



Heraclitean *logos* and flux in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: “cosmic consciousness” and “the still point of the turning world”

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Abstract

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*T.S. Eliot prefaces “Burnt Norton”, the first of his **Four Quartets**, with two quotations from the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus. By means of these epigrams, Eliot points us to the Heraclitean opposition and paradoxical interdependence between **logos** and flux as a paradigm in the poem, a paradigm that he uses for an investigation and articulation of a number of philosophical contemplations. In this paper, I discuss Eliot's different configurations of the **logos**/flux paradigm in the poem, firstly to illuminate the relationship between temporality and eternity, secondly, to elaborate the relationship between God and humanity, and thirdly to express the relationship between structured art and chaotic experience. In each instance it is not only the opposition between the two elements that is important, but also the point of contact, the intersection. There is some evidence that Eliot's depiction of this intersection as, for example, the “moment in and out of time”, is based on personal experience of a transcendent, mystical nature. His expression of this experience is also investigated by comparing it to similar experiences described by others, notably by a Canadian psychiatrist, Richard Maurice Bucke. A comparison of Bucke's description in his evolutionist text of 1901 and Eliot's poetic rendering reveals not only surprising similarities but also essential differences which highlights Eliot's purely Christian interpretation in the face of Bucke's more universalist approach. For T.S. Eliot, eternity or timelessness can only be accessed through the temporal experience of human consciousness, in fleeting moments of exaltation in daily life, in the charged, timeless configurations of art as an imitation of divine creation, and finally in Christ, who embodies the love of God and is for Eliot the ultimate transection of the temporal and eternal, the flux and the **logos**.*

1. Introduction: Heraclitus's notions of *logos* and flux

T.S. Eliot prefaces "Burnt Norton", the first of his *Four Quartets*, with two quotations from the 6th to 5th century B.C. Greek philosopher, Heraclitus and most commentators agree that the epigrams are as applicable to the work as a whole as to the first quartet (e.g. Smith, 1974:255). These epigrams have been translated in many ways, among which "Although the *logos* is universal, most people live as if they had an understanding of their own" and secondly, "The way up and the way down are one and the same" (cf. Barnes, 1987:101, 103) are fairly standard renderings. By means of these epigrams, Eliot points us to the Heraclitean opposition and paradoxical interdependence between *logos* and flux as a paradigm in the poem, a paradigm that he uses for an investigation and articulation of a number of philosophical contemplations in the work. This article focuses on Eliot's different configurations of the *logos/flux* paradigm in the poem.

For Heraclitus, although flux or constant change characterizes existence, there is nevertheless a universal, identifiable *logos*, a form, or harmony, or pattern, imminent in existence. In his *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy*, Zeller (1963: 45-6) explains the Heraclitean notion of flux:

... it was the unceasing change of things, the instability of all individual things that made so strong an impression on Heraclitus, that he saw in this the general law of the universe and could only regard the world as something in incessant change and ever subject to new modifications. Everything flows and nothing is permanent: one cannot step twice into the same river (*Fr* 91) ... everything passes into something else and is thus seen to be something that assumes different shapes and passes through the most varied states.

Heraclitus nevertheless perceives the world – in its condition of flux – as being held together in a state of balance, in "opposite tension which holds the world together" (Burnet, 1978[1914]:49). According to Heraclitus the world is generated by fire and consumed by fire, alternating in fixed patterns throughout the whole of time (Barnes, 1987:107), so that there is an ultimate order or pattern or harmony (the *logos*) which transcends the continuous change within existence.

2. The first configuration: eternity and sequential time

Four Quartets has often been described as a meditation on time. The first configuration of the *logos/flux* paradigm in the poem involves the relationship between time and eternity. Eliot identifies the human experience of sequential time, which he effectively illustrates by the metaphor of an underground train (in "Burnt Norton") or a flowing river

(in “The Dry Salvages”), with flux, constant change, as one second ticks over into the next, while he equates the *logos*, which literally means “word”, but is usually taken to suggest “reason” or “science”, or as we have seen, transcendent “order” or “pattern”, with eternity or timelessness.

