly clang of the bell.

Part II

Eliot responds to the sea's timeless clanging bell and rolling ground swell, the ancient and incomprehensible force that constantly deconstructs and fragments human experience, with a question: "Where is there an end to it?" The beginning of Part II follows a modified sestina form—instead of a rhyme scheme that cycles through the lines of the poem, the rhymes remain motionless across each stanza. On this form, Reibetanz comments, "As the rhymes recur in the same order in stanza after stanza, the ever-repeating round advances nowhere; this effect is reinforced by the languid rhythms" (111). This pattern echoes the poem's images of a destruction and breakage so integral to life and so persistent that it too "advances nowhere" —a "wailing" so central to life that it is breathed out "soundless," flowers that ceaselessly wither and fall apart, "dropping their petals and remaining motionless," the never ending pieces of "drifting wreckage" in the sea's waves. The continual cry is expressed by "the prayer of the bone on the beach." The bone is one bleak fragment of a life washed up out of the vastness of the sea, and it prays an "unprayerable" prayer that is, like the "soundless wailing," a paradoxical expression of deep and inexorable emotion at the continual "calamitous annunciation" of the bell.

The question of the first stanza is immediately answered—"There is no end, but addition." The continual passage of time does nothing to stop the "soundless wailing;" rather, "the years of living among the breakage" just continue to add up, like *The Waste Land's* "heap of broken images." We find ourselves "in a drifting boat with slow leakage"; everything that seems most stable and "reliable" is slowly broken apart. Even reliance on what seems most intrinsic to ourselves—bodies, abilities that define the self—becomes the "final addition" to the breakage: "the failing / Pride or resentment at failing powers." What we once confidently leaned upon becomes "the fittest for renunciation" as we come to the realizations reached in *East Coker*—that even the idea that we are dependable, "substantial flesh and blood" is only something "we like to

think.” The continual “clamour of the bell,” with its announcement of calamity, declares this inevitability.

In the midst of the sea, Eliot pictures fishermen “sailing / Into the wind’s tail, where the fog cowers”—the wind and fog wild, half-alive forces as the fishermen disappear into them. We are unable to comprehend the end result of the fishermen’s voyage and labor, the “trip that will be unpayable / For a haul that will not bear examination”; as we were told by the bird in *Burnt Norton*, “human kind / Cannot bear very much reality.” Instead, without limited comprehension of the vastness of reality, we have to imagine their lives as a set of ongoing, perpetual pieces placed against an unchanging backdrop: “We have to think of them as forever bailing, / Setting and hauling, while the North East lowers / Over shallow banks unchanging and erosionless.” Our inability to see beyond the fragments of time and experience that make up our limited reality leaves us, like the fishermen in our mind’s eye, adrift in the seemingly endless “movement of pain that is painless and motionless / ...the drift of the sea and the drifting wreckage.” As we come to the end of the sestina, we are reminded of the unending “bone’s prayer,” which is prayed “to Death its God.” The bone’s prayer is a desperate attempt at response to the chaos of the vast and catastrophic sea, where death seems like the only end, on an individual level, to the patternless pattern of loss and pain, destruction and fragmentation.

Amidst this pattern, the prayer of the bone, the “hardly, barely prayable” prayer, is the “prayer of the one Annunciation.” Here “the one Annunciation” is separated from the previous, uncapitalized mentions of “annunciation”—not just an the bell’s announcement of the perpetual calamity that characterizes life lived “among the breakage,” but the Annunciation that announced the Incarnation—an announcement of outside reality entering into the human existence of unending “soundless wailing” and “drifting wreckage.” The Annunciation is a reminder of

Mary's prayer in Luke 1, expressing "the acquiescence of man's will in God's" (Reibetanz 115). In the midst of the inescapable reality of the vast sea that eventually returns all our experiences and seeming securities to nothing more than broken relics, the "the bone's prayer" clings to the possibility of deeper reality, making possible the "barely prayable" prayer, the wrestling for an attitude of acceptance of God's will. This acceptance echoes the acceptance of darkness expressed in *East Coker*. Because

We cannot think of a time that is oceanless

Or of an ocean not littered with wastage

Or of a future that is not liable

Like the past, to have no destination,

then we "are not ready for thought" (EC). Instead, we carry out the task of waiting as we voyage amid the wreckage, and "the meaningless monotony and pointless waste of living finds its purpose in the Virgin's words: 'Be it done to me according to thy word'" (Gardner, *Art* 172).

As in the second parts of *Burnt Norton* and *East Coker*, the more formal poetic shape of the first half of Part II of *The Dry Salvages* turns into Eliot's reflections in the second half. "It seems," he writes, "As one becomes older, / That the past has another pattern"—the past no longer seems to take the linear, easily assumed shape of "sequence" and "development." Those images of time's movement are simplistic and unrealistic, implying progress and movement forward, a "means of disowning the past." However, as the sestina with its images of the sea implied, these sequential ideas are "a partial fallacy"—the past is instead caught in flux, drifting and broken wreckage sometimes tossed back up to us on the land.

