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T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets: A Study in Explication

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T. S. ELIOT'S FOUR QUARTETS: A STUDY IN EXPLICATION

BY

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE LOYOLA UNIVERSITY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

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VITA

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	iv
Chapter	
I. T. S. Eliot's Poetic Background	1
II. T. S. Eliot's Intellectual and Spiritual Background	15
III. The <u>Four Quartets</u> : Introduction	34
A. <u>Burnt Norton</u>	43
B. <u>East Coker</u>	58
C. <u>The Dry Salvages</u>	77
D. <u>Little Gidding</u>	90
IV. Summary and Evaluation	108
Bibliography	127

T. S. ELIOT'S FOUR QUARTETS: A STUDY IN EXPLICATION

PREFACE

Many approaches to criticism can be considered in the observation of a work of poetry. Poetry can be considered in the light of historical significance, investigated for influences of style, studied for philosophical content, or traced for reasons pertinent only to the critic in labor. However, no matter what the approach or approaches may be, a danger presents itself that can easily distort the quality of criticism rendered; such a danger is that the critic can become so engrossed in the man behind the poetry that he loses sight of the poetry itself. It must be remembered that it is the poetry that makes the author and not the author who makes the poetry.

In the writing of this thesis, the criticism has taken on a two-fold aim in aiding the reader in the complete understanding of the Four Quartets: to explicate the Four Quartets of T. S. Eliot and to consider, at the same time, the poetic and spiritual development that accompanied the creative processes of the author. This double-aim is parallel in structure throughout the entire thesis, for at no time is it possible to discuss Eliot's later poetry without considering Eliot's personal transformations as well.

Since little criticism has been written on the Four Quartets themselves, primarily because they are so recent, and because no specific statement of his beliefs has been set down by Eliot, the problems

encountered in this thesis are also two-fold in nature. It has been necessary, therefore, first to go to the poetry itself, giving it detailed analysis, and, secondly, to evolve from the essays of Eliot pertinent facts regarding his religious and poetic position, facts which provide a proper background in the reading and appreciation of the Four Quartets.

In referring to the Four Quartets in such detail, it was necessary, also, to study the poetry written before Eliot's conversion, the background of his life preceding this event, and the critical comment expressed both on his works and on his entrance into the "Anglo-Catholic" faith. This has been done to illustrate further the position that Eliot maintains today, and the relative significance of the Four Quartets when viewed in this perspective.

Concluding this thesis is a personal evaluation of the Four Quartets, and a summary of the intention presented in the preface.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on September 26, 1888, the seventh and youngest child of Henry Eliot and Charlotte Stearns. The Eliot family, which is of Devonshire origin, goes back in America to Andrew Eliot (1627-1704) who, emigrating from East Coker, Somerset, was enrolled as a member of the First Church of Beverly, Massachusetts. The poet's direct ancestors were for several generations mainly merchants of Boston, although the Rev. Andrew Eliot (1718-78), a strong Congregationalist and an enemy to Episcopalianism, was elected president of Harvard but declined to leave his North Church congregation. Eliot's grandfather, Rev. William Greenleaf Eliot (1811-87), had gone to St. Louis directly from Harvard Divinity School and established the first Unitarian church in that city. His second son, Eliot's father, became president of the Hydraulic Press Brick Company of St. Louis, and later married Charlotte Stearns, daughter of a commission merchant and trader of Boston, and descendent of Isaac Stearns, one of the original settlers of the Bay Colony. Eliot's mother published a full length biography of her father-in-law and a dramatic poem on the life of Savonarola.

Eliot was sent to Harvard in 1906, and was thus in the same class with John Reed, Stuart Chase, and Walter Lippmann. He became editor of the undergraduate literary magazine of the school, was interested in literary and social clubs, and was influenced by Irving Babbitt and

George Santayana, members of the faculty. He attended Harvard Graduate School, went to Paris, returned to America, studied for three more years, majoring in metaphysics, logic and psychology. In 1913-14 he was appointed as an assistant in Philosophy at Harvard, obtained a travelling scholarship, and was in Germany until the outbreak of the war. He left for Merton College, Oxford, studying Greek there and contributing reviews and essays to various journals and magazines. His first mature work of poetry to appear in print was The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock in Harriet Monroe's newly established journal, Poetry. His second major work, The Waste Land, appeared in Dial, November, 1922.

He married in 1915, and immediately began teaching at the Highgate School near London. Shortly thereafter, he changed his occupation to banking, was assistant editor to The Egoist from 1917 to 1919, and in 1923, editor of the quarterly review, The Criterion. At the present time, he is a director of the publishing house of Faber and Faber.

In 1927, as a result of his growing interest in the English Church and State, he became a British subject and entered the Anglo-Catholic faith. He visited America in 1932 to accept an appointment as Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard, and since 1933, has lived in London, although he has visited America occasionally. He has, at this writing, been invited to join the group at the Institute of Advanced Studies at Princeton, New Jersey. ¹

¹ These biographical facts have been abstracted from F. O. Matthiessen's The Achievement of T. S. Eliot. New York, Oxford University Press, 1947.

CHAPTER I
ELIOT'S BACKGROUND

To most Americans Eliot appears as a rather austere expatriate, and as such he is personally unsympathetic to many. Yet whether we consider him a major poet or merely a talented versifier, we cannot overlook the sincerity of his works and his influence on contemporary poetry. No other modern, if we exclude Hopkins, has had so profound a hold on his generation as Eliot. We find echoes of Eliot in every modern verse magazine or anthology, and while his imitators have rejected his intellectual and moral dicta, they have found in his techniques a new approach for their own verse.

In considering Eliot's poetry as a whole it is almost immediately obvious that he has gone through several periods or stages in his writing. More accurately it could be said that in contrast to lesser artists, Eliot has constantly grown and changed. In his early days as a Harvard undergraduate and Oxford student, he was primarily a satirist. Later he was a mosaic artist of fine sensitivity who used the perfected expression of the world's great writers as honestly as he used his own as he laid, piece by piece and fragment by fragment, his damning picture of the sterility and desolation of his civilization in The Waste Land. After his conversion, he wrote Ash-Wednesday, a confirmation of his religious faith which expressed his new found humility.

It might be well, then, to trace the development of his poetic

thought, to consider briefly the schools and trends that he has established, and to depict the effect that he has had on his contemporaries.

In 1873 there appeared in Paris a small book of poems entitled Les Amours Jaunes by a writer who affixed the name of Tristan Corbiere to his work. The poems were received with almost complete indifference, and within a year the author died of consumption. The poetry remained almost unnoticed until another French poet, Paul Verlaine, praised it in a series of articles in 1883. This critical appreciation was in itself one of the most important developments of the Symbolist movement,¹ and Verlaine himself seems to have integrated into his own poetic personality something of Corbiere's wistful and peculiar accents.

The accidents of time had, in the meantime, led Jules Laforgue, quite independently, to develop a tone and technique very similar to that of Corbiere. Laforgue nonchalantly and rather rudely handled the conventions of French poetry with his, as Wilson calls it, "poignant-ironic, grandiose-slangy, scurrilous-naive"² manner of speech.

These poetical ventures would have had little or no importance except for scholars were it not for the fact that Eliot's earlier work, that published up until the first appearance of The Waste Land, is extremely derivative of Laforgue and remotely of Verlaine and Corbiere.

The French Symbolists inspired Eliot with a new language and flexible vocabulary; he also took his tone from them, some of his imagery, and some of his metrics. For example, shades of the classical French

¹ Edmund Wilson, Axel's Castle. New York, Scribners and Sons, 1931, p. 95.

² Ibid., p. 96.

alexandrine are seen in Eliot's:

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach!
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach,
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

Prufrock

It should not be supposed that merely because Eliot's early poetry is derivative in some things that he is not original. He is in many ways the equal or superior of his teachers. Eliot cannot properly be described as an imitator for he is, in many ways, a superior artist. He is more mature than Laforgue, and his craftsmanship is more workmanlike and precise. Where Laforgue and Corbiere were far-fetched and sometimes grotesque, Eliot is sure and accurate. The major difference between Eliot and the French poets lies, as Clive Bell has pointed out, in his "phrasing."³ Furthermore, Eliot's taste is sure and his images are exact where the French poets often erred on the side of oddity.

In his early poetry, although it was influenced by the Symbolists, Eliot leaves an unforgettable impression. It is never dull, and Eliot himself pointed out that "the worst fault that poetry can commit is to be dull."⁴

George Gordon, sometime lecturer in poetry at Oxford, has stated the effect of Eliot quite well:

It is not the business of poetry to give its readers what they expect, but by assault or by seige force an entry for the unexpected, the surprising, the impossible.⁵

³ Clive Bell, "T. S. Eliot", Nation and Athanaeum, 33:772, 1923.

⁴ T. S. Eliot, The Use of Poetry. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1933, p. 44.

⁵ George Gordon, Poetry and the Moderns. London, Oxford University Press, 1935, p. 10.

Eliot's assault on the unexpected, the surprising, or the impossible, so well begun with The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, Portrait of a Lady, and the Sweeney poems, reached its full maturity in The Waste Land. This work is an expression of the emotional starvation and frustration that can come to men when they apparently seem to lose sight of their eventual destinies both in the present and the future. Eliot carries this theme to its ultimate, and in only 433 lines, portrays the complete disintegration of our society. In many ways, it is the pivotal poem of the twentieth century. It is at once the most discussed, the most criticized, and the most admired poem of our times.

The waste land of the poem is a symbol borrowed from the myth of the Holy Grail: it is a desolate and sterile country ruled by an impotent king, a country in which not only the crops cease to grow and the animals to reproduce, but where the human inhabitants have become incapable of having children. Until the king, who is wounded in the genitals, is healed by a pure knight the country would remain in its state of sterility and desolation. ⁶

In Eliot's handling of this theme, the world of our time is a waste land, barren and dry of the water of life, and needs a knight to deliver it from spiritual death. However, the knight can proceed only a short distance into the country, and at the end, the Fisher King who rules the

⁶ The title and basic plan of the poem are derived from Jessie L. Weston's From Ritual to Romance. Cambridge University Press, 1920, from which this summary of the Grail myth is cited.

waste land is still

Fishing, with the arid plains behind me.

The Waste Land

The central symbolism of the poem is a sexual one, integrated with phallic symbols, derived chiefly from Sir James Frazer's The Golden Bough.

The major difficulties in understanding the poem arise from the fact that the poem, whatever its sources, is not a modern version of the Grail legend. It is not a logically constructed narrative, in which the old story is used as a kind of allegory for the modern application. The method Eliot uses is one of freely associated ideas and images which have as their source the central symbolism of the poem.

In addition, Eliot makes free use of literary quotation and allusion, a device not new to him or to other modern poets. Eliot, for example, acknowledges his debt to Ezra Pound in the poem's dedication, and he has been evidently influenced by Pound's Cantos. The Waste Land, like the Cantos, is fragmentary in form and packed with quotations. Eliot, in his earlier poetry, had introduced phrases or lines from Shakespeare or Blake for ironic effect and is still addicted to prefacing his poetry with quotations from other poets or writers.

In The Waste Land he carries this to an almost unsurpassable limit. In its short length, he has managed to introduce, in one form or another, at least 35 different writers, six foreign languages, and several popular songs.⁷ This weight of erudition would be enough to sink any lesser

⁷ Wilson, op. cit., p. 110.

writer, and, in fact, Mac Leish is notably unsuccessful in Conquistador where he uses the same device, particularly when he echoes the 'old man' theme of Eliot's Gerontion.

The remarkable thing is that Eliot manages to be most effective where he might be expected to be least original. He succeeds in communicating his emotion whether we understand it or not.

Eliot firmly believes in the theory that poetry can communicate before it is understood,⁸ and nowhere is the substantiation of this remark more clearly demonstrated than in The Waste Land. He says further:

...poetry is a form of "communication", yet that which is to be communicated is the poem itself, and only incidentally the experience and the thought which have gone into it.⁹

Thus, to Eliot, it is the whole poem considered as an entity that is important. The masterly reading of The Waste Land requires a transition from an initial experience of the sociological struggle of modern existence to richer perceptions and personal experiences on a psychological level as the many implications of meaning are comprehended.

Matthiessen, in his most recent comments on Eliot, states of the poem:

The Waste Land may not succeed as a whole, it may exist simply as succession of dramatic lyrics. But it interpenetrates the present and the past, it manages to treat on the same plane, modern London and the world of primitive myth, and to prove thereby at the root causes of cultural decay.¹⁰

⁸ Use of Poetry, p. 21.

⁹ IBid.

¹⁰ F. U. Matthiessen, "American Poetry, 1920-40," Sewanee Review, 55:35, Winter 1947.

With the proper background references, the reader of The Waste Land will find that it is not erudite gibberish. At the same time, it is extremely doubtful if the year 1922 which marked the poem's first publication will go down in literary history along with 1798 as a monumental one. Probably somewhere between those two extremes of critical opinions lies the true merit of the poem. Its immediate effect was to produce a generation of poets somewhat overly conscious of their time, but of poets who readily recognized another fine poet in their midst.

Hart Crane, for example, was fascinated by Eliot's techniques although he rejected the pessimism expressed in The Waste Land. "After this perfection of death," Crane wrote, "nothing is possible but a motion of some kind." ¹¹

Yet Crane's major work, The Bridge, is much the same kind of poem as Eliot's tour de force: it is chaotic, undisciplined, allusive, and episodic, and a series of successive passages of optimism and pessimism. But as Allen Tate has remarked:

There was a fundamental mistake in Crane's diagnosis of Eliot's problem. Eliot's 'pessimism' grows out of an awareness of the decay of the individual consciousness and its fixed relations with the world. ¹²

Crane's approach was essentially personal. He was haunted with a persecution complex that approached the psychotic, whereas Eliot almost consistently remained aloof from his work, and never, until 1928,

¹¹ Quoted by Louis Untermeyer, Modern American Poetry. New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1942, p. 614.

¹² Allen Tate, "Hart Crane and the American Mind," Poetry, 40:212, July, 1932.

identified himself with any of his poems. We can, of course, trace elements of Prufrock's character as developments of Eliot's New England background, but we never consider that Prufrock is Eliot.

The Waste Land did much to establish Eliot as one of the two or three major poetic figures of the twentieth century, although this recognition was not attained without some opposition. He was at once hailed and reviled. The major opposition came not specifically to Eliot, but to what he had initiated with Prufrock, developed with Sweeney, and apotheosized with The Waste Land. It was not Eliot but his imitators who were criticized in the nineteen-twenties.

If, (by the moderns)...I mean to denote principally that oblique, equivocal, ego-centric, Anglo-American, and wholly unintelligible school of poetry built in the eclipse, fathered and hatched in the waste lands of the whimpering, inhibited post-war years--then they take leave to tell me that my venture is at once too partial and too bold. ¹³

Am I further, an anthropologist? Have I sheltered with the alert intelligences of my time under the Golden Bough? The latest findings, also, of the famous clinics of the continent, am I acquainted with them? ¹⁴

This particular view was not an uncommon one, and soon gave rise to the phrase, "cult of unintelligibility," which was used in designating Eliot's type of verse and that which was written by his contemporaries. Moreover, Eliot was claimed as one of the chief exponents of the cult, undoubtedly because he emphasized that communication of meaning is not the primary function of poetry, and undue stress on meaning invalidates

¹³ Gordon, op. cit., p. 8.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

much interpretative criticism. Eliot points out the danger of this type of criticism in the following passage:

But for one thing, the possibilities of meaning of "meaning" in poetry are so extensive, that one is quite aware that one's knowledge of the meaning of what oneself has written is extremely limited, and that its meaning to others...is quite as much a part of it as what it means to oneself. But when the meaning assigned is too clearly formulated, then one reader who has grasped a meaning of the poem may happen to appreciate it less exactly, enjoy it less intensely than another person who has the discretion not to inquire too insistently. So finally, the skeptical practioner of verse tends to limit his criticism of poetry to vocabulary and syntax, and analysis of line, metric and cadence...¹⁵

In the years following 1922, Eliot found himself at a relative standstill. He had expressed the characteristic disillusionment of the post-war age so completely that he found he could proceed no further. Except for the singularly disorganized choruses of The Hollow Men with their almost blasphemous juxtaposition of lines from the Our Father, a parodied nursery rhyme, and the halting, aching cadences of the ghastly finale, Eliot wrote no verse between 1922 and his conversion in 1928.

"The poet of The Waste Land," says Wilson, "was too serious to continue with the same complacence as some of his contemporaries inhabiting that godforsaken desert. It was certain he would not stick at that point, and one watched him to see what he would do."¹⁶ Eliot's solution to his position became apparent in 1928 when he turned to faith as his

¹⁵ T. S. Eliot, preface to G. Wilson Knight's Wheel of Fire. New York, Oxford University Press, 1930, p. xv.

¹⁶ Wilson, op. cit., p. 125.

answer to the questions he himself had imposed, and declared himself an Anglo-Catholic. That revelation touched off almost as bitter a literary controversy as that which marked the initial appearance of The Waste Land in 1922. Few critics denied that the chaplet of lyrics which celebrated his conversion, Ash-Wednesday, were Eliot's most richly beautiful, but at the same time, they scorned his allegiance to "faith in the Christian myth." ¹⁷ Wilson's remarks might be taken as typical:

...we can only applaud his desire to formulate a consistent central position, at the same time we may regret the uncompromising character of the ideals and institutions which he invokes....The faith of the modern convert seems to burn only with a low blue flame....His relation to the Anglo-Catholic Church appears largely artificial. ¹⁸

However, Eliot's piety brought with it a new humility, and few critics understood Eliot when he said:

What I do wish to affirm is that the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism, that it is simply unaware of the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life: of something which I assume to be our primary concern. ¹⁹

Ash-Wednesday still found Eliot preoccupied with ideals and actualities, but now he had a fresh vision with which to work. Eliot accepted life with a sense of its limitations, and with a realization, as Matthiessen has observed, that "What gives life its reality is its comprehension of existing evil, which implies at least by contrast the possibility of a positive

¹⁷ Wright R. Thomas & Stuart G. Brown, Reading Poems. New York, Oxford University Press, 1941, p. 719.

¹⁸ Wilson, op. cit., p. 126.

¹⁹ T. S. Eliot, Essays, Ancient and Modern, New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1936, p. 110.

stage of good." 20

The faith that Eliot discovered in Anglo-Catholicism found its first expression in Ash-Wednesday. The poem is not completely divorced from Eliot's earlier verse as might easily be imagined:

Though they could hardly have been forecast before their appearance, the religious poems follow in natural sequence from such persistent absorption in the nature of spiritual reality. They are scarcely poems of easy faith; they mark rather the direction in which the poet's experience is leading him, that he has ascended step by step from the pit of his Inferno. They voice the desire for belief, the understanding of its importance to the human spirit, the palpable movements of the poet's mind from doubt towards acceptance, his gradual comprehension...of the most difficult of the Christian virtues, the virtue of humility. 21

The poem itself is amply illustrative of Eliot's new position, and almost any excerpt shows how he rejects the implications of his earlier work.