He introduces the theme of time in the familiar opening lines of “Burnt Norton”:

Time present and time past
 Are both perhaps present in time future
 And time future in time past.
 If all time is eternally present
 All time is unredeemable.
 What might have been is an abstraction
 Remaining a perpetual possibility
 Only in a world of speculation.
 What might have been and what has been
 Point to one end, which is always present.

(Eliot, 1974[1963]:189)

In this passage, Eliot depicts the interrelatedness of our conventional concepts of present, past and future, to the point of dissolving the traditional divisions between them, but instead of arriving at a state of grace in spiritual timelessness, he is confronted by a problem, that redemption – which in its Christian sense is a *process* of confession, forgiveness and consequent salvation – is not possible outside of sequential time which is a requirement for progressive actions: “If all time is eternally present, all time is unredeemable”; if all sin is eternally present, all sin remains unredeemable. He thus suggests that even spiritually, mortal mankind needs the “enchainment” of sequential time in order to enjoy the possibility of redemption from the constriction of time, which is mortal life. The level of complexity of this issue is raised by bringing the “might have been” past, the road not taken – which, according to the orthodox notion of time as succession, can only be an abstraction (as the sequential moment of possible fulfilment passes for ever more) – also into the equation. If divisions of time are dissolved, the “might have been” also remains an eternal possibility. His conclusion that “What might have been and what has been/ Point to one end, which is always present” may not suggest, as many readers have concluded (cf. Klein, 1994:28), that the present is the only inevitable reality or outcome of all real or possible pasts since it is actual, but instead that the actual past and the potential past stand in the same perpetual relationship to a deeper, ever-present reality, in other words, to eternity “which is always present”. This is Eliot’s equivalent to the *logos*.

The flux/*logos* sequential time/eternity parallel is extremely effective as Heraclitus suggests that the *logos* can only be detected through the flux (being is intelligible only in terms of becoming), and Eliot makes the point that for humanity eternity can only be perceived from the vantage point of sequential time: "Only through time time is conquered". Ronald Tamplin (1987: 155) elucidates, "Time is necessary as the place of access but is otherwise only a distraction".

The central image introduced in "Burnt Norton" II for this interrelationship between flux and *logos*, time and eternity, is that of the wheel or spinning world (implying sequential time or flux or constant change) which moves around a central point or infinitesimal axis (the *logos* or timelessness), which though part of the spinning mechanism, is nevertheless still, motionless, at the very heart of the movement, reconciling change into stillness, sequential time into eternity:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered.

(Eliot, 1974[1963]:191)

The still point of the turning world, the centre, is thus outside of movement but is also the core of the movement.

Eliot uses "the dance" as a symbol for the "unmoving motion of the timeless" (Bergsten, 1973:90) and this image of dancing implies pattern, harmony and therefore correlates neatly with the classical concept of the *logos*, with which Eliot equates it. Klein (1994:27) relates the dance image to the movement of dancers around a maypole, commenting that "the sensual ritual of motion is the only tangible way in which the existence of the still point can be expressed".

As Eliot elaborates the basic *logos*/flux paradigm in its different configurations, he consistently suggests that the intersection or link between the two is significant. This intersection is represented in the time/eternity configuration by what Eliot calls "the moment in and out of time" (Eliot, 1974[1963]:213). From what appears to be personal experience (cf. Murray, 1991:91; Spencer, 1999:259), Eliot sketches in the poem a number of timeless moments, where eternity and temporality intersect within the temporal existence of the individual. The first such moment is

1 Eliot remarked that in the composition of *Four Quartets* he was "seeking the verbal equivalents for small experiences he had had and for knowledge derived from reading" (Murray, 1991:9).