This view of the past shows us that it is not the human "moments of happiness" that matter: "the sense of well-being, / Fruition, fulfillment, security or affection, / Or even a very

good dinner.” Those moments may be pleasant, even desirable, but still are part of the drifting pattern-less pattern of our lesser human reality. Instead, it is the experience of “sudden illumination” that directs us in our attempts to shape meaning out of the world. These moments of illumination, glimpses of the reality that “human kind / Cannot bear” (BN), are not meaning in themselves, but instead require response:

We had the experience but missed the meaning,
 And approach to the meaning restores the experience
 In a different form, beyond any meaning
 We can assign to happiness.

The “approach to the meaning” is a journey of response that goes beyond simple happiness, that delves into the moment of revelation as “not the experience of one life only / But of many generations”—the many lifetimes “burning in every moment” of *East Coker*. In every moment, even in life “among the breakage,” the possibility of the pattern hinted at by the moment of illumination burns.

To recognize that meaning lies deeper than the sequential surface of time, deeper than the comfortable “assurance / Of recorded history,” acknowledges not only the glimpsed moment of illumination, but also “the backward half-look / Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror.” “The past,” Gardner explicates, “does not die; the annunciations, whether of happiness—‘the sudden illumination’—or of agony, are permanent ‘with such permanence as time has’” (*Art* 173). Though in our individual lives, our past may be “covered by the currents of action” as we seek to move forward, yet still in the world around us we see that “the agony abides.” Agony is undying, not simply carried away by “the river,” with its “cargo” of death and pain; Verma

points out that “the past objects are preserved by time in whose current they persist although they pass out of the purview of ‘now’” (117).

Out at sea, where time’s sequential façade is stripped away, rocks like the Dry Salvages themselves stand like ancient agony. When the sea is calm, they may be “merely a monument,” a reminder of and memorial to pain, or they may be “a seamark / To lay a course by.” But the rocks Eliot recalls as images of timeless agony are not always safe; Samuel Morison, historian and admiral, wrote in 1965, “When an easterly gale is raging the entire group—Dry Salvages, Little Salvages, and Flat Ground—becomes a seething mass of foam, as heavy swells from the Atlantic break and roar over it; and at all times it is a menace to navigators attempting to round Cape Ann” (Gardner, *Composition* 52). The journey toward meaning, toward the reality of the “sudden illumination,” is a voyage through a sea marked with the rocky teeth of agony and pain—the rock may sometimes be hidden or appear harmless, “but in the somber season / Or the sudden fury, is what it always was.”

Part III

The necessity of accepting the inevitable danger and agony of the voyage and continuing to push onward in the “approach to meaning” leads Eliot to “wonder if that is what Krishna meant.” This reference to Krishna alludes to the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a text that deeply influenced Eliot during his studies of Sanskrit literature (Murray 139). Krishna’s advice is to a member of the warrior-caste who is duty-bound to go to battle against his relatives; Krishna “urges him at length to “go forward,” attending to his present duty in a spirit of detachment without troubling about the future outcome of his action” (Milward 152). A number of critics have questioned Eliot’s move away from Western sources at this point in the poem (Reibetanz 124-5), but Murray suggests, “The main reason for this remarkable dependence by the Christian poet on the non-

Christian East, is, I think, related to Eliot's new and ever-deepening awareness of the permanence of agony. A truly profound awareness of human agony, and of suffering in general, also characterises [sic] the wisdom of both the Hindu and the Buddhist sages" (140). The deep agony involved in the narrative from which Krishna's advice originates demonstrates this awareness of human suffering. The need to fight, despite agony, with no thought to the results of action, parallels the need explored in Part II to continue living and seeking meaning despite the inevitability of failure, pain, and calamity in the chaos of the "sea."

In Part III, Eliot presents other ways of "putting the same thing." The future is tied intimately to the past, like a flower mysteriously "pressed between yellow leaves of a book that has never been opened." The past is wrapped up inside a both ancient and not-yet-opened future; like the fragments swirled unendingly in the vastness of the sea, past and future are present in one another; through this connectedness, "the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back."

And yet, in the subsequent revival of images of travel so common to *Four Quartets*, Eliot seems at first to be contradicting this idea about time, rather than exploring the same theme in another way. "Time is no healer," he writes, not because the "agony abides," but because "the patient is no longer here." This apparent concession to the linear appearance of time is reflected in the images Eliot delineates: Travelers on a long train journey "are not the same people who left that station / Or who will arrive at any terminus." Passengers on an ocean liner "are not those who saw the harbour / Receding, or those who will disembark." Forward motion leaves these travelers fractured into a present self separate from their past and future selves.