And pray to God to have mercy upon us
 And I pray that I may forget
 These matters that with myself I too much discuss
 Too much explain
 Because I do not hope to turn again
 Let these words answer
 For what is done, not to be done again
 May the judgement not be too heavy upon us.

The very title of the work is sufficient indication of the nature of the poem. It should be recalled that during the ritual preceding the Mass on Ash Wednesday the priest places ashes on the heads of the faithful and says:

Memento, homo quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris. 22

20 Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 103.

21 Ibid., p. 99.

22 "Remember, man, that thou art dust and into dust thou shalt return."
 Translation given in The St. Andrew Daily Missal. St. Paul, Minnesota,
 E. H. Lohman, 1940, p. 110.

It is an extremely urgent note that the poem sounds, and as Eliot himself has stated:

In the long run I believe that the Catholic Faith is also the only practical one. That does not mean that we are provided with an infallible calculating machine for knowing what should be done in any contingency; it means perpetual new thinking to meet perpetually changing situations. The attitude of the Catholic towards any form of organization, national or international, must always be a specific attitude toward a specific situation. ²³

Ash-Wednesday heralded another critical storm, and Eliot was once more hailed and reviled. For those who hailed the satire and metaphysical conceits of the earlier poems, Eliot's conversion only presented difficulties in understanding both the man and his new work. Not only was his conversion frowned upon, but his religious poetry was condemned as well. Allen Tate has summarized the objections to the work quite succinctly:

The reason that is being brought to bear on Mr. Eliot's recent verse is as follows: Anglo-Catholicism would not at all satisfy me; therefore his poetry declines under its influence. Moreover, the poetry is not contemporaneous; it doesn't solve any labor problems; it is special, personal, and it can do us no good. ²⁴

Eliot's published poetry, for an artist of his stature, is singularly meagre. All of his verse is collected in two rather small volumes, the Collected Poems 1909-1935, and the Four Quartets. The Poems has only 220 pages and the Quartets only 881 lines in 39 pages. An accurate count would probably show that Eliot's entire verse does not run over 20,000 lines including the plays Family Reunion and Murder in the Cathedral.

²³ Essays, Ancient and Modern, p. 140.

²⁴ Allen Tate, "Irony and Humility", The Hound and Horn, Winter, 1931, 4: 290.

As we have already pointed out, Eliot has written less and influenced more of his fellow poets than any other writer in memory, with the exception of Hopkins. Not that mere quantity is any criterion of ability, but in proportion to his output, his influence has been almost unduly high.

This influence has been due primarily to Eliot's conversational, ironic tone, to the language which he provided, and to his awakened sense of the dignity of man as evidenced particularly in his latest work, Four Quartets.

It has been the purpose of this chapter to illustrate the process by which Eliot has arrived at the position he maintains today, and to prepare a background for the explication of his latest work, the Four Quartets. We have seen how Eliot has progressed from literal atheism to religion; in this development, he automatically formulated a personal foundation for his literary work.

The difficulties of poets or literary artists in devising a faith upon which to base their work and of communicating their thoughts comprise an ancient problem; today it is more vivid and the issues are more clearly drawn than heretofore. Unless the artist can solve, at least to his own satisfaction, the riddles that are presented him by our modern civilization, he has failed in his intrinsic function. It is not enough, as Eliot found out, to portray merely the decadence and disintegration of our society; it is necessary to re-integrate the broken pieces of that society and show them as one function or reflection of the perfected natural law which governs the actions of men as moral and natural agents.

This has been recognized by the truly great scholars and writers of the past, but our society has either denied outright the existence of any principles or ultimates, or has established false principles and subjected their writings to those principles.

Eliot's position today is a unique one. At an age, fifty nine, when the talent of greater poets is dead and buried, he has seen himself become a classic within his own lifetime. He knows that his position as one of the major figures of contemporary English letters is secure. That security has been bought dearly.

He has already lived through two cycles of taste. In the early nineteen-twenties he was hailed as a revolutionary by the young survivors of the last war, by "the lost generation" who read in him their feeling of the breakdown of tradition and their sense of being thereby liberated if only into despair. But when he found his way out of the pit inhabited by "the hollow men" by means of a return to formal religion, he was dismissed by many of his followers as a reactionary. Yet his preoccupations, from first to last, have shown a singular consistency.²⁶

Matthiessen's observations are extremely apt when we consider that the literary world has those who cannot accept Eliot's challenge. It is a challenge that Eliot has been unafraid to issue either in his poetry or his prose. We shall review, first, Eliot's fundamental philosophic position as revealed in his prose, and then trace that position through an explication of the Four Quartets.

²⁶ Matthiessen, loc. cit., p. 25.

CHAPTER II

Eliot's fundamental philosophic position, a position from which the only change has been one of intensity and insight, was first stated in 1928:

The general point of view (of these essays) may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics and anglo-catholic in religion. I am quite aware that the first term is completely vague....I am aware that the second term is at present without definition...the third term does not rest with me to define. ¹

Eliot might not define Anglo-Catholicism, but the bulk of his critical writing since that time has been either apologetics or elaboration. The steps leading to Eliot's conversion are devious and sometimes obscure, originating from a New England puritanical background through Unitarianism and essential heresy, to almost complete orthodoxy.

Eliot has never separated his philosophic and moral thinking from his literary production. "A man's theory of the place of poetry," he has said, "is not independent of his view of life in general." ²

Wilson, with typical insight, has pointed out that Eliot has thought persistently and coherently about the relations between the different phases of human experience and his passion for proportion and order is reflected in his poems. ³

¹ T. S. Eliot, preface to For Launcelot Andrewes, p. ix.

² Use of Poetry, p. 112.

³ Wilson, op. cit., p. 112.

To be sure, the position that Eliot has now formulated was not readily apparent in his earlier years. The poet of The Waste Land is very far from the critic who said

Le monde moderne avilit. It also provincializes, and it can also corrupt. ⁴

However, any study of Eliot's present system of belief necessitates, for complete understanding, a study of the background of those beliefs. Statistical facts about his life have little purpose here, but it may not be wise to overlook any specific date that he mentions as being important. He constantly inserts into his writing some facet of his personal life, and, by doing so, intends to elucidate his ideas by showing their genesis. Eliot's deliberateness in choosing these details is singular, for in discussing an author or his writing, he almost invariably talks about himself and his own problems.

At times, Eliot surprises the reader by the very unexpectedness of his comments, and in one of these comments, the preface to Edgar Ansel Mowrer's This American World, he reveals the complexity of his middle-western-New England background.

I am myself a descendant of pioneers, somewhat like Mr. Mowrer. My family did not move so often as his, because we tended to cling to places and associations as long as possible; but with a family tendency to traditions and loyalties. I have a background which Mr. Mowrer would recognize, and which is different from that of the native European and from that of many Americans. My family were New Englanders, who had settled--my branch of it--for two generations in the South West--which was in my own time rapidly becoming merely the Middle West. The family guarded jealously its connections with New England; but it was not until years of maturity that I perceived that I myself had always been a New Englander

⁴ T. S. Eliot, After Strange Gods. New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1934, p. 9.

in the South West, and a South Westerner in New England; when I was sent to school in New England I lost my southern accent without ever acquiring the accent of the native Bostonian. In New England I missed the long dark river, the ailanthus trees, the flaming cardinal birds, the high limestone bluffs where we searched for fossil shell-fish. In Missouri I missed the fir trees, the bay and the goldenrod, the song sparrows, the red granite and the blue sea of Massachusetts. ⁵

This note of pride in Eliot's telling of his pioneer forebears must have come as a surprise, particularly since Eliot within the year became a British subject.

However, Eliot's background was rooted more deeply in New England than it was in Missouri. Until the publication of The Dry Salvages in 1942, for example, there was little reference to a river image (which might be the Mississippi) in any of his poetry, but the overtones of Boston society are heard as early as 1916 in Prufrock, and the greater portion of his early verse is predominantly New England in tone. It would be difficult to find a more specific local color poem than The Boston Evening Transcript with its amusing satire about the old New England ladies and his Cousin Harriet.

The essence of Eliot's early poetry, with all of its Symbolistic nuances, is, as Wilson has shown,

...that combination of practical prudence with moral idealism which shows itself in its later developments as an excessive fastidiousness and scrupulousness. One of the principal subjects of Eliot's poetry is really that regret at situations unexplored, that dark rankling of passions inhibited which has figured so conspicuously in the work of the American writers of New England...from Hawthorne to Edith Wharton. ⁶

⁵ T. S. Eliot, preface to Edgar Ansel Mowrer's This American World, pp. xiii-xiv.

⁶ Wilson, op. cit., p. 102.

The nuances of "fastidiousness and scrupulousness" in Eliot's mind led almost inevitably to repression which led in turn to

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach,
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

Another curious outgrowth of this repression is Eliot's evident hatred for rats. Whenever he desires a word or phrase which will convey all of the disgust and horror he can muster, he uses such phrases as

A rat crept softly through the vegetation
Dragging its slimy belly on the bank...

The Waste Land

or

I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones.

The Waste Land

Coincidentally, the "rat" image is usually found in connection with "bones". An excellent example of this is seen in the quotation from The Waste Land previously cited. A survey of three typical early poems ⁷ shows the "rat" image appearing at least six times, coupled on four occasions with the word "bones".

To counteract the impression that the rat symbol has on him and in his poetry, Eliot uses, probably deliberately, the symbol of a cat, and usually treats that animal sympathetically, using the image poetically

⁷ The Hollow Men, The Waste Land, and Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar.

in such lines as

The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

Prufrock

Eliot carries the image of the cat through almost every member of the cat family, including cheetahs, jaguars, leopards, and tigers. The example that best illustrates his fond affection for cats is his almost unnoticed Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats, a book of poems for children.

These extreme examples of Eliot's sometimes peculiar prejudices have a solid foundation in his background. His great-great grandparents had come to Puritan New England at a time when the Metaphysical influence was strong in England, and elements of it were carried over certain Puritan protests, into the new world. His grandfather became a Unitarian minister after graduation from Harvard, which Eliot also attended, and afterwards, Oxford. This juxtaposition of religious and educational backgrounds has led more than one critic astray. McGreevy, for example, calls him "primly emasculate,"⁸ and Wilson expanded this:

We recognize throughout 'The Waste Land' the peculiar conflicts of the Puritan turned artist: the horror of vulgarity and the shy sympathy with the common life, the ascetic shrinking from sexual experience and the distress at the drying up of the springs of sexual emotion, with the straining after religious emotion which may be made to take its place.⁹

⁸ Thomas McGreevy, T. S. Eliot: A Study. London, Chatlo & Windus, 1931,

p. 33.
⁹ Wilson, op. cit., p. 105.

Wilson recognizes, however, that Eliot's poetic and personal philosophy is

a good deal more than the mere gloomy moods of a New Englander regretting an emotionally undernourished youth. The colonization by the Puritans of New England was merely an incident in that rise of the middle class which has brought a commercial-industrial civilization to the European cities as well as to the American ones. T. S. Eliot now lives in London and has become an English citizen; but the desolation, the aesthetic and spiritual drouth, of Anglo-Saxon middle-class society oppresses London as well as Boston. The terrible dreariness of the great modern cities is the atmosphere in which "The Waste Land" takes place.... And this Waste Land has another aspect: it is a place not merely of desolation, but of anarchy and doubt. In our post-War world of shattered institutions, strained nerves and bankrupt ideals, life no longer seems serious or coherent--we have no belief in the things we do and consequently we have no heart for them. ¹⁰

Eliot found little solution for his own problems because he had been subjected to a multitude of diverse influences in his life which only conflicted with the age in which he had to exist. In a review of Murray's Son of Woman, he says:

Perhaps if I had been brought up in the shadowy Protestant underworld within which they all seem gracefully to move, I might have more sympathy and understanding; I was brought up outside the Christian Fold, in Unitarianism; and in the form of Unitarianism in which I was instructed, things were either black or white. The Son and the Holy Ghost were not believed in, certainly; but they were entitled to respect as entities in which many other people believed and they were not to be employed as convenient phrases to embody any cloudy private religion. ¹¹

That he has resolved a solution to his existence is evident by his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism. However, it is also evident by the

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 105 and ff.

¹¹ In Criterion, 10: 771, 1930.

following passage, that in conforming to such an orthodox religion, he is also aware of the fact that strict subservience to tradition is not to be emulated:

We are always in danger, in clinging to an old tradition, or in attempting to re-establish one, of confusing the vital and the unessential, the real and the sentimental. Our second danger is to associate tradition with the immobile; to think of it as something hostile to all change... ¹²

To those who did not share his renewed conviction of the supremacy of the supernatural over the natural life, Eliot identified himself with a religious faith when he entered the Anglo-Catholic Church. Just how far that faith has gone is something little realized by either Protestant or Catholic critics, and this fact becomes evident in answer to Sister Mary Jane Power's request for information and reproduced in her book

Poets at Prayer:

I was brought up as a Unitarian of the New England ¹³ variety; that for years I was without any definite religious faith, or without any at all; that in 1927 I was baptized and confirmed into the Church of England; that I am associated with what is called the Catholic movement in that Church, as represented by Viscount Halifax and the English Church Union. I accordingly believe in the Creeds, the invocation of the Blessed Virgin and the Saints, the Sacrament of Penance, etc. ¹⁴

The rather condescending tone of such utterances has not been lost on some of his critics who still doubt the sincerity of Eliot's faith despite the fact that he has constantly reiterated it in such statements as:

What I do wish to affirm is that the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism, that it is simply unaware of the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life; of something which I assume to be our primary concern. ¹⁵

¹² After Strange Gods, p. 19.

¹³ Note that Eliot himself links the two traditions.

¹⁴ Sister Mary Jane Powers, Poets at Prayer. New York, Sheed & Ward, 1938, p. 126.

¹⁵ Essays, Ancient and Modern, p. 110.

Ivor Winters, normally a relatively level-headed critic, is one of those who fail to see that Eliot, if nothing else, is at least sincere. Winters's comments are interesting, if only for their mass of prejudices and misconceptions:

Eliot suffers from the delusion that he is judging it (our modern life) when he is merely exhibiting it. He has thrown together a collection of disparate and fragmentary principles which fall roughly into two contradictory groups, the romantic on the one hand and on the other the classical and Christian; and being unaware of his own contradictions, he is able to make a virtue of what appears to be private spiritual laziness; he is able to enjoy at one and the same time the pleasures of indulgence and the dignity of disapproval. He is right in confessing that his later work has not appreciably changed,¹⁶...and (there is in his later work) more of the nature of dream than of vision. And he is right again in regarding as heretical, that is, as anti-Christian, the ideas which he has used to justify his failure to change when he meets those ideas which he has used expressed by another writer; though it is strange that he should fail to realize this heresy when he employs it himself. When Eliot announced his conversion to Catholicism and to classicism in 1927, his modernist followers were astonished, and they have never really forgiven him; but they might well have spared themselves so much devout feeling, for the conversion appears to have been merely nominal; at least, so far as one can judge from what Eliot has written, it really meant nothing at all.¹⁷

One wonders, considering these comments, if Winters has bothered to read Ash-Wednesday or the Four Quartets. Any critic who would not recognize in them the religious yearning of a sensitive soul can not be considered except as an example to illustrate how far astray a critic can actually go when he shuts himself off behind a mass of prejudices and blinds himself to reality.

¹⁶ Winters does not, significantly, cite the source of this putative statement of Eliot's.

¹⁷ Ivor Winters, "T. S. Eliot: The Illusion of Reaction (II)", Kenyon Review, 3:238, Spring, 1941.

Wilson, too, despite his usual insight, says that the "faith" of the modern convert seems to burn only with a low blue flame,"¹⁸ and that Eliot's "moral principles seem to be to be stronger and more authentic than his religious mysticism—and his relation to the Anglo-Catholic Church appears largely artificial."¹⁹ The difference between Wilson and Winters is that Wilson is a critic and Winters an iconoclast. Wilson at least admits that "Eliot's new phase of piety has brought with it a new humility."²⁰

It must not be understood that we feel that poetry is a substitute for religion, morals, ethics, metaphysics, philosophy, or theology. Our enjoyment of poetry can be enhanced by the knowledge of those systems of thought, particularly if a poet such as Eliot subscribes to a systematic approach to those systems of thought. Eliot, coupled with his moral thinking, possesses a sense of his own age to an extent that dwarfs such other moderns as Marianne Moore, Archibald MacLeish, or Robinson Jeffers, to name three diverse examples. In reading Eliot we always have the feeling that he is viewing the world with complete honesty and that he himself is usually dispassionate in his appraisal. The world that Eliot saw was too frightened to be honest, and it revolted against his honesty because honesty is generally too unpleasant to acknowledge.

In Prufrock and the Sweeney poems Eliot is clearly showing his hatred of vulgarity, but at the same time he is fascinated by it. Eliot's poetic changes since his first appearance in print cannot, fortunately, be platted

18 Wilson, op. cit., p. 126.

19 Wilson, op. cit., p. 127.

20 Ibid., p. 127.

on a steadily rising curve. The minor poems which appeared between Prufrock and The Waste Land such as The Hippopotamous or Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service read as if they were the work of a considerably lesser artist than the poet of Gerontion. The remarkable thing about Eliot is that he has constantly changed and grown with each change.

Prufrock and Gerontion were examples of finished mastery of artistic material, and, because of this, any artificial graph of his poetic ability would have to show them as distinct peaks. The same would be true of The Waste Land or The Hollow Men because they are, albeit on a different plane, also high points in any analysis.

Hence, any analytic critic would require at least three lines on a graph to give any adequate representation of Eliot's poetic progress: one line would indicate his change from irony to frustration and then to faith; another would show the normal human course of development, his accumulation and digestion of experience; and a third would depict his mastery of poetic and lyric experience and techniques, a line which could only remain at a uniform height.

Matthiessen points out that "The one constant element through all the stages of his work has been his exact fitting of means to end, his rarely failing ability to perfect in each case the very kind of form he wanted for the particular content."²¹ Matthiessen continues:

²¹ Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 133.

After the 1917 volume the re-echoing manner of Laforgue diminishes, and such loosely flowing experiments as 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night' disappear altogether. Then, having carried his study of French versification to the point of writing some poems in that language, he mastered his handling of the quatrain of Gautier and thereafter has used it no more. Likewise his meeting of the late Elizabethan dramatists so completely on their own ground has never been repeated since 'Gerontion.' Both The Waste Land and Ash Wednesday are notable for the great variety of original verse forms that they employ within a short space; but the difference between these forms in the two poems is almost total. ²²

Such versatility in style is no mere technical virtuosity. Eliot's sense of his age with his recognition of its chaotic upheaval, insecurity, and change was evident with his portrait of our society in The Waste Land; that sense was also evident in Ash-Wednesday, for our contemporary society is one of spiritual as well as material conflict.