described metaphorically in the opening movement of “Burnt Norton”. The extract deals with a visit of a man and a woman to the rose-garden of the manor house of Burnt Norton in Gloucestershire (Gordon, 1998:266), where a dry pool is miraculously or symbolically filled with water in a moment of transcendent exaltation:

Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
 And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
 And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
 The surface glittered out of heart of light,
 And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
 Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.
 (Eliot, 1974[1963]:190)

In the second movement of “Burnt Norton”, Eliot ponders this experience of the intersection of time and eternity in the rose garden:

I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where
 And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.
 The inner freedom from the practical desire,
 The release from action and suffering, release from the inner
 And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded
 By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving,
Erhebung without motion, concentration
 Without elimination, both a new world
 And the old made explicit, understood
 In the completion of its partial ecstasy,
 The resolution of its partial horror.

(Eliot, 1974[1963]:191-192)

Eliot consistently depicts these moments in terms of the reconciliation of opposites, which is in accordance with Heraclitus’s notion that the underlying connection between opposites is a significant manifestation of the *logos*. It also correlates to St. John of the Cross’s mystic meditations, which also describe the achievement of union with God in terms of an accumulation of paradoxes (Lobb, 1993:30, Brooker, 1993:96).

The moment “in and out of time” is a moment that occurs in the ordinary life of some ordinary people – in a lecture Eliot referred to it as “a crystallization of the mind” accessible to many people who are not mystics (Kwan-Terry, 1992:161) – in which such people experience eternity, the absolute, the sublime. William Klein (1994:27) describes it as personal time and eternal time becoming one, while Denis Donoghue (1993:7) characterizes it as a moment in which “existence and essence seem to be one and the same” and call it “an epitome, a sample of the ultimate experience, beatitude, the Heaven of God’s presence”. In the next few lines in the poem, Eliot continues his contemplation of the

moment of illumination, of true “consciousness” and explains the need for temporal existence as a platform of access to eternity in our mortal state:

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

Time past and time future

Allow but little consciousness.
To be conscious is not to be in time
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
Be remembered; involved with past and future
Only through time time is conquered.

(Eliot, 1974[1963]:192)

2.1 The first configuration and Bucke's “cosmic consciousness”

The use of the term “consciousness” to describe the intersection of the temporal and eternal, the momentary experience of the divine by mortal man, is significant. I have stated that Eliot's depiction of the “moment in and out of time” appears to be rooted in an actual experience of spiritual exaltation, rather than being merely a philosophical elaboration of a theoretical paradigm. This is supported by the evidence that a number of people – some very privately and others more publicly – have described such personal experiences of a glimpse of eternity within the boundaries of common existence, and in very similar terms to those of Eliot's poetic configuration in *Four Quartets*. One such person is the Canadian psychiatrist, Richard Maurice Bucke, who in 1901 published a book that soon overcame its initial obscurity to acquire something of a cult interest, going through many editions in its first fifty years. (Despite the initial popularity of his book, Bucke is in himself not a very significant figure, but his writing serves as a very useful foil to highlight certain aspects of Eliot's elaboration of the *logos/flux* paradigm in *Four Quartets*.) Bucke's book is called *Cosmic Consciousness* and in it, Bucke, a strong evolutionist, posits the theory that mankind is about to evolve to a higher level of consciousness (Bucke, 1946[1901]:3), which has so far been experienced only briefly by a small selection of people, all of whom, however, describe the experience in surprisingly similar terms. The experience, or higher level of consciousness, involves a sense of the oneness of the universe and of the presence of the Creator, an “intellectual enlightenment” and “moral exaltation”, feelings of “elevation, elation, joyousness, and a quickening of the moral sense”, a “sense of immortality” and a “consciousness of eternal life” (Bucke, 1946[1901]:3). This is further accompanied by an awareness that love is at the centre of

the universe (Bucke, 1946[1901]:10) and that all things, including that which in our normal state of consciousness would appear to us to be evil, inevitably work to the eventual good, which is the essential quality of the universe and its Creator, of which we are all part (Bucke, 1946[1901]:5).