However, it is this very fracturing through our limited perspective within linear time that allows for the acceptance and detachment, the commitment to action without thought "of the

fruit of action” that the images of voyages in the sea urged and that Krishna advised. This forward trajectory leaves travelers perpetually suspended in a moment that is neither the past they came from nor the future they move toward, so Eliot instructs them, “While time is withdrawn, consider the future / And the past with an equal mind.” Gardner explains the ‘equal mind,’ the concept of “Karma-Yoga” for which Eliot draws on the *Bhagavad-Gita*, “releases man from servitude to either future hopes or past regrets...In the present moment, ‘between the hither and the farther shore,’ the past is not finished, the future is not ‘before us.’ The present, the actual moment, is the moment in which past and future exist” (*Composition 56-7*).

This moment of the present is constantly present yet also moving, arriving and passing, and so is the moment “not of action or inaction” into which the quotation from Krishna speaks. Krishna’s words on the significance of “whatever sphere of being / The mind of a man may be intent / At the time of death” is relevant in every moment, because in the constant arrival and passing of the present moment, “the time of death is every moment.” Every moment is the entirety of the journey; every moment is the place where the voyage happens. The “real destination” is not found by those who “come to port” or those “whose bodies / Will suffer the trial and judgment of the sea,” but instead is found in the action of each present moment. Reibetanz notes, “Instead of thinking in terms of past and future, we are to keep our sights on the reality beyond them. This is the attitude of detachment that we have discussed before; it stands opposed to attachment, the condition of being totally immersed in the movement of time” (122). The attempt at “approach to meaning” and recognition of deeper reality invades every moment; it is not profitable to think of failure or success, past or future, but instead the only course of action is to act in the present, to continually “fare forward.”

Part IV

After the intensity of the admonition to “fare forward,” Part IV offers an interlude of calm in the form of a prayer. Gardner observes the appropriateness of addressing this prayer to Mary:

She is rightly prayed to in a poem of the sea, because she is ‘Stella Maris’ to whom the fishermen and their wives pray. She appears also at the poem’s lyrical climax as the handmaid of the Lord, who made the great response to the message of the angel, and as the Mother of Christ, whose birth gives meaning to time. She is also prayed to as Mater Dolorosa, for this is a poem of sorrows, and the whole lyric takes up the theme of the lovely melancholy sestina of the second movement; it recalls the dangerous voyages, the ocean “littered with wastage.” (*Art* 174)

The lyrical and quiet section asks for prayer for figures we have seen before: the fishermen who venture out on “a trip that will be unpayable / For a haul that will not bear examination,” those left behind to try to “unweave, unwind, unravel / And piece together the past and future.” It is a prayer not for warriors or for saints, but for every person caught in the sorrow and the wreckage of life amidst the figurative sea.

The last stanza lifts up all those who have sailed and “Ended their voyage on the sand, in the sea’s lips / Or in the dark throat which will not reject them”—all those voyagers who faced death. However, if “the time of death is every moment,” then this part of the prayer, too, concerns all of us. But it is specifically a plea for all those lost on the sea “wherever cannot reach them the sound of the sea bell’s / Perpetual angelus.” Reibetanz explains that “the angelus is the bell rung three times each day as a call to prayer, but it is also a special prayer said to commemorate the Annunciation and the Incarnation” (Reibetanz 128). The poem asks the Lady

to pray for all those who are unable to see the hope of salvation offered in the Annunciation and the Incarnation, who cannot pray the “hardly, barely / prayable” bone’s prayer of Part II.

Part V

The desire to understand the past and know the future, to gain a little more control in the drifting chaos of life, returns to the poem with the catalogue of fortune-telling techniques listed in Part V’s first twelve lines. This desire is representative of a universal anxiety: “distress of nations and perplexity / Whether on the shores of Asia, or in the Edgware Road.” The natural tendency of humanity is to be governed by this concept of time: “Men’s curiosity searches past and future / And clings to that dimension.” The other alternative, the attempt “to apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / With time is an occupation for the saint.” This path of the saint, of subsumption in “something given / And taken, in a lifetime’s death in love, / Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender” is not possible for every person who responds to the vision of illumination, who wants to make an approach to deeper reality and meaning.

Instead, “for most of us, there is only the unattended / Moment, the moment in and out of time”—moments like the one in the garden that forms the foundation of *Four Quartets* and like the now-familiar refrain of the list that follows. But all these moments are “only hints and guesses, / Hints followed by guesses.” They are not themselves the deeper reality. Kenner elaborates that the

“moment in and out of time” as occurred in the *Burnt Norton* garden is not the saint’s beatitude, but the temporary translation of that beatitude into a more familiar medium, into a mode of experience available to human kind. This is what our least time-ridden moments can give us, not timelessness but a glimpse of it; hence to decide that we live for those moments is to be content with the parody of the real. (270)

This is why we must fare forward, not content with “hints and guesses,” but pressing toward the “further union, a deeper communion” declared at the end of *East Coker*. Our path forward is the work of faith: “prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action;” the consistent acquiescence in every moment to the will of God through discipline and action.