Eliot has never been content to draw a simple journalistic picture of our society and has never invented a verse form for the sake of technical excellence alone. "It is too easily forgotten", as Matthiessen points out, "in the current generalizations about the collapse of our culture that experiment, the trial of new possibilities, is a sign of life and not of death." ²³

As he extended his technical resources from Gerontion through The Waste Land to The Hollow Men, Eliot's awareness of his surroundings went deeper than any sense of journalistic surfaces, since a true journalistic awareness involves a recognition of the permanent no less than the changing.

It is true that Eliot's overwhelming sense of the need for redemption, finally to be culminated in the Four Quartets, which would transform him into

22 Ibid., p. 134.

23 Ibid., p. 135.

a religious poet, was not apparent to many of his readers at that time.

But, as Zabel has remarked in connection with MacLeish,

When a poet arrives at the limits of esthetic experience or an impasse of spiritual emptiness, a turn toward external objects may come as a new lease on life. ²⁴

The external objects in Eliot's case, as we have already observed, were his religion, his classicism, and his British citizenship. Eliot realized that "It is possible that the period in which we live--if we could see it from a distant enough perspective--may be regarded as one of progressive decline of civilization." ²⁵

The question of Eliot's renunciation of his American citizenship is one that has been ignored by American critics, who probably feel, with some inherent show of chauvinism, that Eliot's action was tantamount to treason. However, in the light of his background which was, as we have observed, much more British than American, and in view of his long residence in England, this move was not altogether as strange as might appear on the surface. Moreover, Eliot has never made any move lightly, and it may be assumed that his "royalism" came after long thought and with what seemed, at least to him, some basis in logic. He has written:

The term "democracy" as I have said again and again, does not contain enough positive content to stand alone against the forces that you dislike--it can easily be transformed by them. If you will not have God (and He is a jealous God) you should pay your respects to Hitler or Stalin. ²⁶

24 Morton Dauwen Zabel, Literary Opinion in America. New York, Harper & Bros., 1937, p. 426.

25 Essays, Ancient and Modern, p. 137 & ff.

26 T. S. Eliot, The Idea of a Christian Society, New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1943, p. 64.

Eliot felt that the strongest force against the godlessness of our times was a union of Church and state, a condition that he perceived, at least to some degree, in England. And he has said:

...to speak of ourselves (as Western democracies)...is an abuse of terms. We mean only that we have a society in which no one is penalized for the formal profession of Christianity; but we conceal from ourselves the unpleasant knowledge of the real values by which we live. ²⁷

Eliot's most recent prose work, The Idea of a Christian Society, is an outline of the type of state he envisions as ideal. His idea of a Christian society is similar in principle to that expressed in the Encyclicals of Social Reconstruction of the recent popes, and Eliot's problem is the position of the literary man in such a society and how the poet can express the need for that type of society in his verse.

The problem is much more than one of utilizing the means one possesses and integrating them toward a Christian end; it is also a problem, as Eliot has expressed it, of

...the contemporary poet, who is not merely a composer of graceful verses, is forced to ask himself such questions as "what is poetry for?": not merely "what am I to say?" but rather "how and to whom am I to say it?" ²⁸

Thus, the problem is more than merely a poetic one. Poetry is only one branch of literature, which is a reflection of life. Accordingly, the poet should reflect in his verses the important things of life: the universals and the eternal.

Eliot realized this truth and also realized that his age produces only one universal structure upon which to build his position. And even as his

27 Ibid., p. 5.

28 The Use of Poetry, p. 20.

mind reached toward the Catholic viewpoint, he has been acutely aware of the violent extreme which threatens society today, the overwhelming of valuable impulses in the individual life by the narrow iron standardization of dictatorship.

Eliot is quite conscious of this gulf, and his poetry has evidenced it.

As Matthiessen has written:

If, in severest analysis, the kind of poetry Eliot writes gives evidence of social disintegration, he has expressed that fact as the poet should, not by rhetorical proclamation, but by the very feeling of contemporary life which he has presented to the sensitive reader of his lines. As he has presented this not merely as something which the reader is to know through his mind, but is to know primarily as an actual physical experience, as part of his whole being, through the humming pulsating evidence of his senses. ²⁹

Eliot's conversion, for a man in his position, was conditionally accepted at best, and considerably ridiculed by many as a supernatural event only; yet, for Eliot, it was one which required great personal conviction. His foes were quick to point out that Eliot accepted religion purely for dramatic effect. It is true that Eliot gave himself, in the apologetics of his conversion an air of martyrdom. He was in the "intolerable position of those who try to lead a Christian life in a non-Christian World." ³⁰ He joined the church because he was one of those persons "who were Catholics only because they believed that Catholicism was essential to civilization." ³¹

However, the explanation that Eliot chose the Church as a refuge is hardly tenable in view of his constancy since his conversion. Zabel says "his

²⁹ Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

³⁰ *Idea of a Christian Society*, p. 56.

³¹ "Reply to Mr. Ward," in *Criterion*, 7:86, 1928.

experience remains one of the few authentic records of intellectual recovery in our time." ³² It was an unquestionable recovery "to the moral absolutism of which the Hippopotamus was an inverted parody, the Sunday Morning Service a social indictment, Gerontion a broken and pathetic echo, and the chorus of The Hollow Men a derisive denial." ³³

The final question that Eliot's conversion poses is its intensity. That his conversion has affected both his criticism and his poetry is evident and needs no further substantiation. Wilson has questioned the advisability of his faith; Winters, among others, has questioned his sincerity, while others regret the lack of intensity he has displayed since his conversion. As has already been pointed out previously, attacks against his sincerity have no basis in view of the humility and frankness of his new role, and his lack of intensity is open to question. What there is of it may be due to his native coolness and aloofness, for the conversion has been marked with no emotional overflowings.

Eliot realized that only under law can there be genuine freedom: upon the standards and values presented by both the natural and moral law, the author can build, with a genuine freedom, his conception of man and man's purpose in the world. Having used the law as his foundation, the author is free to strive further in his conception of the universe. The intensity of Eliot's faith was shown the day he submitted his will to the discipline of a higher authority. As Zabel states: "Poetry, like moral life, is an art of concrete conditions whose style and strength are realized when conceptual

³² M. D. Zabel, "T. S. Eliot in Mid-Career," Poetry, 36:330, 1930.

³³ Ibid., p. 331.

or ethical abstraction is tested by vital experience." ³⁴ Viewed in the light of this definition, Eliot's later poetry particularly merits the name "poetry".

The thinking critic who approaches Eliot in the only way he should be approached, through his poetry, can hardly fail to recognize the intensity of his religious thought. Any higher intensity on Eliot's part would lead him to the realm of mystical experience, and one of the difficulties of his later poetry, as we will observe, is mystical experience which is at least hinted at in the Four Quartets.

Eliot's prose work, as well as his poetry, has been concerned more and more with the problems of religion in a secular society. The Christian society which he rather sketchily describes in his most recent book is an almost smug one, and in that respect his society is extremely similar to some non-Christian utopias, particularly those of Wells or Huxley. Eliot differs from those writers, however, by recognizing that the greatest and most difficult of Christian virtues is humility. ³⁵ "Only in humility...can we be prepared to receive the grade of God without which human operations are vain." ³⁶

Eliot's conception of humility is, however, slightly intellectual, and he does not realize that simply surrendering his will to the dictates of God is not enough. For that matter, Eliot's Christian society is not an example of the classic "Brotherhood of Man," for he conceives his fellow men as a lower (and thus inferior) species to be guided to salvation much as sheep

³⁴ Zabel, op. cit., p. 422.

³⁵ T. S. Eliot, "Poet and Saint," Dial, 82:431, 1927.

³⁶ T. S. Eliot, "The Church's Message to the World," Living Age, 352:157, 1937.

are led to slaughter. To be completely unbiased, Eliot's Paradiso is an orthodox one in almost every sense. He has stated:

Our choice now is not between one abstract form and another, but between a pagan and necessarily stunted culture, and a religious, and necessarily imperfect one. ³⁷

We have observed that Eliot's faith is an intellectual one. He admits this when he says that the Christian society "is for the individual, a matter primarily of thought and not of feeling." ³⁸ Eliot's thought is occasionally one of intellectual apologetics, as witness his attempts to justify the satanism and blasphemy of Baudelaire. This may be due to his realization that he himself has committed some of the excesses of the French poet.

It may be said that no blasphemy can be purely verbal; and it may also be said that there is a profounder meaning of the term "blasphemy", in which some modern writers (including possibly myself) may possibly have been gravely guilty. ³⁹

Yet, even as he states that he realizes this deeper meaning of the word "blasphemy", Eliot says of Baudelaire:

The important fact about Baudelaire is that he was essentially a Christian, born out of his time, and a classicist, born out of his due time....But Baudelaire was not an aesthetic or political Christian; his tendency to "ritual"...springs from no attachment to the outward forms of Christianity, but from the instincts of a soul that was naturaliter Christian. And being the kind of Christian that he was, born when he was, he had to discover Christianity for himself. In this pursuit he was alone in the solitude which is only known to saints. To him the notion of Original Sin came spontaneously, and the need for prayer. ⁴⁰

This conscious view of the negative which leads him to an appreciation of the truth led Eliot to comment on Donne and link him, paradoxically

³⁷ The Idea of a Christian Society, p. 16.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁹ After Strange Gods, p. 11.

⁴⁰ Essays, Ancient and Modern, p. 72.

enough, with Huysman:

Donne had a genuine taste for theology and for religious emotion; but he belonged to the class of persons, of which there are but one or two in the modern world, who seek refuge in religion from the tumults of a strong emotional temperament which can find no complete satisfaction elsewhere. He is not wholly without kinship to Huysman. ⁴¹

In reading this and similar comments, we sometimes wonder that Eliot was able to restrain himself from pointing a too obvious finger at his breast and showing his own conversion as one of those two in the modern world. How far astray Eliot can go to illustrate his point that "The contemplation of the horrid or sordid or disgusting, by an artist, is the necessary and negative aspect of the impulse toward the pursuit of beauty," ⁴² is shown by another of his comments on Donne:

Donne many times betrays the consequences of early Jesuit influence and of his later studies in Jesuit literature; in his cunning knowledge of the weaknesses of the human heart, his understanding of human sin, his skill in coaxing and persuading the attention of the variable human mind to Divine objects, and in a kind of smiling tolerance among his manaces of demnation. ⁴³

Whether Eliot feels that the Jesuit training that Donne received was beneficial or detrimental is of little import, but in this comment, as in almost any other criticism that he makes concerning any writer, Eliot finds elements of his own life.

The major point that Eliot makes again and again is that a writer is insufficient without religion and that his writings will mirror that insufficiency. He says, "Our religion imposes our ethics, our judgements and criticism of ourselves, and our behavior toward our fellow men. The fiction

⁴¹ Essays, Ancient and Modern, p. 21.

⁴² Ibid., p. 37.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 100.

that we read affects our patterns of ourselves. When we read of human beings behaving in certain ways with the approval of the author, who gives his benediction to this behavior toward the result of the behavior arranged by himself, we can be influenced toward behaving in the same way." 44

Continuing this train of thought Eliot finds that the logical end of this thinking is the index of prohibited books.

He has stated on this point:

The Roman and Communist idea of an index of prohibited books seems to me perfectly sound in principle. It is a question (a) of the goodness and universality of the cause, (b) of the intelligence that goes to the application. 45

He continues this thought more explicitly. "Indeed, by the time a man knew Montaigne well enough to attack him, he would already be thoroughly infected by him." 46

Eliot's later poetry, to paraphrase the previous quotation, will thoroughly infect the reader, the difference being that Eliot puts spiritual uplift into his work whereas Montaigne supplies only a spiritual surcease. Eliot's religious and moral thoughts have been expressed, at times very explicitly, in his prose criticism as we have already seen. Eliot is one poet who has always attempted to follow in his poetry the philosophy that his prose enunciates.

Having discussed that particular thinking, we can now proceed to trace it in the work that is most characteristic of Eliot's religious poetry, the Four Quartets.

44 Essays, Ancient and Modern, p. 100.

45 The Use of Poetry, p. 129.

46 After Strange Gods, p. 149.

CHAPTER III

It is possible to discover in the development of a poet's writing that certain works are singular achievements and must be considered as artistic unities in themselves. Such a work is Eliot's Four Quartets, a volume seven years in preparation, and Eliot's personal answer to the challenge he himself set forth in the publication of The Waste Land.

Such works, although recognized as personal achievements, are subject to many diverse criticisms. The Waste Land, for example, was hailed by certain critics who felt that it was a true reflection of the age in which it was written; reviled by others as a godless epitaph on man; and casually dismissed by still others as spectacular verse of erudite gibberish. However, despite these many opinions, it is now apparent that Eliot had been able to do in The Waste Land what many poets had been trying unsuccessfully to accomplish; he not only gave a definite poetic image of the period, but conveyed a personal message as well, that of decadence in his time.

Comparing what Eliot had to say in The Waste Land and what he has to say now in Four Quartets is an interesting study, but one that we can only suggest in this thesis. In The Waste Land he voices a warning in which he deplores the sterility and paganism of the time; in the Four Quartets he appeals to man for a spirituality and brotherhood to counteract the waste land of men's souls. In the former he was not alone; many men saw the condition of the age as he did, and also were unable to find any hope for it. In the Four Quartets, however, he is practically alone, for today only a few recognize

the necessity of submission to the supernatural as man's only hope. However, in both poems Eliot maintains a high personal integrity. When The Waste Land was written, Eliot knew of the necessity of arousing men from their indifference but could offer no particular solution. In the Four Quartets, because he had found a personal solution, he writes of his spiritual rejuvenation as the answer. Consequently both poems are the writings of a man at two particular stages in his life, and, as such, are reflective of the thinking of Eliot and are intellectually honest, even though the two works represent opposite viewpoints.

"The great poet in writing himself writes his time."¹ This statement holds particularly true in regard to The Waste Land; it holds equally true in the Four Quartets. Our present age is one of spiritual and moral conflict, which man generally refuses to acknowledge; he prefers to thrust it in the recesses of his mind where he hopes it can be ignored successfully. Consequently the full significance of the message of the Four Quartets has not caused the great wealth of critical comment that The Waste Land aroused, simply because the Quartets are religious in nature, and religious poetry is not regarded seriously by most critics of poetry.

Eliot is fully cognizant of this problem, and he also realizes that there is a relative scarcity of religious verse. Furthermore, he knows that there is a complete breach between those writers who believe in the existence of the supernatural order and those who do not. As he has said:

¹ John Hay, "A Review of Matthiessen's Achievement of T. S. Eliot," Commonweal, 47:122, November 14, 1947.

...the greater portion of our reading matter is coming to be written by people who not only have no such belief (in the supernatural order) but are even ignorant of the fact that there are people in the world so "backward" or so "eccentric" as to continue to believe. So long as we are conscious of the gulf fixed between ourselves and the greater part of contemporary literature, we are more or less protected from being harmed by it, and are, in a position to extract from it what good it has to offer.²

It is obvious that Eliot has not only received an answer to The Waste Land, but has, as well, taken unto himself the responsibility of counteracting the ill effects of secular verse by writing religious poetry. The careful reader in giving the Quartets the study they deserve will find in them some of the finest religious poetry of the last few decades. These are subtle lyrics, capable of charming and teaching many who read them. In a little short of 900 lines, Eliot has confirmed his faith, and has delved deeper into the substance of "mystical experience" than any poet since Thompson or Hopkins.

Communicating mystical experience has always been a difficult task to undertake. Having experienced a religious transformation himself by his conversion, Eliot was faced with the problem of putting his experience into verse, a medium which he felt presented its own barriers in the communication of an experience that is most intangible, easily vague, and highly illusive. Hence, in writing this type of poetry he formulated an entirely new approach, which he has described briefly in a recent unpublished lecture:

...to write poetry which should be essentially poetry, with nothing poetic about it, poetry standing naked in its bare bones, or poetry so transparent that we should not see the poetry, but that which we are meant to see through the poetry, poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poem

² Essays, Ancient and Modern, p. 112.

points at, and not on the poetry, this seems to me to be the thing to try for. To get beyond poetry, as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to get beyond music.³

To achieve this particular idea in the Four Quartets Eliot devotes his writing to the technique of poetic rhythm. By applying the use of beat and meter in verse, he feels that poetry can recreate one of the most primitive and elemental of man's experiences, the tribal chant; at the same time, he is giving expression to the ultimate hidden nuances of his civilized experience. He has defined "the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end,"⁴ as the "auditory imagination." Eliot further adds, "It works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the current, and the new and surprising, the most ancient and the most civilised mentality."⁵

This definition of the term "auditory imagination" is necessary, to understand what Eliot means when he says that "poetry can communicate before it is understood."⁶ Matthiessen has clarified this:

(Poetry) can work upon the ear by the depth of its incantation; it can begin to stir us by its movement before our minds can say what it is that we feel.⁷

³ Unpublished lecture quoted by Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 90.

⁴ The Use of Poetry, p. 111.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

⁷ Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 81.

Eliot's use of poetic rhythm is of particular interest in reading the Four Quartets, as it illustrates quite clearly the relationship between poetry and music. It is certain that Eliot derived his title, much of his tone, and elements of his form and content from Beethoven. The parallels between Beethoven and Eliot, though not too extensive, are interesting:

Both Beethoven and Eliot are working with the most difficult and quintessential of all elements for art: the substance of mystical experience. Both, in the effort to translate it into art, have strained traditional forms and created new ones. Both use motif, refrain, counterpoint, contrasts both violent and subtle, the normal coinage of both arts, for purposes more profound and more intense than their normal transactions. ⁸

It is of little import to note that Beethoven was a man of colossal genius and that Eliot is not. However, even if he lacks major genius, Eliot is a man of profound spiritual intelligence and of poetic talents, which, if "minor", are unmatched in his generation. Coupled with this is the inherent dignity of the subject of his verse. Such a combination makes excellent poetry almost unavoidable and great poetry possible.

The title of the poems themselves is indicative of the nature of their contents and provides further clues to the work. The numeral "four" implies the strength and solidity of a square, while the "quartets" shows, as pointed out above, the structural rigidity of the musical quartet form with its rhythmic fluidity, especially as formalized by Beethoven.

The cryptic titles of each of the Quartets are also illustrative of the new and highly personalized style that Eliot has adopted. The first three Quartets are the names of places intimately associated with Eliot's personal experience. Burnt Norton is the name of a Gloucestershire manor near which he lived for a time; East Coker, in Somerset, is the village which was

⁸ (James Agee.) "At the Still Point." Time, 43:96, June 7, 1943.

the home of his ancestors until their emigration in the mid-seventeenth century to New England; The Dry Salvages are a group of rocks off the New England coast near Cape Ann, where Eliot visited as a boy. Little Gidding, the fourth Quartet, was the seventeenth century religious community founded by Nicholas Ferrar, and with which the names of George Herbert and Richard Crashaw are intimately associated.⁹ It is assumed that Eliot chose the title of Little Gidding as the name of the last Quartet for the religious connotations it presented, and as a fit summation for the work as a whole.