It is clear that the experience of spiritual exaltation that Bucke cites as his own, and which he then further explores in the lives and writings of other figures whom he deems to have had the same experience of spiritual exaltation (like Buddha, Christ, St. Paul, Mohammed, Dante, Bacon, Blake and Whitman, as well as contemporaries whom he had personally interviewed on the experience) correspond in surprising detail with Eliot's description of the "moment in and out of time". (What is interesting to South Africans is that Field Marshall Jan Smuts also confessed to a similar experience in his private correspondence and confirmed his solidarity with Whitman in this respect [Wagener, 1995:211-212; Beukes: 1994:66-68].) As far as the similarity between Eliot's writing and Bucke's experience is concerned, Bucke's "intellectual enlightenment" corresponds to Eliot's "... concentration without elimination, both a new world/ And the old made explicit, understood", while Bucke's "elevation, elation, joyousness" is echoed by Eliot's "*Erhebung* (i.e. elevation or exaltation) without motion" and "the completion of its [the world's] partial ecstasy,/ the resolution of its partial horror"; so, also, the whole temporal/ eternal paradigm in *Four Quartets* relates to Bucke's "sense of immortality", "consciousness of eternal life" and "Brahmic bliss, leaving thenceforward for always an aftertaste of heaven" (Bucke, 1946[1901]: 10). Even Bucke's more controversial assertion that this experience is characterized by an awareness that all things – including that which in our normal state would appear to us to be evil – inevitably work to the eventual good, which is the essential quality of the universe and its Creator, is echoed in Eliot's references in "Little Gidding" to the writings of the Medieval mystic, Dame Julian of Norwich,

Sin is behovely, but
All shall be well, and
All manner of things shall be well
(Eliot, 1974[1963]:219)

which he takes up again in the conclusion of the final Quartet:

All shall be well and
All manner of things shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.
(Eliot, 1974[1963]:223)

Bergsten (1973:239) comments on these lines from "Little Gidding":

The transfiguration of human life and history in the timeless pattern [*logos*] must also involve a resolution of the antithesis of good and evil ... This quotation from the *Revelations* of Julian of Norwich is the answer she received to the question how the existence of sin was to be reconciled with a good and righteous God [In] quoting Dame Julian he indicates that in the divine order of things there is a place even for that which appears evil.

Smuts (quoted in Beukes, 1994:68), without any reference to Eliot's poem, expresses the same notion, derived, it seems, from the same experience, very clearly, and integrates it into his holistic philosophy of life:

Evil becomes an ingredient in the final good which we attain on the higher synthesis or integration of life. Holism seems to imply this deeper spiritual view of the universe. Evil is not extrinsic to it, but, in some way difficult to comprehend, natural to it and a constituent element in it. The great lesson of experience is to absorb, transmute and sublimate evil and make it an element to enrich, rather than a dominant factor to dominate life.

The central position of love that Bucke accords this state of heightened consciousness, is endorsed by Eliot in "Burnt Norton" V when he closely associates love with "the moment in and out of time" and "the still point of the turning world": "Love is itself unmoving,/ Only the cause and end of movement" (Eliot, 1974[1963]: 195) and in "East Coker" V: "Love is most nearly itself/ When here and now cease to matter" (Eliot, 1974[1963]: 203), which clearly identifies divine love with timelessness, stillness, the *logos*, the Absolute or God. Marianne Thormählen (1994:128) comments,

Much that is said in the *Quartets* is tentative ... But love is the central, immutable power, the heart of the still point, the heart of light; nothing temporal can touch it, but it touches us everywhere, in and out of time.