Through this process, we understand that “the hint half guessed, the gift half understood, in Incarnation.” The entirety of *Four Quartets* up to this point, “moving towards meaning and not starting from it” (Gardner, *Art 57*), finally arrives at the necessary realization that the moment of illumination, the acceptance of insufficiency and humility, and the desperation of life amid chaos and sorrow have led toward that place where the eternal has entered the temporal, light enters darkness, where “the impossible union / Of spheres of existence is actual,” and where “past and future / Are conquered, and reconciled.” It is the reality of the Incarnation that gives life to every present moment. The Incarnation gives the aim of “right action” that is freed from control of the forces of past and future, because it shows us the nature of the deeper reality for which we wait. Though “for most of us, this is the aim / Never here to be realized,” in the light of the Incarnation, the work of “prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action” that hangs on awaited future hope becomes worth the struggle. Though “we are only undefeated / Because we have gone on trying,” yet we can accept the failures, the inevitable end of death, and our state of not knowing the results of our actions; we are “content at last” knowing that in light of the Incarnation our “reversion” is “temporal.” The reflected light of *Burnt Norton*, the dance of *East Coker*, and the clang of the bell in *The Dry Salvages* have all been echoes of this Incarnation, pointing to deeper meaning in the midst of exile, darkness, and chaos, and calling for the response which the poems enact.

4. *Little Gidding* and Transforming Fire

Little Gidding echoes many of the images and ideas found throughout the previous three poems; within this final poem, Eliot is able to develop a way of approaching the problem of meaning that is both unique to *Little Gidding* and, at the same time, ties the whole of *Four Quartets* together in a sense of conclusion and finality. While Eliot wrote the first three poems of *Four Quartets* fairly quickly, it was partly this effort of achieving conclusion that made the writing of *Little Gidding* significantly more difficult and time-consuming (Gardner, *Composition* 19); Kenner calls it Eliot's "most extensive and demanding poem" (276). Nonetheless, Eliot considered *Little Gidding* the best of his *Four Quartets* (Reibetanz 140).

Gardner describes how "in writing it Eliot deliberately gathered up...images from his earlier meditations on Time's losses and Time's gains, to make the poem not only complete and beautiful in itself but the crown and completion of the exploration of man in Time he had begun in *Burnt Norton*" (Gardner, *Composition* 71). Images of *Burnt Norton*'s reflected light and of *East Coker*'s dance and fire make up some of the most obvious echoes from the previous poems, though there are certainly echoes of *The Dry Salvages* as well. It is through these echoes that *Little Gidding*'s "approach to the meaning" takes shape. The image of "pentecostal fire" appears near the very beginning of the poem, and it is in the descent of these divine flames into the human world that the other images are tied together and transformed. The transformation of earlier images into a new shape pictures the heart of *Little Gidding*'s approach to the problem of limited human existence. The response the poem enacts is both the same pattern and the pattern made new as the searching in exile of *Burnt Norton*, the waiting in darkness of *East Coker*, or the faring forward on the sea of *The Dry Salvages*—here it is a response of embracing renewal and transfiguration by means of fire.

Part I

Little Gidding opens with a landscape—a setting for beginning made familiar through each of the previous three poems. Here, “midwinter spring” is the backdrop for the scene. The strange period of warmth in the midst of winter destroys an accurate sense of the passing of time, leaving the world feeling “suspended in time, between pole and tropic.” During this time of the year, when the days are shortest, the unusual season outside of regular time makes “the short day the brightest.” This short day of midwinter spring, in its brevity, opens up an interval within the fabric of passing time; in this temporal space, as in the walk through the garden in *Burnt Norton*, reflection occurs. Here in *Little Gidding*, the brilliant light of reflection is both similar to and different from *Burnt Norton*’s moment of light glinting from a dry pool. Because it is winter, everything is covered in ice; however, because the day is warm, the surface of the ice has just started to melt. The touch of the sun’s light “flames the ice, on pond and ditches / ...Reflecting in a watery mirror / A glare that is blindness in the early afternoon.” The paradoxical combination of “frost and fire” becomes real in the brightness of the short day of midwinter spring, as ice appears in flame so intense that it is blinding.

While Eliot describes the healing fire in Part IV of *East Coker* as “frigid purgatorial fires,” the flaming light reflected on the ice in *Little Gidding* is “pentecostal fire”—with the mention of Pentecost, Eliot evokes the idea of the divine and the spiritual entering into the human. That this fire occurs in “the dark time of the year” reminds us of the darkness of waiting in *East Coker*. Yet this “pentecostal fire” is not the light to see by in darkness that we might have hoped for, but instead is “a glare that is blindness”—radiant light and beauty replacing darkness for a time out of time, a time “not in time’s covenant.” The scene is “shot through with the sense of something given, uncovenanted, and miraculous” (Gardner, *Art* 178). The internal world of

the soul echoes the vision of the external world, in a state “between melting and freezing,” where “the soul’s sap quivers.”