Matthiessen finds original traces of the musical pattern formalized in the Quartets in the rhythmical Landscapes which grew out of Eliot's renewed impressions of America in the nineteen-thirties.¹⁰ The irregular patterns of the Landscapes, however, are developed into a formal pattern of counterpoint and harmony in the development of all the quartets. Eliot has adhered to this structure so closely throughout the entire work that a description of any of the quartets is a description of the form of all of them, and reveals the deliberateness of Eliot's intention.

Each quartet is divided into five movements. The first part of each of the poems is a series of statements and counter-statements about a theme. After presenting this theme, Eliot gives a short description of a scene, which then represents the nucleus about which his thoughts gather.

The second movement opens with a highly developed lyric and ends in a refrain, although in the case of East Coker, the movement drops from incantation into conversational verse with almost prosaic undertones:

⁹ Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 179, and (Agee), loc. cit., p. 97.

¹⁰ Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 178.

That was a way of putting it--not very satisfactory:
 A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
 Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
 With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.

East Coker

This sharp change from the formal lyric to a brief four line study of semantics might have been designed to surprise, as Matthiessen believes,¹¹ but instead of surprising it intensifies the mood by the very nature of the highly personal statement.

The third part of each of the poems is a description of physical movement of a particular period of time, ranging from the description of the subway in East Coker to the descent into the dark night of the soul of St. John of the Cross.

The Waste Land, also written in five movements, is remarkably similar in structure to the Four Quartets. In the earlier work, which antedated Burnt Norton by fourteen years, the first part is a description of nature:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
 Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
 Memory and desire, stirring
 Dull roots with spring rain.

The Waste Land

Part II of The Waste Land is again similar to the second part of any of the later poems. The highly formal lyric in this case is almost pure Elizabethan blank verse:

The chair she sat in, like a burnished throne
 Glowed on the marble, where the glass
 Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines...

The Waste Land

¹¹ Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 180.

And just as the lyric is followed by a refrain in the Four Quartets, Eliot develops the theme in The Waste Land by shuttling back and forth from Elizabethan England to a pub in modern Britain.

In each of the Quartets the fourth movement is a very short lyric, just as it was in The Waste Land, and the last movement is a resumption and restatement of themes developed in the previous parts.

The metric techniques that Eliot uses are as varied as any he has previously adopted. We will examine some of the verse forms in the poems in detail during the explication. For the most part, however, the versification of the entire cycle is a loose and irregular iambic line with many substitutions. Some feet have as many as four slack syllables with each stressed syllable. Wilfully or not, Eliot has apparently taken hints in diction from Hopkins and Auden, and much of the poetry in the Quartets is actually written in Eliot's modification of Hopkins' sprung rhythm.

The line length of the poems varies from two or three words to the regular hexameter in

The inner freedom from the practical desire...

Burnt Norton

There are also many lines such as the loose and almost unscannable

Or when, under ether, the mind is conscious but
conscious of nothing--

East Coker

Much has been written concerning Eliot's personal and acquired religion, but little mention has been made of the second of his beliefs first stated in 1928, that of classicism. Classicism, to Eliot, is something more than a return to classical models, more than a reflection of the poetic thought of

Donne, for example, and is not a renewal of some sterile tradition." He says:

Tradition is not solely, or even primarily, the maintenance of certain dogmatic belief; these beliefs have come to take their living form in the course of a formation of a tradition. What I mean by tradition involves all of those habitual actions, habits, and customs, from the most significant religious rite to our conventional way of greeting a stranger....It involves a good deal which can be called taboo: that this word is used in our time in an exclusively derogatory sense is to me a curiosity of some significance. ¹²

This involves the ability to go beyond the appearances of an object to the recurring elements in it which are of significant and lasting importance. Thus, analogously, the notes and scales in music might be called tradition, but the ability of the composer to utilize those elements of tradition and bring from them something which approaches the meaning of life, is, to Eliot, classicism. Eliot believes that poetry can approach the condition of music without sacrificing its inherent nature so long as it has "definite emotion behind it." ¹³

The Four Quartets are Eliot's poetic illustration of this belief. The traditional elements in them are the words and rhythmic patterns which suggest the pattern of thought in the human mind, and one of the bases for each of the Quartets is the classic concept of the elements or humours. ¹⁴

¹² After Strange Gods, pp. 18 & 19.

¹³ T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, His Metric and Poetry. New York, Knopf, 1917. p. 16. The entire passage, while relating to Pound, is illustrative of Eliot's position:

Such a relation between poetry and music is very different from what is called the 'music' of Shelley...a music often nearer to rhetoric (or the art of the orator) than to the instrument. For poetry to approach the condition of music...it is not necessary that poetry should be destitute of meaning. Instead of slightly veiled and resonant abstractions...Pound's verse is always definite and concrete because he has always a definite emotion behind it.

¹⁴ This idea was first suggested by Helen Gardner, "The Recent Poetry of T. S. Eliot," New Writing and Daylight, Summer, 1942.

Burnt Norton, the first of the poems, has as its basis the classic element "air". This is only the basic framework and the poem is in no manner a modern version of the Greek Humour. For Eliot's purpose the "air" of the poem is wound throughout the poem, providing some of the structure upon which Eliot weaves his poetic thought.

For the most part Burnt Norton is the most difficult to understand of the four. Readers who became acquainted with it in the Collected Poems in 1936 found that, even with usual attention, it remained abstruse, but when viewed in its proper context with the remaining three quartets and when considered as one part of an artistic whole, the poem almost immediately gains a coherency and unity.

BURNT NORTON

I

The theme of Burnt Norton is partially derived from the prefatory quotations from the Greek philosopher Heraclitus concerning the eternal flux and change of events.¹⁵ What attracted Eliot to the Heraclitean fragments was, according to Preston, their poetic suggestiveness, a suggestiveness that Eliot evolved into a discourse on time.¹⁶ The poem opens:

15 G. T. W. Patrick, translator, The Fragments of Heraclitus. Baltimore, N. Murray, 1889, p. 84 gives one version of the first epigraph: To this universal Reason which I unfold, although it always exists, men make themselves insensible, both before they have heard and when they have heard it for the first time.

Patrick's translation of the second epigraph is "The way upward and downward are one and the same." p. 101.

16 Raymond Preston, 'Four Quartets' Rehearsed. London, Sheed & Ward, 1946, p. viii.

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

This quiet statement on the nature of time could almost have been the utterance of an abstract mathematician were it not for the fact that the lines are reminiscent of Ecclesiastes, 3, 15:

That which hath been made, the same continueth:
 the things that shall be have already been. 17

Briefly, Eliot is here concerned with the effect of time on the individual consciousness, since man is not living in the past because he is the sum of the things of the past; and he is not living in the future, because the future is a continual summation of the past and present. All a man can concern himself with, then, is the present.

The changes of tense and mood in the opening lines are also important. The five five lines are indicative, a simple statement, in abbreviated terms, that "all is always now." In the sixth line the mood shifts and the subjunctive is used to show the possibility of action. Again, the word "only" in the eighth line is not used loosely. The line does not read:

Remaining only a perpetual possibility

17 The King James Version, with which Eliot would be more familiar, is even more reminiscent of the opening lines:

That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been.

but

Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.

The change in meaning with this shift in what would seem to be normal word order is an extremely subtle one. We have a double level of abstraction. The "might have been" is a definite possibility, but (and here we notice the second level) it is only a speculative possibility, not an actual one. Eliot is not using mere metaphysical double-talk here, for this is extremely controlled verse with every word giving the impression of mental uncertainty.

Reclaiming the utmost from the meditation on time, Eliot is echoing the constant flux stated in the Heraclitean fragments. However, Eliot is using Heraclitus for only a limited purpose because the last line quoted, "the one end, which is always present," points a final end to the flux when everything ceases to move; at least we know motion in a Divine union with God. This is an excellent example of Eliot's usage of tradition upon which is grafted his awakened awareness of the supernatural order.

Viewed in this light, the opening lines are a poetic restatement of Eliot's knowledge of his time and civilization whose literature, as he has stated, is:

...the phase of those who have never heard the Christian Faith
spoken of as anything but anachronism. ¹⁸

From the appearances of reality in the first lines, the lyric continues with a counterpointed realistic melody:

¹⁸ Essays, Ancient and Modern, p. 100.

Footfalls echo in the memory
 Down the passage which we did not take
 Towards the door we never opened
 Into the rose-garden. My words echo
 Thus, in your mind.

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

The meditation on time in the first part of the poem was one position of the Heraclitean flux, and the reality of the rose-garden is still another movement within that flux. Here the garden is a very specific one, that of the manor of Burnt Norton, a summer house in Gloucestershire, near where Eliot lived for a time. The garden, however, is only a point of departure for Eliot's poetic thought. His memory, once stimulated by the sight of the garden, carries him through several ramifications. The door which Eliot never opened could be the secular road he left when he entered the church, an impression stated in the last lines quoted above. There is no actual purpose in continuing the mnemonic train of thought inasmuch as he has taken another road. Despite this, Eliot continues the lyric by recalling the poignancy of some other moments that the garden recalls.

 Other echoes
 Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?

This has a very personal meaning for the poet, for the descriptions which follow are half-remembered impressions from childhood when considered on one level of meaning. Another possibility of meaning has been suggested by Preston: the garden and the roses have both religious and sexual symbolism, typified by such works as the Roman de la Rose and the mystic Rose of Dante's Paradiso.¹⁹ This curious juxtaposition of sources is heightened by images

¹⁹ Preston, op. cit., p. 12.

that Eliot used previously in The Waste Land, although we might not associate the hermit-thrush and rose-garden of Burnt Norton with the thrush and hyacinth garden of the earlier poem.

The well devised lyric which follows indicates that it is actually a descant on the theme of present time, and we are forcibly reminded, after such lines as:

And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light,
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,
Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.

that

Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.

The bird mentioned could be a simple thrush, but the triple repetition of the word "Go" might indicate that it could be the Cock of Heaven which, according to legend, would crow three times to herald the end of the world, and was the same cock which crew three times when Peter denied Christ.²⁰ It could be any of these or it could be none of these, for at the conclusion of the strophe the descant is ended with:

Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

The first part of the poem is summarized in these lines, which is simply a restatement of the opening of the poem. All of the description of the rose-garden is gone under the vivid reality of the "one end."

On cursory reading the first part of Burnt Norton appears similar to

²⁰ Elder Olson, The Cock of Heaven. New York, Macmillan, 1940, p. 1. This very long poem is an interesting modern version of the legend, a tour de force on this theme.

Eliot's earlier poetry with its images of decay and change: the "dust", the "dead leaves", the "dry concrete, brown edged", "the drained pool", and the "unseen eyebeam". Despite these images the first part of the poem succeeds in suggesting an experience that is timeless, and because the experience is a timeless one, it is unrelated to the earlier poetry.

II

Opening the second section of the poem is an image that Eliot has used on two other occasions:

Garlic and sapphires in the mud
Clot the bedded axle-tree.

In Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleisten with a Cigar, Eliot's use of the image was:

The horses, under the axle-tree
Beat up the dawn from Istria...

and, in the closing lines from Gerontion, Eliot continues the image, originally derived, as we shall see, from Seneca:

Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear
In fractured atoms.

These passages are apt illustrations of Eliot's habit of rephrasing the thought of other written works to gain his own purpose. Eliot, who has never denied his use of literary quotations, calls this technique a "reborn image,"²¹ and traces its use in Coleridge and Shakespeare:

²¹ Use of Poetry, op. cit., p. 140.

The recreation of word and image which happens fitfully in the poetry of such a poet as Coleridge happens almost incessantly with Shakespeare. Again, and again, in his use of a word, he will give a new meaning or extract a latent one; again and again the right imagery, saturated while it lay in the depths of Shakespeare's memory, will rise like Anadyomene from the sea. In Shakespeare's poetry this reborn image or word will have its rational use and justification; in much good poetry the organization will not reach so rational a level. I will take an example which...is from Chapman's Bussy d'Ambois:

Fly where the evening from the Iberian vales
Takes on her swarthy shoulders Hecate
Crowned with a grove of oaks: fly where men feel
The burning axletree, and those that suffer
Beneath the chariot of the snowy Bear...

Chapman borrowed this...from Seneca's Hercules Oeteus:

dic sub Aurora positis Sabaeis
dic sub occasu positis Hiberis
quique sub plaustro patiuntur ursae
quique ferventi quatiuntur axe

and probably from the same author's Hercules Furens:

sub ortus, an sub cardine
glacialis ursae?

There is first the probability that this imagery had some personal saturation value, so to speak, for Seneca; another for Chapman, and another for myself, who have borrowed it twice from Chapman. I suggest that what gives it such intensity as it has in each case is its saturation...²²

Eliot's use of the image of the axle-tree and the stars is traceable in the lyric which opens the second strophe of Burnt Norton. From the axle-tree in the mud, the poet traces his image through "the dance along the artery,"

²² Use of Poetry, p. 140. A translation of the Latin will more adequately reveal both Chapman's and Eliot's indebtedness to the Roman author:

Say, when the Sabans (are) under the dawn,
Say, when the Spaniards (are) under the sunset,
Who suffers under the wagon of the Bear,
Who shakes under the burning axle-tree?

Under the rising of the sun, or under the
pole of the icy Bear.

which is "figured in the drift of stars" and is "reconciled among the stars."

Garlic and sapphires in the mud
 Clot the bedded axle-tree.
 The trilling wire in the blood
 Sings below inveterate scars
 And reconciles forgotten wars.
 The dance along the artery
 The circulation of the lymph
 Are figured in the drift of stars
 Ascend to summer in the tree
 We move above the moving tree
 In light upon the figured leaf
 And here upon the sodden floor
 Below, the boarhound and the boar
 Pursue their pattern as before
 But reconciled among the stars.

The growth of images in this passage is extremely unusual, and is greatly reminiscent of the metaphysical poem in which an image is twisted almost beyond all recognizable description. Here the "blood" figure receives a treatment so thorough that it is difficult to recognize that what Eliot is trying to say is that all opposites are reconciled, and that life becomes a stillness in this reconciliation. However, the stillness will never be completely realized in this world.

The tight linkage of Eliot's imagery has been most recently demonstrated by Louis A. Martz in the Winter, 1947 issue of the Sewanee Review.²³ He observes that the phrase "At the still point of the turning world", is a key one in Ash-Wednesday, Murder in the Cathedral, The Family Reunion, and Burnt Norton. Mr. Martz, unfortunately, fails to realize that the phrase, as used in Burnt Norton, is diametrically opposite to the conception of stasis emphasized in his article. He apparently has forgotten that the Heraclitean epigraphs which preface the poem point out the constant state or flux of our

23 Louis A. Martz, "The Wheel and the Point," Sewanee Review, 55:126, Winter, 1947.

existence, and Eliot's use of the "still point" image, at least in Burnt Norton, echoes this constant change:

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,²⁴
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor
towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.
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.

We notice that Eliot here emphasizes change and constant movement, and rejects "fixity," particularly in the sphere of time, which is his predominant concern throughout the poem. The dance to which Eliot refers in this and the previously quoted passage is the dance of life, and, to Eliot, that dance is one of the important things of our existence.

Concluding the strophe is a dispassionate statement or definition of what Eliot means by "the still point."

The inner freedom from the practical desire,
The release from action and suffering, release from the inner
And the outer compulsion....
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.

The last four lines accomplish a number of purposes. They are first, a statement of the effects of time upon the individual consciousness; secondly, the line poses a problem in the use of the word "protect." We would not want to be "protected" from heaven, to be sure, but this problem is resolved in the final line. We realize that human flesh cannot endure the Beatific Vision on this earth, much as it might be desired, because of the very weakness of

²⁴ Italics mine.

that flesh, and because our time on this earth should be considered as merely a preparatory stage before the soul receives the Beatific Vision. A third effect of the lines is to state the immediate result of time upon the individual which echoes the opening lines of the first strophe and prepares the way for the concluding passage of the second strophe:

Time past and time future

Allow but a 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 as smokefall
 Be remembered; involved with past and future.
 Only through time time is conquered.

Preston summarizes this very well:

...he is rather trying to divine the condition (eternal life) itself, to realize as precisely as possible what 'eternal life' is from the hints given by--not thought alone, but perception and feeling and thought....He cannot say more of what eternity is like, except by saying what it is not like, by successively rejecting ideas which limit the 'one end.' ²⁵

III

The third section of the poem illustrates a way of writing that is new to Burnt Norton, a tight conversational description of movement, more abstract and more philosophically dense than any previous poetry that Eliot has written. It opens with a description of the London subway:

Here is a place of disaffection...
 ...Only a flicker
 Over the stained time-ridden faces
 Distracted from distraction by distraction
 Filled with fancies and empty of meaning
 Tumid apathy with no concentration
 Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind
 That blows before and after time,

²⁵ Preston, op. cit., p. 17.

Wind in and out of unwholesome lungs
 Time before and time after.
 Eructation of unhealthy souls
 Into the faded air, the torpid
 Driven on the wind that sweeps the gloomy hills of London.

This apparent return to Eliot's early disgust at the conditions of life is sublimated by his realization that these "unhealthy souls" which are spewed into the faded air," are actually "Not here, not here the darkness, in this twittering world," but souls living in abstention of movement.

This discourse on time (and again we notice the slight digression on "air" and "wind" which relates to the Aristotelian element mentioned earlier) leads to a short lyric which closes the third part of the poem.

St. John of the Cross has been mentioned only briefly earlier in this paper, and, for the first time, we begin to discern the influence the Saint's works have had on Eliot, who undoubtedly was attracted to the spiritual detachment which marks the discipline of the Spanish mystic. In East Coker, as we will observe, Eliot directly paraphrases St. John of the Cross, but here, in the passage in question, Eliot hints at the Dark Night of the Soul by means of a series of paradoxes:

Descend lower, descend only
 Into the world of perpetual solitude,
 World not world, but that which is not world,
 Internal darkness, deprivation
 And destitution of all property,
 Dessiccation of the world of sense,
 Evacuation of the world of fancy,
 Inoperancy of the world of spirit;

The conclusion of the third strophe serves a double purpose. It is first, a poetic restatement of the second Heraclitean epigraph, implying that the "way up" and the "way down" are the same; and secondly, it is a suggestion of

the methods that the soul can use to reach "the world of perpetual solitude."

This is the one way, and the other
Is the same, not in movement
But abstention from movement; while the world moves
In appetancy, on its metalled ways
Of time past and time future.

Preston has clarified this:

The meaning of this is made clear by St. John of the Cross writing on the 'ladder of contemplation': 'Communications which are indeed of God have this property, that they humble the soul and at the same time exalt it. For upon this road to go down is to go up, and to go up to go down; for he that humbles himself is exalted and he that exalts himself is humbled.' ²⁶

IV

The condition of detachment which Eliot has advocated in the previous section is given another resolution in the ten line lyric which comprises the fourth movement of the poem. This new approach is one of personal participation in the detachment, as shown in the opening lines:

Time and the bell have buried the day,
The black cloud carries the sun away.
Will the sunflower turn to us, will the clamatis
Stray down, bend to us; tendril and spray
Clutch and cling?