3. The second configuration: God and humanity

It is thus clear that from the time/eternity representation of the flux/*logos* paradigm, it is only a short step to its next configuration in which the *logos* is identified with eternal God, flux with mortal man and the intersection between them with Christ, God as man. This second configuration of the paradigm is suggested by the charged image of the axle-tree in "Burnt Norton" II ("Garlic and sapphires in the mud/ Clot the bedded axle-tree") which clearly refers to the cross as well as to the "still point of the turning world" further on in the same movement (cf. Klein, 1994:28), and is confirmed in "The Dry Salvages" V, where, in discussing

“the moment in and out of time” (Eliot, 1974[1963]:212-213), the poet elaborates:

The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.
 Here the impossible union
 Of spheres of existence is actual,
 Here the past and future
 Are conquered, and reconciled.

(Eliot, 1974[1963]:213)

This configuration of the *logos/flux* paradigm is already anticipated in Eliot’s 1934 work, “Choruses from ‘The Rock’”, in which Christ’s incarnation – the ultimate transection of the temporal and the eternal – is described in very similar terms, also suggesting the equivalence of the divine Incarnation to the “moment in and out of time” as intersections of the temporal and eternal:

Then came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in time and of
 time,
 A moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call history:
 transecting, bisecting the world of time, a moment in time but
 not like a moment of time,
 A moment in time but time was made through that moment: for
 without the meaning there is no time, and that moment of time
 gave the meaning.

(Eliot, 1974[1963]:177)

This configuration is of course also endorsed or perhaps inspired by the opening lines of the Gospel according to St. John: “In the beginning was the Word [*logos*], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”, in which Christ is conceived of as the *logos* within the flux of life and existence.

3.1 The second configuration and Bucke’s “cosmic consciousness”

In 1937, between the publication of “The Choruses from ‘The Rock’” and the third Quartet from which the above two passages are quoted, Eliot wrote about the centrality of the Incarnation in his personal theology:

I take it for granted that Christian revelation is the only full revelation; and that the fullness of Christian revelation resides in the essential fact of the Incarnation, in relation to which all Christian revelation is to be understood (quoted in Bergsten, 1973:47).

This statement brings us to the essential difference between Eliot’s treatment of “the moment in and out of time”, the phenomenon of incarnation, and Bucke’s experience of the same thing, which he calls

“cosmic consciousness”. Both agree that love is central to the experience. Bucke (1946[1901]:10) states that “cosmic consciousness” brings about the certainty that “the foundation principle of the world is what we call love and that the happiness of everyone is in the long run absolutely certain”, which, as I have indicated, comes close to Dame Julian of Norwich and Eliot’s “All shall be well and/ All manner of things shall be well”(Eliot, 1974[1963]:223), but with the essential difference that for Bucke the universal advent of “cosmic consciousness” will herald the end of religion as we know it and of religious differences (even though there will be ubiquitous certainty about the existence of God and eternal life (Bucke, 1946[1901]:5)), while Eliot interprets the experience in purely Christian terms. For him the love at the centre of these experiences is “Love” with a capital “l”, Love as Christ, or Christ as Love, in the metaphysical tradition of Herbert’s poetry, as he makes clear in “Little Gidding” IV:

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre
To be redeemed from fire by fire,

Who then devises the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.

(Eliot, 1974[1963]: 221)

While the love that dominates the intersection of time with the timeless is thus clearly perceived in a spiritual context by Eliot, it is interesting that these moments of illumination are not divorced from human, perhaps even sexual love. As I have indicated, the first “moment in and out of time” described in the *Quartets* is set in the rose garden of the manor house of Burnt Norton,

And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light
(Eliot, 1974[1963]:190).