The space of this landscape, internal and external, echoes the paradoxes of the moments in and out of time that resound throughout *Four Quartets*—here is both “frost and fire,” simultaneous “melting and freezing,” snow on the hedgerow appearing like flowers “neither budding nor fading,” yet also “transitory,” lasting “for an hour.” Kenner writes,

This time suspended in time, “zero” because heat is cancelled, though not by cold, and because movement is ended, though not in immobility, this actuality toward which we are admonished by “pentecostal fire” flaming on the ice, comes shockingly against our senses to subsume many tedious abstractions, “neither from nor towards,” “concentration without elimination,” and the rest of it. (272)

Rather than being a place of revelation that we are exiled from, this is a place we come to “at the end of the journey,” where the paradoxical becomes visible and the painful purgatorial fire becomes “pentecostal.” Gardner calls this scene “a place of destiny, where the purpose with which men come is changed” (*Art* 178).

The approach to this place is not about the route taken, but about the process of the journey; the repeated suggestion, “if you came this way,” recalls the journey of darkness and dispossession derived from St. John of the Cross in *East Coker*. Whether the hedgerows are covered in the “blossom” of snow or “white again, in May,” the journey leads here. Whether “you came at night like a broken king,” replicating the secret nighttime visit of the defeated King Charles to the church of Little Gidding (Gardner, *Composition* 62), or “if you came by day not knowing what you came for,” the result “would be the same.” You would find, in the words of *East Coker*, that “where you are is where you are not.” What appears to be “the end of the

journey” is not an end. Turning from the road “behind the pig-sty to the dull façade / And the tombstone,” the marker of human finitude, reveals that

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. Either you had no purpose
 Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured
 And is altered in fulfillment.

Our attempts at a journey of “approach to meaning” (DS) lead here—to the understanding that “the purpose is beyond the end you figured.” The compelling moment of revelation from *Burnt Norton*’s rose garden was only “a husk of meaning.” But here, at a place that marks “the world’s end,” the edge of human sight and purpose, it becomes apparent that what we thought was the purpose of the journey is only a beginning.

Like the darkness of *East Coker*, this realization requires the humility to give up certainty of knowledge: “you would have to put off sense and notion.” Instead of being here “to verify, / Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity / Or carry report” you have come to take a posture of humility and faith—“to kneel where prayer has been valid.” This act of prayer recalls *The Dry Salvages*’ prayer of the bone, striving for submission and acquiescence. Yet this description of prayer resonates less with that sense of desperation and more with a confidence found through humility, the faith that “prayer is more / Than an order of words, the conscious occupation / Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.” Prayer is communication, but not the same communication fraught with the difficulties of shifting and inadequate words that the poet encountered in the previous poems, because prayer is not just words, conscious thought, or

sound. Reibetanz reminds us that though at this point in the poem we do not yet understand the mention of the dead, still in the last few lines of the section “the communication here is paralleled directly to the incarnation of the Holy Ghost in the original pentecostal tongues of fire” (149). This second reference to the flames of Pentecost ties Part I together, leaving us with the image of pentecostal tongues of fire and the understanding that prayer is, in fact, a place where we arrive at “the intersection of the timeless moment.”

Part II

The lyrical beginning of *Little Gidding*'s second part immediately conjures images from the previous three poems; as Gardner points out, “The ‘burnt roses’ and the ‘dust in the air suspended’ are from *Burnt Norton*, the ‘wall, the wainscot and the mouse’ from *East Coker*, the ‘dead water and dead sand’ from *The Dry Salvages*” (Art 178). The descriptions of the “death” of the elements give a sense of the inevitability of emptiness and destruction—not the swirling cosmic chaos of *East Coker*, nor the unending, patternless “breakage” of *The Dry Salvages*'s sea, but an end that is a slow descent into emptiness and destruction. The echoing lines that end each stanza, describing the “death” of the elements of air, earth, water, and fire, serve as a “kind of repeated refrain” (Reibetanz 226), aurally emphasizing the inevitability of this end.

The “ash on an old man’s sleeve” in the first line of Part II of *Little Gidding* follows directly from the images of fire in Part I; fire that was full of power and beauty in Part I is here an agent of destruction—the roses that in *Burnt Norton* “served...as an image of intense life” (Reibetanz 151) reappear here burnt, only a subtle remnant. Similarly, the dust that danced at the end of *Burnt Norton*, reflecting sunlight, here is “suspended” and motionless, merely a marker of “the place where a story ended.” In a shift of images, dust “inbreathed” becomes the “house” of *East Coker*. Reibetanz connects this line to Genesis’s account of God’s creation of man from

dust and his breath, pointing out that “house works as a metaphor for both the body of man and a synecdochic figure for the whole of civilization” (152). Eliot’s reference to “the wall, the wainscot and the mouse” reminds us of the cycle in which “houses rise and fall” (EC) and *East Coker*’s image of the abandoned house, empty except for the blowing wind. In this natural progression toward ruin and emptiness, “hope and despair” die along with the elements of the natural world.