The "black cloud" is the Dark Night of the Soul which prevents the soul from the full knowledge of the "sun" or Divine Light. The poet questions himself here: will the Dark Night be a permanent condition? Will the "sunflower" eventually be seen through the cloud? He asks one more question, this one stated explicitly in the poetry, and answered in the final lines:

²⁶ Preston, op. cit., p. 20. He is quoting The Dark Night of the Soul, Book II, chapter XVII et seq.

Chill

Fingers of yew be curled
Down upon us? 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.

Eliot asks if death will envelop the soul as a result of the cloud, the "dark night," and proceeds to answer his own question. After the things of this world are forgotten, the eternal light will remain, and that same light is actually the focal point of all of our attention, the axis upon which the entire earth turns.

V

Eliot's summation of the time motif marks the final movement and close of Burnt Norton. Time, and more specifically the things of and in time, "can only die," and can only attempt to reach "into the silence" of God. Fore-shadowed, too, is the discussion of time reaching into history which forms the major poetic problem of East Coker.

The particular problem that Eliot faces here is the insufficiency of words to picture the ultimate end of the soul. Again, Eliot's solution is not a descriptive one but a suggestive use of words to convey the conception of stillness, which is essential to his ultimate end.

Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness. 27

27 The poetic suggestiveness of this passage is extremely well done. Eliot has experienced the phenomenon, usually unnoticed by those who experience it, of gazing intently upon a motionless object, and then apparently seeing that object move in its stillness.

He proceeds and tries to define the feeling:

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 stops and realizes the impossibility of his definition:

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. Shrieking voices
 Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering
 Always assail them. The Word in the desert
 Is **most** attacked by voices of temptation,
 The crying shadow in the funeral dance,
 The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera.

The poet realizes that he can never completely solve this problem, but aided by his own mastery of language, by Heraclitus, St. John of the Cross, and Aristotle, he is able to fuse this divergent thought into a coherent poetic statement:

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

However thoroughly Eliot has discussed the effects of time and movement, he realizes that

The detail of the pattern is movement,
 As in the figure of the ten stairs.

The "ten stairs" is, of course, the "ladder of contemplation" of St. John of the Cross, which implies a constant movement toward God, a movement in time which must be conditioned by history, for, as the poem continues:

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
 Even while the dust moves
 There rises the hidden laughter
 Of children in the foliage
 Quick, now, here, now, always--
 Ridiculous the wast sad time
 Stretching before and after.

The particular phrasing of two lines in this passage is of importance.

We note that it is not, as we might think the line to read on first glance, a "sad waste of time," but a "waste sad time," of history, wasted and sad because Eliot's fellow men have not adjudicated the teachings of history and time, and applied those teachings to their own life. The second peculiarity of phrasing is actually one of diction in the line "quick, now, here, now, always--" with the extremely sharp rapid movement of the words suggesting a fleeting quickness of movement essential to the understanding of the line.

Matthiessen has ably summarized the effects of Burnt Norton:

...the chief contrast around which Eliot constructs this poem is that between the view of time as a continuum, and the difficult paradoxical Christian view of how man lives both 'in and out of time,' how he is immersed in the flux and yet can penetrate to the eternal by apprehending timeless existence within time and above it. But even for the Christian the moments of release from the pressures of the flux are rare, though they alone redeem the sad wastage of otherwise unilluminated existence. ²⁸

The conclusion of Burnt Norton which hinted at the intersection of time with history provides the immediate starting point for East Coker, and the brief discourse in the last strophe:

Or say that the end precedes the beginning
 And the end and the beginning were always there
 Before the beginning and after the end...

leads directly to the first line of East Coker. Thus the theme of the second Quartet is foreshadowed in the first poem and given a further expansion in the second.

EAST COKER

I

The theme of the entire poem, East Coker, is stated in the first line: "In my beginning is my end." By the addition of the personal pronoun Eliot quite simply translated the dispassionate usage of the time motif in Burnt Norton into a personalized statement, and we see again Eliot's use of the philosophy of opposites or contrasts which had attracted the poet as early as The Hollow Men. The predilection for reconciliation of opposites of Heraclitus is here given consummation. By its very act of personalization, the time of the poem intersects history.

Specifically, the history that Eliot is concerned with in the opening section of East Coker is pre-Elizabethan England, in the days when his namesake and probable ancestor, Sir Thomas Elyot, was writing The Boke Named the Governour in the village of Coker, and when Mary Stuart first stated the thought translated and reversed by Eliot:

En me fin est mon commencement.

The opening lines of the poem are a rapid sketch of the village of East Coker, compressing several centuries into a few swift lines:

In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.

From the extended description of the entire countryside, Eliot localizes the scene to the open field:

Now the light falls
Across the open field, leaving the deep lane
Shuttered with branches, dark in the afternoon,
Where you lean against a bank while a van passes,

Into the village, in the electric heat
Hypnotized...

The season is summer,²⁹ and, after the telescoping of time, the scene is the present, and the time apparently late afternoon or early evening. Eliot is not content, however, to leave the reader in the present-day village, and just as rapidly, although much more subtly, transports him back to the sixteenth century.

On a summer midnight, you can hear the music
Of the weak pipe and the little drum
And see them dancing around the bonfire
The association of man and woman
In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie--
A dignified and commodious sacrament,
Two and two, necessarye coniunction,
Holding eche other by the hand or arm
Whiche betokeneth concorde.

The effect of the pre-Shakespearean English is rather surprising at first. The reader might immediately suspect that Eliot is being precious in utilizing this technique, but Eliot is being extremely logical, for he is thinking back to the conception of order and harmony propounded by Sir Thomas Elyot. The influence of the earlier author is manifest when we investigate his major work, first published in 1531.

Two passages show Eliot's indebtedness, at least in diction, to the earlier work:

It is diligently to be noted that the associating of man and woman in daunsing, they both obseruing one nombre and tyme in their meuyngs, was nat begonne without a speciall consideration, as well as for the necessarye coniunction of those two persones, as for the intimation of sondry vertues, which be by them represented.

²⁹ The word 'electric' to describe the heat is remarkable and extremely effective.

And for as moche as by the association of a man and a woman in daunsinge may be signified matrimonie, I could in declarynge the dignities and commodities of that sacrament make intiere volumes, if it were nat so communely knowen to all men that almoste frere lymitour carieth it writen in his bosome. 30

But nowe to my purpose. In euery daunse, of a moste auncient custome, there daunseth to gether a man and a woman, holding eche other by the hand or the arme, which betokeneth concorde. 31

The connection between the two writers goes further than mere literary quotations, however, for it is certain that Eliot could have established a sixteenth century atmosphere by quoting any number of passages from other more widely known writers. But Elyot's interests went further than an interest in dancing; he was an arch-royalist and his sixteenth century conception of the ideal state is startlingly similar to Eliot's Idea of a Christian Society. James Sweeney, in his study of the sources of East Coker, goes so far as to maintain that Eliot derived the central thought of his Christian Society from the Gouverneur. 32

Whatever Eliot's intention was in utilizing the Gouverneur and whatever the extent of its influence are moot points, for by its use, Eliot has intensified the mood of the opening description of the village and provided an "insight into a harmony with nature which must be re-established if the truly Christian imagination is to be recovered by Christians." 33

Toward the end of the passage the rhythm of the dancing, so ably suggested by the rhythm of the verse, is quickened and from the rhythm of the dance it becomes "keeping time."

30 Sir Thomas Elyot, The Boke Named the Gouverneur, edited by H. H. S. Croft, London, Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1889, Vol. I, p. 233.

31 IBID., p. 235-36.

32 James J. Sweeney, "An Examination of the Sources of East Coker," Southern Review, 5:774, Spring, 1941.

33 Preston, op. cit., p. 25.

Keeping time,

Keeping the rhythm in their dancing
 As in their living in the living seasons
 The time of seasons and the constellations
 The time of milking and the time of harvest
 The time of the coupling of man and woman
 And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.
 Eating and drinking. Dung and death.

The rhythm of the dance is thus subtly transformed to another commentary on time, and is slowed to a meditative commentary. Sweeney has pointed out the similarity between this passage and the opening eight verses of the third chapter of Ecclesiastes. ³⁴

All things have their season: and in their times
 all things pass under heaven.

A time to be born, and a time to die. A time to
 plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted.

A time to kill, and a time to heal. A time to
 destroy, and a time to build.

A time to weep and a time to laugh. A time to
 mourn, and a time to dance.

A time to scatter stones, and a time to gather.
 A time to embrace, and a time to be far from embrace.

A time to get, and a time to lose. A time to
 keep, and a time to cast away.

A time to rend, and a time to sew. A time to
 keep silence, and a time to speak.

A time to love, and a time of hatred. A time
 of war, and a time of peace. ³⁵

The pervading aura of stillness of the first section is intensified by the four lines which conclude it:

Dawn points, and another day
 Prepares for heat and silence. Out at sea the dawn wind
 Wrinkles and slides. I am here
 Or there, or elsewhere. In my beginning.

The night is over, the "summer midnight" has changed to dawn and the cool of the evening is broken by a new heat. The vision of the past fades having

³⁴ Sweeney, *loc. cit.*, p. 775.

³⁵ Ecclesiastes, Chap. 3, Ver. 1-8.

reminded us that the present is merely the sum total of the things of the past. The comparative rigidity of Burnt Norton has been deliberately changed to an extreme flexibility reflected in the line, "I am here or there, or elsewhere."

II

The lyric passage which opens the second strophe of the poem begins on a very prosaic note:

What is the late November doing
 With the disturbance of the spring
 And creatures of the summer heat,
 And snowdrops writing under feet
 And hollyhocks that aim too high
 Red into grey and tumble down
 Late roses filled with early snow?

The casualness of the beginning is deceptive, however, for from the simple description of the seasons and nature, the lyric proceeds, as Gardner has expressed it, to

...war among the constellations, ending with the apocalyptic vision of the end of the world, burnt out to an icy cinder.³⁶

This inversion of images in an otherwise apparently simple lyrical passage is also seen in the hollyhocks, flowers of summer, which "aim too high" and bloom in the "late November." Here, too, the four seasons are first introduced formally, but again, even the seasons are placed in inverted order, with fall following winter.

Concluding the lyric is an exalted passage in which Eliot explores the consequences of inter-galactic destruction:

Until the Sun and Moon go down
 Comets weep and Leonids fly
 Hunt the heavens and the plains
 Whirled in a vortex that shall bring

³⁶ Gardner, op. cit., p. 90.

The world to that destructive fire
Which burns before the ice-cap reigns.

The "destructive fire" could be the apocalyptic fire suggested by Gardner, or it could be a suggestion of the Aristotelean element and nothing more. In view of the abrupt change from the earth to the stars in the passage, however, it is more probable that Eliot is directing the reader's attention to the opening line of the poem. "In my beginning is my end", and is restating that theme. Eliot realizes, as Preston points out, that "...in humility, one person in a single lifetime cannot change an ethos..."³⁷ The beginning and the end are two of the fundamental things about life that an individual cannot understand, and that only "in the middle way" can a man receive answers to his spiritual questionings.

Even Eliot realizes that the opening lyric is not complete, for as the poem continues:

That was a way of putting it--not very satisfactory:
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.

This is a poetic restatement of a remark Eliot made at approximately the same time East Coker was written:

While the practice of poetry need not in itself confer wisdom, or accumulate knowledge, it ought at least to train the mind in one habit of universal value: that of analyzing the meanings of words: or those that one employs oneself, as well as the words of others.³⁸

This brief semantic interlude is important only for the last statement:

"The poetry does not matter." Here is one of the few key statements, not only

³⁷ Preston, op. cit., p. 27.

³⁸ The Idea of a Christian Society, p. 4.

of East Coker, but of the entire sequence of the poems. Eliot shares, with Richards, Korzybski, and other semanticists, the belief that language can influence human behavior. He obviously does not share Korzybski's extremism or his belief in non-Aristotelian systems, but Eliot's preoccupation with words in their meanings, already observed in footnote 15 of the first chapter, stems directly from his associations with Richards and other semanticists.

Eliot continues this meditation by questioning the validity of knowledge derived from experience:

There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience,
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been.

This section demonstrates the constant search for truth that Eliot has continued. He knows that a mind hampered in its search for objective truth by the accretions of history is a mind that is not free. As he expresses it:

What was to be the value of the long looked forward to,
Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity
And the wisdom of age? Had they deceived us
Or deceived themselves, the quiet-voiced elders,
Bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit?
The serenity only a deliberate hebetude
The wisdom only the knowledge of dead secrets...

This statement of the chaos in the life of the individual is, upon reflection, the antithesis of the thought contained in the opening lyric, the chaos of the solar-system, and, upon further reflection, might seem allied to Eliot's earlier poetry. Indeed, Preston calls attention to the similarity in mood and diction between the previously quoted passage of East Coker and the "passages of tortuous celebration in the middle of Gerontion

("Think now...")" ³⁹ However, remembering Eliot's thoughts upon what Matthiessen has called "the Catholic paradox: society is for the salvation of the individual and the individual must be sacrificed to society," ⁴⁰ we are led to think that Eliot here is criticising his critics for their blind unswerving faith to the modern heresy--obedience to false precepts.

The exposition of the passage is then broken by a sentence reminiscent of the description of the field in the first strophe:

In the middle, not only in the middle of the way
But all the way, in a dark wood, in a bramble,
On the edge of a grimpen, where is no secure foothold,
And menaced by monsters, fancy lights,
Risking enchantment.

We are taken from the prosaic realm in the immediately preceding passage and brought again to a realization of the supernatural environment of which the world is oblivious. The broken phrases suggest a sudden intensity, and we observe the repetition to achieve poetic effect which has for so long played such an important role in Eliot's verse.

The strophe is concluded with Eliot's summation of the theme of the wisdom of experience, a musical restatement or coda:

Do not let me hear
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,
Or belonging to another, or to others, or to God.
The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.

Eliot has here suddenly removed the prosaic and journalistic tone of his poetry and inserted an ethical one. Here, too, he has turned a phrase originally made in a political speech ⁴¹ into a rhythmic utterance that almost surges

39 Preston, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

40 Matthiessen, *loc. cit.*, p. 52.

41 The phrase "fear of fear" was used in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's first inaugural address.

into the reader's consciousness, particularly when read aloud. From the simple statement "fear of fear or frenzy", the lyric intensifies and proceeds from individualism to community, and, finally, to God. The complete futility of pride is echoed in the last line.

Closing the second part of the poem are two lines which again relate to the first strophe. The first line

The houses are all gone under the sea.

and the second

The dancers are all gone under the hill.

are two lines as poetically packed as any Eliot has ever written. All of the striving and yearning of human existence is here summarized, and the eventual end of all things human is shown.

III

Opening the third part of the poem are two lines adapted almost directly from the opening of Milton's Samson Agonistes:

O dark, dark, dark. They all go into the dark,
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant...

Eliot has adapted Milton's original lines:

Oh dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,	l. 80
The sun to me is dark	ll. 86 - 89
And silent is the moon,	
When she descends the night	
Hid in her vacant interlunar cave.	

but has used them in almost entirely a new context, for the next lines are a cataloging of the people who "go into the dark" of death. It is more than a physical death, for the implications found in the later portion of the stanza

seem to indicate that it is an apocalyptic death as well as a personal one. The style of the passage is a curious combination of W. H. Auden's highly personalized journalism and Kenneth Fearing's savagely appropriate patois:

The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,
 The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,
 Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees,
 Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the dark,
 And dark the Sun and Moon, and the Almanach de Gotha
 And the Stock Exchange Gazette, the Directory of Directors...

These lines are set between two passages of metaphysical content, and the six lines between them, so different in tone and substance, are almost jolting to the reader. Yet as Sweeney and others have shown, the passage is a poetic adaptation of four verses from the Apocalypse of St. John the Apostle, chapter six, verses 12 to 15: ⁴²

And I saw, when he had opened the sixth seal: and behold there was a great earthquake. And the sun became black as sackcloth or hair; and the whole moon became as blood.

And the stars from heaven fell upon the earth, as the fig tree casteth its green figs when it is shaken by a great wind.

And the heaven departed as a book folded up. And every mountain, and the islands, were moved out of their places.

And the kings of the earth and the princes and tribunes and the rich and the strong and every bondman and every freeman hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains.

This is an excellent example of Eliot's use of literary allusion to create effect. The average reader of the Quartets will not recognize the references to the Biblical passage and will assume that the cataloging of types of people in the six lines is designed only to gain effect, and insofar as he goes, he most certainly will be correct. The discerning reader, however,

⁴² Sweeney, loc. cit., p. 775.

will realize that the passage is still another method of emphasizing the final judgment which is the substance of the lines preceding and following the selection.

The last line of the opening section, "And cold the sense and lost the motive for action," announces, for the first time, the "dark night of the senses" of St. John of the Cross, and the following two passages of the third section of the poem represent the final two stages of growth of the soul.

As the Saint has said:

We may say that there are three reasons for which this passage made by the soul to union with God is called night. The first has to do with the point from which the soul goes forth, for it has gradually to deprive itself of desire for all worldly things which it possessed, by denying them to itself; the which denial and deprivation are, as it were, night to all the senses of man. The second reason has to do with the means of the road along which the soul must travel to the union--that is, faith, which is likewise as dark as night to the understanding. The third has to do with the point to which it travels--namely God, who, equally, is the dark night to the soul in this life. ⁴³

Before Eliot considers the road that the soul must travel he summarizes the means that the soul must use before it can embark on its trip:

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God.

This is immediately reminiscent of Housman's line from A Shropshire Lad:

Be still, my soul, be still...

but there is a major difference between the two uses of the phrase, a difference of mood. Both writers use the imperative but Eliot adds an immediacy by speaking directly to the soul and giving it advice.

⁴³ The Ascent to Mt. Carmel, I, ii, 1, et. seq. The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross. London, Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1934, Vol. I, p. 19-20.

The second stage of the ascent of the soul in East Coker is separated from the first by more than a change of thought; there is a curious typographical break between the two, a break which, in print, looks somewhat as follows:

...the darkness of God. As in a theatre,
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed...

This distinction is more than mere arbitrary typographical madness a la E. E. Cummings, for Eliot wants to indicate that the two thoughts are separate, but still related to the whole.

Eliot finds difficulties in picturing the road that the soul must travel. It is an inherently mystical state and the English language is frequently insufficient to do more than simply indicate. This Eliot has done by analogy, for, as the lyric continues:

Or as, when an underground train...stops too long between stations
And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence
And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen
Leaving only the terror of nothing to think about;
Or when, under ether, the mind is conscious but
 conscious of nothing--
I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the
 waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness
 the dancing.

The development of the images of the lyric from analogy to paradoxical anaphora is designed to indicate rather than describe, for Eliot finds the course that the soul must take impossible of description, and it can be depicted only by telling what it is not, rather than what it is.