These lines were inspired by a visit that Eliot made in 1934 or 1935 to Burnt Norton with a former beloved, the first love of his youth, Emily Hale (Gordon, 1998:265-70; Williamson, 1991:160-161), during which the

former lovers experienced such harmony and fulfilment, that, we can only gather, it precipitated Eliot's glimpse of eternity. Lyndall Gordon (1998: 268) comments: "The rapport is so acute that the ghosts of their former selves seem to walk towards a moment that transcends love with a glimpse of eternal 'Love', the still point of the turning world ...". As sequential time provides an essential platform of access to glimpses of eternity, so, it seems, romantic love provides a platform of access to eternal "Love" as embodied in Christ. (It is interesting that Bucke (1946[1901]:9-10) likewise describes his experience of cosmic consciousness as occurring after a particularly heart-warming night of amicable congeniality.) The term "heart of light" which Eliot uses in his rendering of the moment in and out of time, also occurs in *The Waste Land*, written thirteen years before, to describe an earlier romantic encounter in a hyacinth garden:

Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

(Eliot, 1974[1963]:64)

These lines were likewise inspired by Emily Hale (Gordon, 1998:82), and the earlier encounter forms a nostalgic moment of emotional relief in the otherwise grim quest for spiritual meaning, described in *The Waste Land*. It thus appears that though Eliot spiritualizes the sense of love that attends the moment of illumination in a more radical way than Bucke does, it is not divorced from, but rather precipitated by an intense experience of human or romantic love.

4. The third configuration: art and sequential human experience

The third configuration of the *logos/flux* paradigm in the poem pertains to art. This configuration forms another clear equivalent to the time/eternity relationship, taking up the idea that a work of art – as notably exemplified in Keats's Grecian urn – can also represent an overcoming of the ravages of sequential time. Steve Ellis (1991:15) has pointed out that Eliot was influenced by the "prevailing aesthetic of abstraction" in England during the 1930s, and quotes the artist Ben Nicholson as stating in 1934, "painting and religious experience are the same thing, and what we are all searching for is the understanding and realisation of infinity" (Ellis, 1991:16). Art becomes another manifestation of the *logos*, of infinity or eternity, of the still point of the turning world. Eliot explicates this idea in the last movement of "Burnt Norton":

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

(Eliot, 1974[1963]:194)

Eliot suggests that words and notes, like everything in our world, are subject to time and extinction, and that only by imposing or retrieving a pattern, i.e. *logos*, can this “mortality” be overcome. When notes or words or designs are cast into an artistic mould by the artist, the process of artistic creation wrests the words or music from transience and the work becomes eternal or immortal, so that even when the notes are not physically played, or the words read, the work of art exists, conceptually, aesthetically, and is not subject to passing seconds, so that “the end precedes the beginning,/ And the end and the beginning were always there/ Before the beginning and after the end”. Art then becomes another emblematic representation of the eternal, of the “still point of the turning world”. Ellis (1991:50) comments,

It is true that in ‘Burnt Norton’ we have the still and moving paradox, as in the Chinese jar itself, but here it seems to me that the idea of movement is much more easily accommodated within an overall stability of **form**; the motion of the jar inscribes a harmonious circle, so to speak, which can thus be equated with stillness ...

and adds that the jar “represents metaphysical presence, rather than absence, at the still centre” (Ellis, 1991:86). He thus suggests the work of art as a parallel to the “dance” at the still point of the turning world, or what Eliot calls “consciousness”: “To be conscious is not to be in time” (Eliot, 1974[1963]:192).

5. Conclusion: “The still point of the turning world”

The flux/*logos* paradigm is elaborated in *Four Quartets* in three major configurations, transient human experience which can be immortalized in art through the process of artistic creation, sequential time and eternity which intersect in the fleeting but significant moments “in and out of time”, and ultimately in human/mortal existence versus divine/immortal existence, intersected in the incarnation of Christ, God as man, the

essentially eternal in human and temporal form. For T.S. Eliot the centre can only be located through the periphery, the axis “at the still point of the turning world” can only be reached through the spinning wheel; eternity or timelessness can only be accessed through the temporal experience of human consciousness, in fleeting moments of exaltation in daily life, in the charged, timeless configurations of art as an imitation of divine creation, and finally in Christ, who embodies the love of God and is for Eliot the ultimate transection of the temporal and eternal.

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T.S. Eliot