The second and third stanzas continue this progression. In the second stanza, the portrayal of “flood and drouth / Over the eyes and in the mouth” presents the world as a body, relating back to the house imagery of the first stanza. The deathly pattern of “flood and drouth,” “dead water and dead sand,” leaves earth as no more than “parched eviscerate soil” which “gapes at the vanity of toil, / Laughs without mirth.” The “earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth” of *East Coker*’s dance within time here is replaced by a mirthless vision of pointless toil towards the inescapable. The “water and fire” of the fourth stanza continue the work of desolation, wiping away “the town, the pasture and the weed.” But more than this, they also “deride / The sacrifice that we denied” and “rot / The marred foundations we forgot / Of sanctuary and choir”—the foundation of Christ’s sacrifice that *East Coker*’s Part IV presented as our only true substance has been ignored and forgotten, and the natural world, not really as “sound” and “substantial” (EC) as it appeared, is effaced. As Gardner summarizes, “The effect of the lyric is cumulative; human emotion and human passion depart into the air, human effort crumbles into dust, the monuments of the human spirit are rotted by the corrosion of water and fire” (*Art* 178).

While the third part of each of the previous *Four Quartets* transitioned from stanzaic form to more prosaic reflection, in *Little Gidding*, the three stanzas give way to a narrative scene. Eliot writes of this scene as being set in the aftermath of an air raid, a “hallucinated”

conversation (“What Dante Means to Me” 128). The scene is set in the darkness “near the ending of interminable night / At the recurrent end of the unending”—a moment both within the movement of time, but also seemingly endless. The “dark dove with the flickering tongue,” identified by Reibetanz as the bombers (153), is a twisted version of the imagery from Part I—here the “flickering tongue” is not the miraculous light of Pentecostal flames, but is a fire of bombs and destruction. In the wake of this fire, the scene is a ghastly and barren one, full of smoke and the empty metallic rattling of “dead leaves.”

In this setting, Eliot has a dreamlike encounter with a figure who has the “look of some dead master / Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled / Both one and many.” Critics identify this figure with various “dead master[s],” including Yeats, Dante, and Milton (Kenner 274); however, it is clear that ultimately “we are not to identify this ‘familiar compound ghost’ with Dante or with any other single poet” (Gardner, *Art* 179). He is “both one and many,” a “compound” of many masters and even of some version of Eliot himself: “I was still the same, / Knowing myself yet being someone other— / And he a face still forming.” Reibetanz writes, “This is a colloquy that the poet holds, in a sense, with himself, with a ghost “still forming” in his own mind. He assumes “a double part,” externalizing an aspect of himself, perhaps in order to make bearable the revelation of what must be a deeply private experience” (155).

This revelation is the reflection of what the three stanzas that began Part II express—“the death of hope and despair” and “the vanity of toil.” The ghost declines to speak of “thoughts and theory which you have forgotten,” echoing Eliot’s conclusions from earlier poems on the attempt to use words as he declares, “last year’s words belong to last year’s language / And next year’s words await another voice.” But, since the concern of poets is speech, “to purify the dialect of the tribe / And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight”—Eliot further explicates this idea of the

poet as a servant of language in “What Dante Means to Me” (133-4)—the ghost offers foresight, a revelation of “the gifts reserved for age.” These “gifts” present “the stark reality of decline...Every word in these lines seems to cut off hope of any positive fulfillment” (Reibetanz 157). They expound, on a personal level, on the inevitable decline and the futility of action that the stanzas depicted on a larger scale.

Yet the ghostly figure’s words end with a note of hope, returning to the image of fire. He concludes:

From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
 Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire
 Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.

The possibility of escaping the path “from wrong to wrong” requires transformation through fire. This fire is not just an agent of destruction, but is a refining force that allows us to enter into the dance and “move in measure” within the rhythm of time, as in the dance of *East Coker*. In this transforming fire, the central image of *Little Gidding*, “We accept the constraints of purgation as we accept the discipline of the dance, for its measured steps lift us into a movement and a pattern beyond ourselves” (Reibetanz 159).

Part III

The hedgerow, part of the landscape of Part I of *Little Gidding*, reappears in Part III as a picture of “three conditions which often look alike / Yet differ completely”—conditions which build on the idea of transfiguration. The three conditions are “attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment / From self and from things and from persons; and growing between them, indifference.” While indifference might initially seem similar to detachment, it is really “between two lives—unflowering, between / The live and dead nettle.” To experience

attachment, pictured in the “live nettle,” is one kind of love. At the same time, the detachment of the “dead nettle” is not negative, since as *The Dry Salvages* revealed, “the time of death is every moment,” and it is in death that we are able to “nourish... / The life of significant soil.” In fact, one critic argues the fruitful and blossoming “live nettle” is the branch that represents the condition of detachment (Moore 48). Eliot illustrates these three conditions of attachment, detachment, and indifference with an example:

Love of a country
 Begins as attachment to our own field of action
 And comes to find that action of little importance
 Though never indifferent.