It must not be understood that Eliot is merely paraphrasing in poetry what St. John of the Cross has already stated in quite lucid prose. Eliot has based his thought upon the Saint, but it extends only to that. He knows, also, that poetry and prose are two quite different methods of communication. What The Ascent of Mt. Carmel communicates is essentially the same as what Eliot is communicating, but the major difference is that St. John does it theologically and Eliot does it poetically.

Between the second and last parts of the strophe is a brief interlude, almost taking the place of a coda, as fine a short lyric as Eliot has ever penned:

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

The images in the lines are derived from the first section of the poem, from Burnt Norton, and from the Heraclitean flux of the first of the Four Quartets. The last lines restate the opening line of the poem, for the "beginning" is "birth", and the "end" is "death".

Nowhere is Eliot's debt to St. John of the Cross more apparent in these poems, than in the fourteen lines which close the third movement of East Coker, depicting the third stage in the progress of the soul. Here he has taken directly the instructions of the Saint in entering the night of the senses, rephrased them, and used these counsels to summarize his entire thought, and he has done this deliberately. A comparison of the two passages shows how closely Eliot stays with St. John of the Cross:

You say I am repeating
 Something I have said before. I shall say it again.
 Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there
 To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not
 You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
 In order to arrive at what you do not know
 You must go by way of dispossession.
 In order to arrive at what you are not
 You must go through the way in which you are not.
 And 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.

The Spanish mystic originally expressed the same thought:

In order to arrive at having pleasure in everything,
 Desire to have pleasure in nothing.

In order to arrive at possessing everything,
 Desire to possess nothing.

In order to arrive at knowing everything,
 Desire to know nothing.

In order to arrive at that wherein thou hast no pleasure,
 Thou must go by a way wherein thou hast no pleasure.

In order to arrive at that which thou possessest not,
 Thou must go by a way that thou possessest not.

In order to arrive at that which thou art not,
 Thou must go through that which thou art not. ⁴⁴

St. John of the Cross gives the thought of his lines, and thus, of
 Eliot's, much better than any critic:

In this detachment the spiritual soul finds its quiet and repose;
 for, since it covets nothing, nothing wearies it when it is lifted
 up, and nothing oppresses it when it is cast down, for it is in the
 centre of its humility; since, when it covets anything at that very
 moment it becomes wearied. ⁴⁵

⁴⁴ St. John of the Cross, op. cit., p. 62-63.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 62-63. Another possible source for Eliot's paradoxes is an
 earlier passage from The Ascent to Mt. Carmel. It at least demonstrates
 further the extent of Eliot's indebtedness to the Saint:

Strive always to chose, not that which is easiest,
 but that which is most difficult;

Not that which is most delectable, but that which
 is most unpleasing;

Not that which gives most pleasure, but rather that
 gives least;

IV

Eliot's discussion in the first three movements has been with the sickness of the soul and some of the remedies necessary to enable it to achieve health and consequently, final mystical unity. In the fourth section of East Coker, Eliot expands specifically on this theme in a lyric of five five-line stanzas. The almost metaphysical imagery progresses logically through a pyramiding of the images and figures leading to the ultimate climax. Remembering that East Coker was originally written for Good Friday, 1940, much of the imagery is clarified, and the figure of "The wounded surgeon" in the opening line is immediately identified.

A comparative study of the first lines of each of the five stanzas will indicate how the images progress, from the simple operation, to health, to the hospital, and finally, to the Eucharist:

The wounded surgeon plies the steel
 Our only health is the disease
 The whole earth is our hospital
 The chill ascends from feet to knees
 The dripping blood our only drink

Not that which is restful, but that which is wearisome;

Not that which gives consolation, but rather that which makes disconsolate.

Not that which is greatest, but that which is least

Not that which is loftiest, and most precious, but that which is lowest and most despised;

Not that which is a desire for anything, but that which is a desire for nothing;

Strive not to go about seeking the best of temporal things, but the worst.

Strive thus to desire to enter into complete detachment and emptiness and poverty, with respect to that which is the world, for Christ's sake.

This passage is found on page 61 of the work previously cited.

Essential to an appreciation of the stanzas is understanding of some of the images, most important of which are in the second stanza:

Our only health is the disease
 If we obey the dying nurse
 Whose constant care is not to please
 But to remind of our, and Adam's curse,
 And that, to be restored, our sickness must grow worse.

The paradox of the first line is resolved upon consideration of the curse of Adam and the consequences of Original Sin. The health of the soul can only come through suffering, a suffering described by St. John of the Cross, and a suffering imposed on man as a natural consequence of Original Sin. The "dying nurse" is the Church whose duty it is to direct the soul to God, and, if necessary, to direct it to further suffering by means of the Sacrament of Penance.

The last stanza is as tensely poignant a metaphysical poem as almost any written since the seventeenth century. As one writer has commented:

(It) has that very serious wit which has rarely been achieved since the seventeenth century. You find it, for instance--to take an example from a poet whose personality is completely different from Eliot's--in Herbert's couplet:

Love is that liquor sweet and most divine
 Which my God feels as blood, but I as wine.

Eliot's wit is more intense, the jaw muscles are tighter...it is almost satirical--it smarts.⁴⁶

However, the predominant immediate effect of the last stanza should be to make the reader slow his reading and consider the implications to be found in it:

The dripping blood our only drink,
 The bloody flesh our only food:
 In spite of which we like to think
 That we are sound, substantial flesh and blood--
 And, in spite of that, we call this Friday good.

⁴⁶ Preston, op. cit., p. 36.

Y

Immediately following the intensity of emotional feeling contained in the fourth section of the poem is the opening of the last strophe, an opening that approaches pedantry in its simplicity. The section moves from an admission of personal inadequacy to an impersonal ending that leads directly to the third Quartet, The Dry Salvages.

One of Eliot's major concerns throughout the series of poems is his difficulty in expressing his thought. Again and again, as we have observed, Eliot inserts a brief digression on semantics into the poems. Here in the concluding section of East Coker is again another example:

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years--
Twenty years largely wasted, the years of

l'entre deux guerres--

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion.

Eliot's concern for words and meanings was probably heightened by the difficulties of writing of deep religious experience, but the general concern for words is no new problem for Eliot, as has been observed previously. This particular concern might refer again to Sir Thomas Elyot, for as Sweeney has observed,

...a fundamental feature of Sir Thomas Elyot's interest was language--words in particular. He was very conscious of the poverty of the Anglo-Saxon of his time as compared with other languages and (he) desired above all things to augment its vocabulary. In 1536

he undertook the compilation of a dictionary, the Bibliotheca Eliotae subsequently known as Eliotes Dictionaire. And from a pure linguistic viewpoint The Governour may be regarded as a connecting link between the English of the time of Chaucer and the English of the time of Bacon. ⁴⁷

From a study of words, Eliot progresses to a study of meaning, or the content of verse:

And what there is to conquer
By strength and submission, has already been discovered
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
To emulate--but there is no competition--
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

This particular passage is among the most lucid in the entire poem, and the last line

The rest is not our business.

is a restatement of a line from the second strophe

The poetry does not matter.

Bradford has expressed the thought of the entire passage:

As an artist Eliot has struggled with words. The plight of the writer, who must make an art-medium out of words worn and battered by their daily use for every type of human intercourse from business to prayers, is feelingly stated. The poet realizes that what he is attempting to discover has already been discovered by Dante, Donne, and others--his masters. But he is not competing with them; he is only trying to recover this lost sense of man's spiritual possibilities. ⁴⁸

The opening of the final passage

Home is where one starts from.

echoes the opening lines of the poem, and reconveys the poet's sense of the

⁴⁷ Sweeney, loc. cit., p. 774.

⁴⁸ Curtis Bradford, "Footnotes to East Coker," Sewanee Review, 52:175, Winter, 1944.

past. In many ways the closing lines are a recapitulation of the entire poem.

The wisdom of age which Eliot deprecated is resolved as the poet says that

Old men ought to be explorers.

and the Dark Night of the Soul is summarized with

Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion.

The last line of the poem is a complete summary of the poem, and shows the full circle that Eliot has travelled:

In my end is my beginning.

Thus the full thought of the poem is finally apparent. A man's birth predicates his death, and his death predicates his re-birth. His life should be a constant attempt to prepare his soul for that re-birth and his attempts at preparation are dictated by history and by his realization of his purpose on earth.

THE DRY SALVAGES

I

The three lines which close East Coker:

Through the dark cold and the empty desolation
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.

provide the most lucid transitional passage of any in the whole series, and they serve to demonstrate further the intrinsic unity of the four poems. In Burnt Norton Eliot was concerned with time, the effort to apprehend reality, and the object of that concern was the soul. East Coker personalized the search of the soul and showed the trials that the soul meets in its striving. The validity of personal experience as a guide to the soul was questioned. The Dry Salvages further localizes Eliot's thought, but on a different plane of reality.

Throughout the opening section of the third quartet, the varied movements of the sea, foreshadowed by the conclusion of East Coker, and the river, are contrasted. The opening lines are modest, with echoes of the ironic tone Eliot first adopted in Prufrock, but the irony is subtly modulated to give an impression of controlled power.

I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river
Is a strong brown god--sullen, untamed, and intractable,
Patient to some degree, at first recognized as a frontier;
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce;
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.
The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten
By the dwellers in cities--ever, however, implacable,
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder
Of what men choose to forget.

The river, however, says Eliot, is

Unhonoured, unpropitiated
By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching, waiting.

The description of the river is broken suddenly by a brief relection on
the rhythm of the river which 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.

The long years of the poet's growth are thus telescoped into four lines
with each of them suggesting a season of the year, another indication of the
classic elements and a further extension of the time motif.

Critics of the nationalist school, such as Van Wyck Brooks, have suggested
that Eliot has completely outgrown his American background, and have maintained
that the river of the poem is the Thames and not the Mississippi, despite all
evidence to the contrary. Their lack of insight is matched only by their
evident admission of the gravest of critical sins: criticism written without
having read the work criticised. That the river is the Mississippi is obvious
both from the context and from a line in the second strophe: ⁴⁹

Like the river with its cargo of dead Negroes, cows
and chicken coops...

It is difficult to picture "dead Negroes" on the Thames and, in addition,
Eliot adds a parenthetical statement at the beginning of the poem which helps
to explain the somewhat enigmatic title and to establish the setting in

America:

The Dry Salvages--presumably les trois sauvages-- is a small group
of rocks, with a beacon, off the N.E. coast of Cape Ann, Massa-
chusetts. Salvages is pronounced to rhyme with assuages...⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Preston, op. cit., p. 39 adds further proof: "Mr. Eliot says that he had
in mind the Mississippi.

⁵⁰ Eliot, Four Quartets. Title page to The Dry Salvages, p. 19.

The rocks which comprise The Dry Salvages make their first appearance immediately after the portrait of the river. The relative fluidity of the rhythm of the river is contrasted with the more subtle, but equally pervasive, rhythm of the waves beating on the rocks:

The river is within us, the sea is all about us;
 The sea is the land's end also, the granite
 Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses
 Its hints of earlier and other creation:

Symbolically the poet has shifted his attention from the individual to the race in the line "The river is within us, the sea is all about us." Again, however, the poet is concerned with time, but a time dwarfed in the immensity of creation, although that time is necessarily imaged in created things:

The tolling bell
 Measures time not our time, rung by the unhurried
 Ground swell, a time
 Older than chronometers, older
 Than time counted by anxious worried women
 Lying awake, calculating the future,
 Trying to unweave, unwind, unravel,
 And piece together the past and future,
 Between midnight and dawn, when the past is all deception,
 The future futureless, before the morning watch
 When time stops and time is never ending;
 And the ground swell, that is and was from the beginning,
 Clangs
 The bell.

It would be of little import to point out that Eliot's images of the seventh line in the above passage are extremely reminiscent of Hopkins' sonnet "Spelt from Sybil's Leaves", unless further similarities were obvious. But we see that Eliot, like Hopkins, is concerned with ultimates, and in each poem the ultimates are identical. In Hopkins it is "black, white; right, wrong." Eliot's usage of the same idea is in harmony with the time image:

Between midnight and dawn... The future futureless...

Primary to Eliot's concern is a "time older than chronometers," which goes beyond the mere consideration of the beginning and the end. "The underlying changelessness of the sea beneath its tides," as Matthiessen expresses it, "...underscores also the contrasting theme of the timeless." 51

II

Opening the second strophe is a lyric that is one of the most formal of any in the entire series. It is one of only four that is written in an identifiable meter, and its rhyme scheme and linkage of images is so complete that it almost represents a tour de force. The thirty-six lines that comprise the six stanzas contain only six rhymes, a b c d e f, and so well is the passage executed that we are scarcely conscious of its ingenuity. The rhyme words are all feminine, and the first line of each stanza contains, in one form of expression or another, the word "end." A comparison of each of the first lines will indicate both the involved rhyme scheme and the complexity of the imagery. The italics are supplied.

Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing...

There is not end, but addition: the trailing...

There is the final addition, the failing...

Where is the end of them, the fishermen sailing...

We have to think of them as forever wailing...

There is no end of it, the voiceless wailing...

In intricacy the form is similar to some types of Provencal lyrics, particularly the sestina and chanson, and the steady movement of the verse

51 Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 186.

almost sweeps the reader into a whirlpool of motion.

The lyric first enunciates clearly one of the major points that has distinguished Eliot from his contemporaries: Eliot's belief in the doctrine of the Incarnation; God become Man through Christ, and not man become God through man's own potentialities as many of Eliot's lesser contemporaries would seem to believe.

Eliot draws a distinction between the annunciation of death and the "one Annunciation" which is "hardly, barely prayable." Gardner has elaborated on this:

Under the metaphor of fishermen setting out on their perilous voyages...it pictures the lives of individual men, the sum of which makes history. It finds meaning in the process only in the union of the temporal with the eternal, in annunciations: the calamitous annunciation of death, and the one Annunciation of history. The only end to the flux of history is man's response to the eternal. 52

Having stated the central theme of the poem, the Annunciation, Eliot relieves the formality of the lyric by a return to the highly personalized style of East Coker. Instead of mere restatement of the earlier poem's theme Eliot uses its style to expand upon that theme:

It seems as one becomes older,
That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be
a mere sequence,
Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy,
Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution,
Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of
disowning the past.

On second view it appears that Eliot has gone too far in his attempt to counteract the formality of the opening lyric, and has descended into a rhythmic prose arbitrarily broken into poetic lines. The thought is not overly poetic,

52 Gardner, op. cit., p. 93.

but Eliot corrects this momentary lapse with another discursus on semantics:

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.

Here Eliot develops the problem first stated in East Coker:

...the intolerable wrestle
 With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.

The meaning of a poem is not important until the poem is experienced,
 and the experience will manifest the meaning. The two are inextricable. This,
 of course, suggests the possibility of getting "beyond poetry" as was suggested
 earlier in this chapter.⁵³

Eliot expands on this statement in The Dry Salvages:

I have said before
 That the past experience revived in the meaning
 Is not the experience of one life only
 But of generations...

We appreciate this better
 In the agony of others, nearly experienced,
 Involving ourselves, than in our own.
 For our own past is covered by the currents of action,
 But the torment of others remains an experience
 Unqualified, unworn by subsequent attrition.

Eliot's exposition is suddenly intensified:

Time the destroyer is time the preserver,
 Like the river with its cargo of dead Negroes, cows
 and chicken coops,
 The bitter apple and the bite in the apple.

The allusion to the Fall, Original Sin, while not anticipated, was inevitable, for from a simple description of the Mississippi, the river has become the river of time which destroys and preserves not only the evidences of man's sin but the mirrors of man's experience. The surprising understatement of

⁵³ Vide footnote 3 of this chapter.

the last line only serves to heighten its effect.

The concluding lines of the strophe express the contrapuntal movement of the sea which images our efforts to achieve our ultimate end:

And the ragged rock in the restless waters,
 Waves wash over it, fogs conceal it;
 On a halcyon day it is merely a monument,
 In navigable weather it is always a seamark
 To lay a course by: but in the sombre season
 Or the sudden fury, it is what it always was.

III

Eliot's sojourn in Hindu mysticism which comprises the third strophe of the poem is the least successful of any in the four poems. It is obviously allusive but at the same time the allusion is so exotic that it only barely carries the substance of Eliot's thought. Stripped of the allusion, the passage remains a series of semi-disjointed restatements of the thought of the previous two sections. The poetry suffers because of the allusion, and a reference to the Bhagavad Gita in the first line does little to clarify the passage.

Even Eliot is uncertain of himself as the poem opens:

I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant—
 Among other things—or a way of putting the same thing:
 That the future is a faded song, a Royal Rose, or
 a lavender spray
 Of wistful regret...
 And the way up is the way down, the way forward is
 the way back...

Juxtaposed into this dissertation on Hindu religion is Eliot's own rewording the Heraclitean fragment which was appended to Burnt Norton:

And the way up is the way down, the way forward is
 the way back...

This curious unity of philosophies is designed to give the impression of systematic thinking. Ostensibly the entire passage considers the voyage undertaken by the fishermen in the opening lyric of section two and presents Krishna's comments on that voyage. Unfortunately, to perceive this takes more time and trouble than the substance of the poem warrants.

The Bhagavad Gita comprises one section of the Maharabata, the sacred writings of the Hindu religion. "...In recent years educated Hindus have put it forward as a rival to the New Testament." 54

Eliot is probably trying to use a method of attack of his problem of time and personal salvation. We can see similarities between Eliot's problem and the one posed in the Bhagavad Gita, or Song of the Blessed:

A personal God, Krsna, manifests himself in the form of a human hero, propounds his doctrines, and demands of his hearer not only the exact fulfillment, but before everything else, faith and love and resignation, of which he is himself to be the object... 55

In the Hindu legend Krishna gives spiritual instruction and advice to Arjuna who is about to engage in battle. Arjuna quails before the struggle when he realizes that his enemies are hostile relatives. Krishna reveals himself as the incarnation of the one God and tells Arjuna that the way of salvation lies in the fulfillment of duty, but action freed of desires and performed in complete detachment. 56

Eliot sets the stage for his modern paraphrase of Krishna's advice:

At nightfall, in the rigging and the aerial,
Is a voice descanting (though not to the ear,
The murmuring shell of time, and not in any language)...

54 (Richard Gorbe), "Bhagavad Gita," Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics. New York, Scribner's, 1909, Vol. II, p. 536.

55 Ibid., p. 536.

56 Ibid., p. 536 and ff.

You can receive this: 'on whatever sphere of being
The mind of a man may be intent
At the time of death'--that is the one action...

So Krishna, as when he admonished Arjuna
On the field of battle.

Not fare well,
But fare forward, voyagers.

Krishna's statement, which Eliot leaves half-completed, helps to relate
the poet's thought to the subject of death:

On whatever sphere of being the mind of man may be intent at
the time of death, to that he goes...having been used to ponder
on it. ⁵⁷

Another passage from the Hindu helps to elucidate some of the difficulties
in the passage:

For that which is born, death is certain, and to that which is
dead, birth is certain. ⁵⁸

IV

That Eliot's poetry since his conversion is actually one long sustained
poem in celebration of that fact is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than
in the short lyric which comprises the fourth strophe of The Dry Salvages.