“Our own field of action” is where we begin—as Eliot said in *East Coker*, “Home is where one starts from.” Love springing from those roots is transformed in light of the revelation of a bigger picture and more complex pattern, and thus we eventually see our field of action as “of little importance.” This does not mean we experience indifference, which would be “less of love,” but rather we find in detachment the “expanding / Of love beyond desire”—love that is greater than just the “here and now” (EC).

This “liberation” and “expanding of love,” Eliot says, “is the use of memory.” Memory, in *Burnt Norton*, served to bend time, removing us from its linear constraints. Here, we see the result of this action. Reibetanz comments, “Memory must be used to release our love into an enlarged circle of vision liberated from the past, and so from the future also” (167). We are freed by memory from love restricted to desire and to “here and now,” and freed to experience revelation “burning in every moment” (EC)—to live in time but also in fire that is both revelatory and refining; this is the fire where we “move in measure, like a dancer,” both in and

out of time. Through this, we find ourselves and the “faces and places” that we loved to be “renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.”

This idea of transfiguration echoes in the quotation Eliot draws into his poem from Julian of Norwich: though “Sin is Behovely,” nonetheless “all shall be well, and / All manner of thing shall be well.” Through these lines comes the promise of ultimate transformation—“that the burden of human sin is a necessary part of human history, but that in the larger and final pattern of history, all actions will take their place reconciled as essential elements of the whole” (Reibetanz 170). In what follows of Part III, Eliot further considers some of those who have played a part in history, referencing a variety of figures who “fought for or against Charles I and his church policy in the English Civil War” (Reibetanz 170)—men who, though “not wholly commendable” and “of no immediate kin of kindness,” exemplify the detachment of the first section of Part III. They are all unified in death—men from both sides of the conflict “folded into a single party”—and through this, leave us “a symbol perfected.” Reibetanz explains,

As a symbol of detachment, the meaning of *Little Gidding* is perfected in death, because it is only at some distance in time that one can see what is so difficult to see when involved in the currents of action: that whatever factions we may support and to whatever purpose, our strife must necessarily serve an end beyond the end we may have figured.

(172)

This symbol illuminates Eliot’s repetition of Julian of Norwich’s words, to which he now appends the means by which “all manner of thing shall be well:” “By the purification of motive / In the ground of our beseeching.” In “the purification of motive” is transformation to that “purpose...beyond the end you figured.” This purification is found in the “ground of our

beseeking,” returning us to the place we found ourselves in Part I—coming “to kneel / Where prayer has been valid.”

Part IV

The lyric fourth part of the poem continues this journey into transformation and purification through the descent of the Pentecostal dove wreathed in flame that brings “discharge from sin and error.” Though the fire of Part II brought destruction and was tied up in “the death of hope and despair,” the miraculous flame revealed in the descent of the dove points to “the only hope, or else despair,” which is “the choice of pyre or pyre— / To be redeemed from fire by fire.” Just as *Burnt Norton* declared that “only through time time is conquered,” the only redemption from the destructive natural “fire” of time is fire itself—Atkins comments, “only through fire is fire quenched” (31). We recognize the very fire as divine and transformative, transfiguring us and our purposes into an end beyond that which we figured.

The ideas expressed in the second stanza follow directly from the quote from Julian of Norwich; the explanation she received fifteen years after hearing the words, “I am Ground of the Beseeking,” described how love is at the center of the meaning (Gardner 182). Eliot credits “the torment” of the “intolerable shirt of flame / Which human power cannot remove” to love. Gardner writes, “As *East Coker* has at this point a lyric on the eternal Passion, *Little Gidding* celebrates the eternal Pentecost, the perpetual descent of the Dove in tongues of fire” (Art 182). Human life is perpetually caught in the fire: “We only live, only suspire / Consumed by either fire or fire;” either we exist in the destroying fire of time, or we turn to the flames of Pentecost—flames that are transformed from a mere destructive force into a fire of love that can transform us.

Part V

As Eliot brings *Four Quartets* to a close, he weaves together echoes of the images he has developed through the last three poems as ways to understand human existence in time, finding them now transformed. This is why “the end” becomes like *East Coker*’s “home”—a place we are familiar with, have traversed, and now find to be “where we start from” as a recognizable pattern becomes new again. Creating a beginning from an end, a new vision from an identifiable pattern, is what each one of the poems of *Four Quartets* accomplishes; however, here at the end of *Little Gidding*, the poem that celebrates transformation, these threads are tied together in a final act of transformation.

As in Part V of each of the previous poems, Eliot moves to consideration of the use of words and language. Here, rather than frustration at how words “decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, / Will not stay still” (BN), acknowledgement that though words never wholly suffice, “for us, there is only the trying” (EC), or realization of the pointlessness of using words as a means of holding on to “past and future” (DS), Eliot finds a satisfaction in “every phrase / And sentence that is right.” Where words work together, each one “taking its place to support the others,” they are turned into a “complete consort dancing together.” This transformation of words occurs because “every sentence is an end and a beginning”—not an end in itself, but a starting point.