Considered out of context, the average reader might claim, with some
legitimacy, that it was a section from Ash-Wednesday, for the passage begins
with a fervent invocation to the Virgin and continues as a prayer to her:

Lady, whose shrine stands on the promontory,
Pray for all those who are in ships, those
Whose business has to do with fish, and

57 Swami Nikhilanada (tr.), The Bhagavad Gita. Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center,
New York, 1944, p. 202.

58 The Bhagavad Gita, op. cit., p. 79.

Those concerned with every lawful traffic
And those who conduct them.

Repeat a prayer also on behalf of
Women who have seen their sons or husbands
Setting forth, and not returning:
Figlia del tuo figlio,
Queen of Heaven.

By incorporating a line from Dante's Paradiso ⁵⁹ Eliot uses his familiar technique of literary allusion to achieve the effect of "resignation, humility, and faith, which has come of facing the agony of existence." ⁶⁰

The conclusion of the lyric brings a final change in mood. The clanging of the sea-bell, which shortly before had been a harbinger of the agony of time, is now transformed into a "perpetual angelus!"

Also pray for those who were in ships, and
Ended their voyage on the sand, in the sea's lips
Or in the dark throat which will not reject them
Or wherever cannot reach them the sound of the sea bell's
Perpetual angelus.

V

Opening the final strophe of the poem is a discourse on some of the odder pastimes of Eliot's fellow men, a discourse that is not without its elements of humour. The humour is a biting one, however, and is the only example to be found in the entire series of poems.

To communicate with Mars, converse with spirits,
To report the behaviour of the sea monster,
Describe the horoscope, haruspicate or scry,

59 Dante, Paradiso. Canto XXXIII, line 1. Vergine madre, figlia del tuo figlio. The translation given by Cary in the Everyman edition is:

O Virgin Mother, daughter of thy Son!

Dante's line is also paraphrased by Chaucer in the Prologue of the Second Nun's Tale. The Robinson edition gives this version:

Thow Mayde and Mooder, doghter of thy Sone...

60 Preston, op. cit., p. 47.

Observe disease in signatures, evoke
 Biography from the wrinkles of the palm
 And tragedy from fingers; release omens
 By sortilege, or tea leaves, riddle the inevitable
 With playing cards....

This cataloging of human foibles carries Eliot to extreme satire and
 revulsion, a characteristic we have previously noted in Eliot:

...fiddle with pentagrams
 Or barbirturic acids, or dissect
 The recurrent image into pre-conscious terrors--
 Th explore the womb, or tomb, or deaams; all these are usual
 Pastimes and drugs, and features of the press:
 And always will be, some of them especially
 When there is distress of nations and perplexity
 Whether on the shores of Asia, or in Edgware Road.

Eliot's scorn for his fellows, a scorn born of the almost hopeless struggle
 to infuse some sense of spiritualities into their secular existence, reaches
 from the Far East to London and is summarized in some of the finest poetry in
 the entire series of poems:

Men's curiosity searches past and future
 And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend
 The point of intersection of the timeless
 With time, is an occupation for the saint--
 No occupation either, but something given
 And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,
 Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.
 For most of us, there is only the unattended
 Moment, the moment in and out of time,
 The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
 The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
 Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
 That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
 While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
 Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
 Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
 The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.

By including elements and images alluded to in the previous poems, Eliot
 almost summarizes the thought of the key-passages. This is a statement of

religious belief, "prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action...the gift...is Incarnation."

This is more than a "raid on the inarticulate," for it is a recapitulation. The Incarnation is "the pivotal point on which Eliot's thought has swung well away from the nineteenth century heresies of Deification...Eliot has long affirmed that Deification, the reckless doctrine of every great man as a Messiah, has led inductably to Dictatorship. What he has urged in his Idea of a Christian Society, is a re-established social order in which both the governors and the governed find their completion in their common humility before God."⁶¹

In the concluding lines of The Dry Salvages, Eliot uses a series of successive references from within the other poems. By doing this, the passage can be seen as a development of the second strophe of Burnt Norton, and the metaphysical images of the "wounded surgeon" lyric in East Coker.

Here the impossible union
Of spheres of existence is actual,
Here the past and future
Are conquered, and reconciled,
Where action were otherwise movement
Of that which is only moved
And has in it no source of movement--
Driven by daemonic, chthonic
Powers. And right action is freedom
From past and future also.
For most of us, this is the aim
Never here to be realized;
Who are only undefeated
Because we have gone on trying;
We, content at the last
If our temporal reversion nourish
(Not too far from the Yew-tree)
The life of significant soil.

61 Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 187-88.

The "fight to recover what has been lost and found...for us there is only the trying..." of East Coker is not resolved:

For the most of us, this is the aim
 Never here to be realized...
 Because we have gone on trying.

Further, only in such a mystical union as the Incarnation can the past and the future become a single moment. While our knowledge of the Incarnation can only be "half-understood", the Incarnation is the timeless "point of intersection" that gives the only answer to man's curiosity and the only end of his attended striving.

The Dry Salvages may not succeed as a whole because of its third movement, but at its conclusion it expresses the core of Eliot's thought on "time, on history, and on the destiny of man."⁶² The poem, in spite of its faults, has a unity given it by the theme of movement through water and the contrasts of the rhythm of the sea and the rhythm of the river. This continual undulating movement symbolizes the movement of man through time, "driven by daemonic, chthonic powers." This image of life through water first found in Ash-Wednesday, is a temporal reversion until it nourishes "the life of significant soul."

With this return, in the last line of the poem, from water to earth, Eliot foreshadows the last quartet, Little Gidding. The pattern is not yet complete, for despite the incremental repetition of the last stanza, the soul is not completely cleansed before it achieves its final union. And it is to the purgation of fire, hinted at by the obvious stressing of its opposite,

62 Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 188.

water, that Eliot now turns. 63

LITTLE GIDDING

I

More than any other poem in the series which comprise the Four Quartets, Little Gidding depends, for a complete understanding, upon a knowledge of the date of its composition and a realization of the importance of that date in Eliot's life. We have previously observed that Eliot is primarily concerned with the soul and its purgation through fire in this poem. The image of fire is not, of course, a new one to Eliot, for one of the sections of The Waste Land bears the title "The Fire Sermon," and we have seen hints in other of the Quartets that Eliot must discuss the significance of fire in order to complete the series. In East Coker it was

...a vortex that shall bring
The world to that destructive fire
Which burns before the ice-cap reigns.

Eliot now is concerned with something more than mere combustion and flames. In the latter part of 1942 during some of the worst German bombings of England, Eliot was a fire-watcher in Bloomsbury. It was during this time

63 It is interesting to note that the final two stanzas of The Dry Salvages, are quoted in Masterpieces of Painting from the National Gallery of Art, New York, Random House, 1944, p. 46, as illustrative of mysticism and artistic sensation. The painting to which the poetry appends is Raphael's St. George and the Dragon.

that he wrote Little Gidding.⁶⁴ The destructive fire of the bombings with

64 T. S. Eliot, "Correspondence to the Editor," Scrutiny, 15:56, Winter, 1947. This letter is quoted in its entirety because it illustrates another of the rare examples of humour that the poet has shown:

To the Editor

Scrutiny,
Cambridge.

Sir,

In your issue of September last, which I have just received, Mr. Ronald Bottrall replies to Mr. Mason, who had made what to Mr. Bottrall (and I must say, to me also) seemed 'a very odd remark' to the effect that Mr. Bottrall should have appended, to a poem called Freedom Lies in Adaptation, a note stating either that the author had, or that he had not, read Little Gidding. Mr. Bottrall says: 'the lines were, in fact, drafted in the autumn of 1941 and finished in their final form in June/July, 1942.'

I should like to mention that Little Gidding was written in the latter part of 1942. It first appeared in The New English Weekly in October, 1942, and I had not shown the poem or any part of it to Mr. Bottrall before publication. Mr. Bottrall in June/July, 1942, was certainly unacquainted with any verse of mine later than The Dry Salvages. And I do not believe that he could have seen The New English Weekly in October of that year. In all probability he had no acquaintance with the poem until it was published separately by Faber & Faber. Perhaps I should, however, add a note to Little Gidding to say whether I had or had not read a draft of Freedom Lies in Adaptation before composing my poem.

I am, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

T. S. Eliot

While the substance of the letter has little to do with this study except to establish the date for Little Gidding, the humour, even if restrained satire, is remarkable in a man who has been singularly devoid of humour in the rest of his work. The reader is also referred to the poem which appears on page 169 of the Collected Poems and begins: "How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!" and shows that Eliot is not beyond satirizing himself if the occasion demands.

their consequent effects on himself and the English populace became linked in his mind and poetry with the fire of purgation. The results of that linkage produced in Little Gidding some of the finest religious poetry of the present decade.

The central image of the poem is stated in the opening lines:

Midwinter spring is its own season
 Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown,
 Suspended in time, between pole and tropic.
 When the short day is brightest, with frost and fire,
 The brief sun flames the ice, on pond and ditches,
 In windless cold that is the heart's heat...

Here, explicitly for the first time in any of the four poems, the Aristotelian element with its corresponding season is stated and amplified. It is mid-winter when the bright sun "flames the ice." Following the brief description of the season, Eliot proceeds directly to this theme:

...no wind, but pentacostal fire
 In the dark time of the year. Between melting and
 freezing
 The soul's sap quivers.

But Eliot only suggests his theme here, and turns back immediately to the description:

There is no earth smell
 Or smell of living thing...Now the hedgerow
 Is blanched for an hour with transitory blossom
 Of snow, a bloom more sudden
 Than that of summer, neither budding nor fading,
 Not in the scheme of generation.
 Where is the summer, the unimaginable
 Zero summer?

In the second section of the first strophe, Eliot returns to the tone he adopted in East Coker, a conversational intimacy that hints of controlled power. Compare the selections:

In that open field
If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close...

East Coker

If you came this way
Taking the route you would be likely to take
From the place you would be likely to come from...

Little Gidding

The tone of the two passages is obviously similar. In East Coker Eliot proceeds to a description of the sixteenth century dancers of the Boke Named the Gouvernour while in Little Gidding Eliot takes us to the mid-seventeenth century religious community of Nicholas Ferrar. "This way" refers to Ferrar's community, Little Gidding, and the various references in the following lines are to that village and some of the implications Ferrar's experiment holds for history.

If you came this way in may time, you would find the hedges
White again in May, with voluptuary sweetness.
It would be the same at the end of the journey,
If you came at night like a broken king...

We notice the contrast here with the previous passage about the hedge. Compare the "hedgerow blanched for an hour with transitory blossom of snow," with "the hedges white again in May, with voluptuary sweetness." Eliot has contrived, here, by the use of two widely differing images, to convey the idea of the relative impermanence of the things of nature. In the next line he does the same thing with the things of man with the phrase "broken king," an obvious reference to Charles I who visited Ferrar's village shortly before he surrendered himself to the Scotch. 65

In spite of all of the references to Little Gidding, Eliot realizes that Ferrar's ideas were only incompletely fulfilled because he continues:

65 Preston, op. cit., p. 53.

And what you thought you came for
 Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
 From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
 If at all. Either you had no purpose
 Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured
 And is altered in fulfillment.

The concluding passage of the first strophe finds Eliot concerned with more than the material existence of Little Gidding; he is dealing with the residual force of that community on the memory of man:

You are not here to verify,
 Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
 Or carry report. You are here to kneel
 Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more
 Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
 Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.

Our purpose is clear, and our prayers must be more than mere lip service regardless of our location either in time or space. Here in Little Gidding, "behind the pig-sty to the dull facade and the tombstone," the "the intersection of the timeless moment...England and nowhere. Never and Always."

II

The three stanzas which comprise the opening lyric of the second strophe present difficulties on first reading. Recollection of the opening lyric of Burnt Norton from which some of the imagery is derived will aid in explaining some of the difficulties, and most of the others can be understood if we remember the structure of the musical quartet form. Here in twenty-four lines is a rhythmical restatement of the major themes of all of the four poems. One by one the elements are mentioned and die; one by one the roads that the soul must travel are again suggested and their images rewoven into the fabric pattern of the lyric.

Ash on an old man's sleeve
 Is all the ash the burnt roses leave.
 Dust in the air suspended
 Marks the place where a story ended.
 Dust inbreathed was a house--
 The wall, the wainscot and the mouse.
 The death of hope and despair,
 This is the death of air.

The levels of meaning in this and in the two stanzas which follow, are many. The imagery of both East Coker and Burnt Norton is suggested in the human decay and the dust floating in the void which presages the "death of air." At the same time the "dust" and "ash on an old man's sleeve" could be all that remains after a bombing raid. The upper story of a house is blasted into fine particles which linger over the destruction.

Again and again Eliot turns to his own work as a source for imagery and poetic content, and thus, in the second stanza, he recreates the harsh dryness and sterility of The Waste Land or The Hollow Men in order to picture the "death of earth." Actually, in the early poems the "death of earth" and its sterility was one of Eliot's primary concerns, and how far he has progressed since that time is evidenced in almost any passage from the Quartets.

There are flood and drouth
 Over the eyes and in the mouth,
 Dead water and dead sand
 Contending for the upper hand.
 The parched eviscerate soil
 Gapes at the vanity of toil,
 Laughs without mirth.
 This is the death of earth.

Compare this with a similar passage in The Hollow Men:

The eyes are not here
 There are no eyes here
 In this valley of dying stars
 In this hollow valley
 This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms...

There is, despite all similarities, a change in the tone of the two passages, a change of mood and intensity. In the earlier poem Eliot pictures sterility with relative dispassion, while in the stanza from Little Gidding Eliot heightens the suspense. The "broken jaw" is transformed to a disembowelled, "eviscerate" shell, and the mere absence of eyes is changed, albeit subtly, to eyes that are not only sightless, but covered with dead water and dead sand.

Finally, the concluding stanza pictures the death of water and fire, the last of the humours; intermixed in this description is a vivid remembrance of the actualities that were once denied and are now accepted.

Water and fire succeed
 The town, the pasture and the weed.
 Water and fire deride
 The sacrifice that we denied.
 Water and fire shall rot
 The marred foundations we forgot
 Of sanctuary and choir.
 This is the death of water and fire.

It is hardly necessary to point out that the sacrifice referred to is the Mass which was denied, if not explicitly, at least implicitly, in Eliot's earlier poetry. The final four lines of the stanza are important for its complete understanding. Eliot here is not merely denying the implications of his earlier work, but is pointing out that if the philosophy of that poetry is carried to its logical extreme, it can undermine the very foundations of our civilization and society. Eliot is also saying that denial of heresy is not enough; that the Christian society based on the brotherhood of man must have realism coupled with prayer, social charity with social justice, and bitter antagonism to things which are un-Christian as well as anti-Christian.

The conclusion of the second strophe is the one example of narration in the entire Four Quartets; it is the longest single passage and the most logically coherent in the series. The story can be briefly stated:

Eliot, after a night of acting as a fire-watcher during an air raid, is going to his home. He meets his alter ego on the street, another fire-watcher, the Eliot he would have been if he had continued on the way he had started in his early poetry. He speaks to his alter ego, wondering at the meeting, and asks the wraith his opinion of his later self. The early Eliot tells the present writer to forget the past. "These things have served their purpose: let them be." Finally the alter ego sums up the effects that Eliot has had and points out Eliot's abilities. This summary is three fold, and exactly parallels the three major stages in the poet's development. First was Eliot's ability to depict the spiritual frustration of his age:

...the cold friction of expiring sense
Without enchantment, offering no promise
But bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit
As body and soul begin to fall asunder.

Second was Eliot's language and irony:

Second, the conscious impotence of rage
At human folly, and the laceration
Of laughter at what ceases to amuse.

Finally, the ghost of the poet admits the changes that Eliot has undergone since his conversion with his consequent spiritual awakening:

And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which you once took for exercise of virtue.
When folls' approval stings, and honour stains.
From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.

The day was breaking, and the alter ego left Eliot, "with a kind of valediction, and faded on the blowing of the horn."

This intensely dramatic dialogue is written in a stanza form new to Eliot, a much modified terza rima, with assonance, alliteration, and phraseology taking the place of rhyme. The effect of the regular meter and the insistent, but insidious, alliteration is profound. The story proceeds with stark inevitability and a lucidity strange to the other Quartets. At the same time the thought and philosophic content of the dialogue is perhaps stronger because of its very directness, and poetically it is the equal or superior of any other single passage. There are isolated lines, phrases, and even whole sections that rank with the finest poetry Eliot has ever written. The dramatic and poetic content of such lines as

We trod the pavement in a dead patrol
is evident and requires no further justification.

Eliot's complete awareness of his age is adequately stated in the opening lines:

In the uncertain hour before the morning
Near the ending of interminable night
At the recurrent end of the unending
After the dark dove with the flickering tongue
Had passed below the horizon on his homing
While the dead leaves still rattled on like tin
Over the asphalt where no other sound was
Between three districts whence the smoke arose...

A detailed analysis of these few lines will demonstrate further what occupied Eliot's thought when he wrote the passage. The time is early morning; the night is almost over, and Eliot's seemingly endless tour of duty is finished. Anyone who has not spent an all-night watch on military or

similar duty cannot fully appreciate the import of the "recurrent end of the unending." The "dark dove with the flickering tongue" refers to German raiders, and the next two lines indicate the silence that follows an air raid and is also typical of the time of morning that Eliot is describing. "The three districts" are, of course, three areas of London that had been bombed during the night.

Regardless of how much the poem may reflect the terror of German bombings and how closely we may identify the other air raid warden with Eliot's alter ego, the poet never loses sight of one of his masters, Dante. The general overall tone of the passage is suggestive, as both Matthiessen and Preston have pointed out,⁶⁶ of the Brunetto Latini passage of the Inferno, but Preston makes the grave error of positively identifying the other fire-watcher as Latini, overlooking the import of such lines as:

...I was still the same,
Knowing myself yet being someone other...

and

I caught the sudden look of some dead master
Whom I had known, but forgotten, half-recalled...

Such erroneous identification can lead to grievous misinterpretation of essential passages. Witness Preston's comments on the following lines:

After the dark dove with the flickering tongue
Had passed below the horizon of his homing...

The flickering suggests the tongues of flame, and dark the mystery of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter...Before the end of the Dark Night there is one image to be purged: the image of the futilely striving autonomous self.⁶⁷

We would not suggest that the ultimate aim of Little Gidding is not the

⁶⁶ Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 190 and Preston, op. cit., p. 56.

⁶⁷ Preston, op. cit., p. 57.

purgation of the soul by means of the flickering tongues of flame; we would, however, suggest that the very tone of the passage is sufficient indication that it should be taken only at face value. Any allusions in the passage should be considered only as allusions and not as identifications.

The image of "fire" in the passage effects a peculiar reaction on the reader. He shares Eliot's quiet hate of the destruction given by fire, and, dramatically speaking, the image gives a purgation of the emotions through the Aristotelian prerequisites of pity and fear.