This transformation of words so closely echoing *East Coker* transitions, with an expansion from words to “every action,” into the vision of *The Dry Salvages*—that “the time of death is every moment.” Eliot writes, “any action / Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea’s throat / Or to an illegible stone”—a stone such as the one we confronted when turning from the road at the beginning of *Little Gidding*. But here, not only is every moment one of death—“We die with the dying”—but also one of rebirth—“We are born with the dead.” As with the fire

that both destroys and purges but also transfigures and renews, constant death and life are intertwined.

We see this, too, in the images of the rose and the yew, echoes the other poems—the rose as the flower associated with life and with the revelation in the garden in *Burnt Norton*, and the yew as the tree that not only served as a marker of the fleetingness of human existence in *Burnt Norton*, but also was planted near the place of our “temporal reversion” in *The Dry Salvages*. Here we come to see that “the moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree / Are of equal duration.” One critic further explicates: “The moment of the yew involves a deliberate, laborious, and long journey to God through darkness, while the moment of the rose is a sudden, easy, and instantaneous experience of grace from God” (Reibetanz 180); the constant “death” of the slow journey through darkness is not separate from the moments of light where the “lifetime burning in every moment” (EC) becomes visible. Without the rhythmic journey through time, time could not be redeemed through the eternal intersection of the timeless; “A people with history / Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern / Of timeless moments.” The “timeless moment” that Eliot speaks from is the moment from Part I of *Little Gidding*, “On a winter’s afternoon, in the secluded chapel”—in prayer, he both undertakes the discipline of the journey and finds the timeless moment even “while the light fails.”

The line set apart, “With the drawing of the Love and the voice of this Calling,” comes from the medieval mystic text *The Cloud of Unknowing*; this line itself serves to call us onward to the final lines of the poem, where our vision of the garden of *Burnt Norton* and the journey we have been making since the timeless moment in the garden are transformed. Like in *The Dry Salvages*, Eliot calls us to “not cease from exploration.” But now we glimpse the garden not as a place from which we were exiled, but as the place “where we started,” at which we will arrive

and “know the place for the first time”—not the place itself transformed, but we ourselves, because of our journey of “approach to the meaning” (DS), transformed so that we can truly know the place. The children that we heard, laughing but hidden, in *Burnt Norton* and *East Coker* are heard on the journey forward as “hints and guesses” (DS); they are “heard, half-heard, in the stillness / Between two waves of the sea.” They call us forward towards a “condition of complete simplicity / (Costing not less than everything)” —a condition found in the humility and faith of prayer.

The poem draws to a close with a final vision of the Pentecostal “tongues of flame,” but now they are “in-folded / Into the crowned knot of fire / And the fire and the rose are one.” The fire itself is transformed—it becomes the weaving dance, it becomes the rose. We are reminded that we too have traversed the journey from *Burnt Norton*’s vision of the rose garden to *Little Gidding*’s illumination with fire. To arrive at the end is also a beginning—a discovery of a way to read the poems, to see them unified and as a whole. The many paradoxes along the way, culminating in the fusion of “the fire and the rose,” show us the shape of the poems—the language and vision of each poem a different way of understanding the experience of the search for deeper meaning, yet tied together in a journey of response that at last leads us back to the beginning to find that we “know the place for the first time.”

Works Cited

- Atkins, G. D. *Reading T.S. Eliot: Four Quartets and the Journey Towards Understanding*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Blamires, Harry. *Word Unheard: A Guide through Eliot's 'Four Quartets.'* Methuen, 1969.
- Ellis, Steve. *T.S. Eliot: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Continuum, 2009.
- Eliot, T.S. *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*. Harcourt, 1991.
- . "What Dante Means to Me." *To Criticize the Critic, and Other Writings*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965.
- Gardner, Helen. *The Art of T.S. Eliot*. Dutton, 1950.
- . *The Composition of Four Quartets*. Faber, 1977.
- Kenner, Hugh. *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot*. W.H. Allen, 1960.
- Milward, Peter. *A Commentary on T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets*. The Hokuseido Press, 1968.
- Moore, Ronald. *Metaphysical Symbolism in T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets*. Stanford Honors Essays in Humanities, no. 9, 1965.
- Murray, Paul. *T.S. Eliot and Mysticism: The Secret History of Four Quartets*. St. Martin's Press, 1991.
- Preston, Raymond. *'Four Quartets' Rehearsed: A Commentary on T. S. Eliot's Cycle of Poems*. Haskell House Publishers, 1966.
- Reibetanz, Julia M., and T. S. Eliot. *A Reading of Eliot's Four Quartets*. UMI Research Press, 1983.
- Verma, Rajendra. *Time and Poetry in Eliot's Four Quartets*. Humanities Press, 1979.