Viewed as a dramatic whole the entire passage is definitely successful primarily because of its clarity, yet hidden in many lines are hints of deeper meaning which give the dialogue a unity not only within itself but within the complete series. The following lines are illustrative:

But, as the passage now presents no hindrance
 To the spirit unappeased and peregrine
 Between two worlds become much like the other.

The antecedant to the word "passage" cannot be found in context, and thus can only refer to the passage of the soul between the two worlds of life and death. Hence the selection hints at the problem of the soul which was first stated in East Coker and is eventually to be resolved in the final three movements of the poem.

III

Eliot's method of unifying his images and using a short passage as a bridge between two longer and more philosophical passages is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the sixteen line lyric which opens the third part of Little Gidding. The theme, actually an echo of the opening description

of the first strophe, is stated immediately:

There are three conditions which often look alike
Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow...

Eliot's three conditions are actually reflections on the narrative just concluded. He states them succinctly:

Attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment
From self and from things and from persons; and, growing
 between them, indifference
Which resembles the others as death resembles life...

The use of the rather trite image "death resembles life" is not simply a lapse into jargon. Instead, it is a phrase used consciously and deliberately. Eliot's aim in this Quartet, as we have observed, is the cleansing that the soul must undergo in its travels between birth in this physical world and death, or birth into the spiritual world. However Eliot is rarely content to leave a passage with only one level of meaning, and as the section continues we see the extension of the poet's ideas:

 This is the use of memory:
For liberation--not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past.

The reasons for Eliot's rehandling of the "time" motif are obvious. We have seen him discuss time, eternity, history, and immediacy, and now the various images he has previously used are unified by detachment and indifference to the things of this world:

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

Thus the soul must love beyond desire, beyond the faces and the places of this material existence, and become renewed, almost deliquescing into its

final role.

Echoing this imperative action is the reason for the action, Original

Sin:

Sin is behovely, but
All shall be well, and
All manner of thing shall be well.

The soul is sinful by nature, but the sustaining hope of the final remission of that, and all other sin, is all that gives credibility to our present life.

The seventeenth century has been Eliot's temporal source of imagery throughout the poem and more reminiscences of the community of Little Gidding are seen in the next few lines:

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

The people who made up Ferrar's community are not exceptional although they are perhaps touched by their founder's genius and fired by a common aim. It is their unity which we must emulate. Eliot continues:

If I think of a king at nightfall,
Of three men, and more, on the scaffold
And a few who died forgotten
In other places, here and abroad,
And of one who died blind and quiet...

This passage poses a great number of difficulties, the most important of which is identification of the people referred to. Is Eliot recalling the martyrdom of Charles I and his followers and is the "one" who died "blind and quiet" Milton? Possibly, but at the same time the more probable

and logical identification is of the king as Christ. This would identify the three on the scaffold, and the reference to the "few who died forgotten in other places, here and abroad" is immediately clarified. These men would be the early Christian martyrs and saints and the blind man could be either Milton, Xavier, or even possibly Homer. Exact identification is unnecessary, for Eliot continues:

Why should we celebrate
These dead men more than the dying?

The questioning of the past goes further. Eliot realizes that the major contribution of Ferrar's community or of the early saints and martyrs is not their actions but the results of their actions:

Whatever we inherit from the fortunate
We have taken from the defeated
What they have to leave us -- a symbol...

The symbol is the important thing, because, as he continues:

We cannot revive old factions
We cannot restore old policies
Or follow an antique drum.
These men, and those who opposed them
And those whom they opposed
Accept the constitution of silence
And are folded in a single party.

The "single party" is, of course, death, and by the symbol of these men's teaching

All shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
By the purification of the motive
In the ground of our beseeching.

IV

In the third section of the poem Eliot has attempted to show that the

only logic of our existence is the knowledge of history coupled with prayer, and the prayer Eliot is referring to leads directly into the short twelve line lyric which comprises the entire fourth section of the poem.

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

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

These two stanzas contain the culmination of Eliot's thinking about fire, and in them we find a linkage of images and diversity of meaning that is unparalleled in modern poetry. Matthiessen's analysis is excellent:

The control of the range of meaning here is masterly. On one level, the choice in the first stanza is between destruction and destruction....But the descending dove is, more profoundly, that of annunciation, and 'the tongues' of prophecy declare the terms of our possible redemption. ⁶⁸

The "descending dove" could be the Holy Ghost or a Spitfire or a Messerschmidt or all three. The redemption from fire by fire may be either the crucial moral dilemma or war or the redemption from hell-fire of the soul by means of heaven sent fire, or both.

Reading these two stanzas aloud, however, the meaning that Eliot wants to communicate is emphasized. The repetition of the word "love" in the first and second lines of the last stanza and the capitalization of the word "Name"

⁶⁸ Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 191.

are sufficient indication that the "fire" and the "dove" are Heaven-sent. "We can hardly face the fact," Matthiessen continues, "that love is essentially not release but suffering; and that the intolerable burden of our desires... can be removed by nothing within our power, but solely through grace. All we have is the terms of our choice, the fire of our destructive lusts or the inscrutable terrible fire of divine Love." ⁶⁹

The mythological reference to the Nessus shirt in the fourth line of the last stanza is another indication that it is impossible for "human power" to subsist without Divine aid.

V

In the conclusion of the last poem Eliot transcends the quartet form that he has been following, because it provides not only a summary of Little Gidding, but of the entire series of poems. The section opens with a suggestion of East Coker in the line

What we call the beginning is often the end
and has an element of The Dry Salvages in such lines as

...down to the sea's throat.

A line from Burnt Norton:

Quick now, here, now, always--

toward the end of the poem provides the linkage with the first quartet of the series.

Similar as the opening lines of the last strophe are to East Coker, there is a distinct difference that comparison reveals. Little Gidding finds the thought stated:

⁶⁹ Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 191 and ff.

What we call the beginning is often the end
 And to make an end is to make a beginning.
 The end is where we start from.

In East Coker the thought was personalized:

In my beginning is my end.

In the earlier poem the poet was speaking of his own personal beginning and end. In Little Gidding instead of a personal experience it is a universal one, and the line

Home is where one starts from

from East Coker is transformed to

The end is where we start from.

These subtle changes in meaning are important for a complete understanding of the poem, and Eliot himself recognizes their importance. The strophe continues:

And every phrase
 And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
 Taking its place to support the others,
 The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
 And easy commerce of the old and the new,
 The common word exact without vulgarity,
 The formal word precise but not pedantic,
 The complete consort dancing together)
 Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
 Every poem an epitaph.

This final semantic discourse might well be considered Eliot's own criticism of what he would like his work to be, at least linguistically. It is at least his idea of what any poetry should strive for in the matter of language. But here the discourse goes further than semantics; a poem is an epitaph that provides a start:

We die with the dying:
 See, they depart, and we go with them.

We are born with the dead:
See, they return, and bring us with them.

Death, or history, is a "pattern of timeless moments" that leads ineluctably to the triumph of Eternal Life over history and time.

The final lines of the poem provide a detachment only rarely found in the previous poems, and at the same time the lines give a point from which the reader can survey the complete series.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploration
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always--
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

The "exploration" echoes Eliot's struggle in East Coker to "recover what has been lost and found and lost again and again," but the final exploration is an Aristotelian sense of awakening, of recognition. The awakening must be "a condition of complete simplicity" for nothing less will suffice if the soul is to achieve a unity with God. In that unity "all shall be well" and the Divine Fire is changed from a fire of trial and purgation to a fire of Eternal Peace.

CHAPTER FOUR

Eliot has stated that the understanding of poetry usually goes through three stages: enjoyment or appreciation, selection and organization, and finally, reorganization, a "stage at which a person already educated in poetry meets with something new in his own time, and finds a new pattern of poetry arranging itself in consequence."¹

Such a stage in the understanding of poetry was reached in Eliot's own work with the Four Quartets, poems that tax the reader's intellectual abilities but give him, at the same time, a unique poetic experience.

Some of the difficulties in understanding the Four Quartets are not new in Eliot's poetry. The Waste Land is more allusive; Ash-Wednesday is more obviously religious, and passages from Gerontion or The Hollow Men more obscure and difficult of comprehension. However, the difficulties that the reader encounters in the Four Quartets are more than a question of understanding allusion or explicating apparent intricacies; the Quartets are least obviously allusive poetry, the least ingratiating in image and diction, the most stripped, and the most direct of all of his published work. What the Quartets require that his earlier poetry does not is a patience of intellect and ear which many readers either lack or are unwilling to give.

Much of the work of this thesis has been annotation and interpretation in order to shed some light on the problems mentioned. Yet, it is obvious that if the explication in this thesis were only annotation, the thesis would

¹ Use of Poetry, p. 9.

fail in its purpose: to aid the reader in the complete understanding of Eliot's poems. Preston, Sweeney, Matthiessen, and Gardner have all indicated sources and one method of interpretation, but these critics, able as they are, have neglected the fact that the four poems are actually one, a single whole with a logical and coherent unity. Thus, any interpretation of particular parts or examination of sources, however sound, will fall short of indicating the significance and completeness of the entire series.

Eliot, himself, as we have seen, has warned against too intensive an investigation into the "meaning of meaning" of his poems, a warning which invalidates a great deal of criticism of the type undertaken by Preston or Sweeney. We have tried to show the "meaning" of the poems, not in any narrative sense, but on an abstract level, feeling that the "meaning" we have shown will aid the reader in his own interpretation of the poems. One person cannot give the "entire meaning" of the poems, and the poet is no more qualified to suggest a meaning than the reader.

A poem, once composed, belongs neither to the author of the poem, nor to the person reading it, but has reality existing somewhere between the two individuals. It is a reality which is simply not the reality of what the writer has tried to express or what the reader derives from it. The reality is accumulative, for one thing, and the writer and each reader, in turn, contribute to it. Thus, it is just as legitimate for a reader to suggest the "meaning" of a poem as it is for the author to do so. It should be noticed, in this connection, that Eliot has let his verse stand for itself and has never published or allowed to be published any "authorized" interpretation of any of his poems. Eliot's notes to The Waste Land might be

considered by some as interpretation, but they are singularly unfruitful of any possible elucidation, and provide references only to some of the more obvious literary allusions.

Our interpretation of the Four Quartets, then, has been an attempt to suggest a meaning upon consideration of the poems as a whole, and to provide sufficient elucidation and annotation to overcome some of the more obvious literary allusions.

Our interpretation of the Four Quartets, then, has been an attempt to suggest a meaning upon consideration of the poems as a whole, and to provide sufficient elucidation and annotation to overcome of the more obvious difficulties of the poems.

While the Four Quartets comprise a literary unity, understanding of the series depends upon understanding its various parts. Thus, for example, East Coker (and inevitably all four of the poems) rests primarily upon the thought of St. John of the Cross. Unless the importance of the Saint is understood, the reader's appreciation of the poem will necessarily suffer because Eliot's use of the thought of the Spanish mystic has been adapted to the poet's own purposes in creating these poems. Similarly, the various connotations that the Mississippi river carries are important aids in the understanding of the third quartet, The Dry Salvages. Of course Eliot has not limited himself to the mere quotation of authors and references to historical facts or places. Rather, he has used the inanimate things of nature and the written expression of the world's great authors as a foundation upon which to build his poetic thought.

Accordingly, it should be realized that the appreciation of The Four Quartets depends for a large part upon an appreciation of its parts. No mere investigation of sources will give this complete appreciation or understanding; it can only provide the reader with a syllabus, as it were, to gloss some of the more obvious difficulties.

It could be said, with some basis of fact, that this difficulty of complete appreciation and putative obscurity tends to rob the poems of some element of universality which would keep them from becoming truly great in the classical sense. However, the major difficulty of obscurity is easily explained when we consider that Eliot is using, in these poems, a new poetic form based almost completely on a musical pattern. This juxtaposition of the arts tends to some legitimate obscurity but in this connection it should always be remembered that an obscure poem is not necessarily a bad one, and a clearly understood poem not necessarily a good one.

The musical structure of the poems, with their consequent obliqueness, can best be studied aurally, for the ear has as keen, or a keener memory for sound than the eye has for pictorial representation. Eliot constantly repeats rhythmic patterns that often tend to escape the reader unless they are read aloud or heard read aloud by a competent speaker who has himself made some study of the poems. The themes of the poems, their restatements, developments, and harmonic changes are primarily aural images, not visual ones.

Yet the very problems which are solved, at least partially, by reading aloud, give rise to further problems in the actual oral reading, problems that even the poet as executant has apparently failed to cope with adequately.

F. R. Leavis reviews some recent records of Eliot's rendition of the Four Quartets,² and states the problem of oral interpretation quite adequately when analyzing Eliot's own execution:

As for the critical significance of the rendering, with its curious inadequacies, I think they can be related to the striking contrast offered by his later prose to his poetry. In his poetry he applies himself to a merciless standard; it is the product of intense and single-minded discipline-- discipline for sincerity and purity of interest. In his prose he seems to relax from the asceticism he undergoes as a composer of verse. The prose-writer belongs to an external social world, where conventions are formidable and temptations are not only often resisted, but they seem not to be perceived. The reader of the poetry would seem to be more intimately related to the prose-writer than to the poet.

These records should call attention to the problem of reading Four Quartets out loud. The problem deserves a great deal of attention, and to tackle it would be very educational.³

Whatever the difficulties of the poems because of the nature of their structure, it should always be remembered that they are poems and not musical compositions and thus should be primarily considered as poetry and only secondarily as rhythmic compositions. The final evaluation of the Four Quartets will rest upon their ultimate success as poetry and nothing else.

The basic raw materials of the poems are, of course, words; words that have both denotation and connotation, and certain limitations as signs and symbols. Moreover, the particular words used in poetry achieve a certain significance, but words have certain acquired obligations by that same fact of artistic inclusion. Thus, as Eliot puts in East Coker:

² F. R. Leavis, "Poet as Executant," Scrutiny, 15:80, Winter, 1947.

³ Ibid. Unfortunately these records (H.M.V.C. 3598-3603) have not yet been released in this country. Leavis continues his review by indicating that it is his opinion that Eliot is a much better poet than executant. He does point out, however, the significance of the records: "here for posterity is a rendering of some of the indubitably great poetry of our time by the poet himself."

...each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling...

Words, as we have pointed out, are only the basic raw materials of the art. Poetry is made up of words and ideas; each of which are of almost equal importance in judging a work of poetic art. Swinburne is a classic example of a fine metricist who is not a great poet. His poetry fails not because he did not know how to say anything, but because he had little of value to say; and his verse often degenerates into orgiastic jingles. In exactly the same manner it could be said that the "poetry" of St. Teresa of Avila or St. John of the Cross is not truly great because the profound ideas of those mystics could not be contained in language. In their particular cases their written work does not achieve greatness as poetry because of the impossibility of expressing mystical thought in language.

The ideal poet, then, would attain a perfect welding of these two characteristics of poetry, but even this linkage can be achieved in differing degrees. A poet can intermix words and content magnificently well, as did Shakespeare, Milton, or Chaucer; it is not, however, necessary to catalogue the various methods that a poet can utilize as the fundamentals of his art; our contention is that one of the tests of a poet's greatness is the way he is able to express the emotional intensity of his time, based not only on what his time happens to think, but also on certain fundamental standards that are native or basic to any age.

One of the major difficulties in this approach is that we are dealing with literature, or poetry, and it is sometimes quite difficult to distinguish

between form and content, and to separate the idea from its expression.

In theory, for that matter in actuality as well, the use of words and ideas is a human activity; its proximate purpose is the influence of human activity. It may do this by uplifting, degrading, entertaining, or amusing, but by whatever means it chooses, it achieves its primary purpose.

Distinguishing further, language as a human act has another purpose, a final end, which is to help men attain their ultimate destiny. As a human act it is bound by the laws of ethics and the perfected expression of the natural law which controls and governs men and their activities as moral agents. However, in this consideration, we must not confuse the work of art with the doctrines it embodies; a confusion often made by critics who maintain that only Catholic literature or poetry can be great. They perhaps feel that because Catholicism is great, a work of literature must, ipso facto, be Catholic in order to achieve greatness.

This literary fallacy would lead us inevitably to believe that only pantheists could appreciate Shelley; only Catholics could enjoy Crashaw, Chaucer, or Hopkins; only Anglo-Catholics understand Donne or Eliot, and nobody at all understand Milton. All of these poets are read and enjoyed, albeit not always completely or sympathetically, by any discerning student of English literature not for any doctrine or theology they might hold, but for the richness of imagery and the wealth of music they contain. Anybody wanting doctrine or theology should go to the catechism or the Summa and not to verse.

This discussion immediately raises the question of the relationship of art and morality, a question treated by Plato, St. Thomas, and many others.

That question is one that has more than an academic interest to this discussion of Eliot's poetry, for the Four Quartets, as we have seen, is an attempt at a combination of those two genre. The very ambiguity of the terms "poetry" and "morality" has led a number of critics to confuse means and ends, and has often led them to identify a moral work as a poetic one or a poetic passage as an example of moral teaching.

Once the ambiguity of the question is resolved into its component parts certain obvious truths are clarified and much diverse opinion on Eliot's later verse is given a central focus. Actually, the discussion of poetry and morality relegates itself into two specific relationships, which might be called existential and essential. In the first category would come such questions as: "Does immoral poetry have a right to existence?" In the essential relationship would fall such questions as: "Can a work which is morally evil become true and good poetry?"

Our discussion here is primarily about the essential relationship; the answer to the existential one is obvious and needs no further elaboration. The closeness of the connection between poetry and morality, if any, is the major problem, and three answers have been given.

The first answer is the concept of ars gratia artis which posits not only a clear distinction between art and morality but a definite separation. Art is concerned with the good of the work and morality with the good of the worker and they should exert no control over each other.

A second theory is the theory that art and morality are not only allied, but identical. Art and morality are both concerned with the good and to

attain the poetic one must also attain the moral. Contrariwise, if a poet's work is immoral, it is poetically or aesthetically lacking. This position of course leads us to assume that we must either canonize Dante, Villon, or de Vega or place them on the Index.

The third position is a compromise, a via media between two extremes, and the position held by such modern Catholic philosophers as Maritain. Art and morality are both supreme in their respective spheres; the sphere of morality is above that of art for morality is concerned with man as man, and art with man as the worker.

This is actually a question of means and ends: bad art cannot achieve good ends or morality; indifferent art can possibly reach this level; good art can certainly, but not inevitably, be directed to good morality.

This leads us again to the question of Catholicism in poetry, for all morality directly springs from the Church. A poem which is Catholic should also be moral, and a work which is catholic would embrace any type of good poetry ever written regardless of the author's religion; this accounts for the greatness of such poets as Milton. The author of Samson Agonisties was an extremely catholic poet even though he lost no opportunity to castigate Rome; he achieved great art through indifferent morality, a logical reversal of one of the statements made earlier in this discussion.

It should be obvious from this apparent discourse, that it is not necessary for a poem to teach a moral as long as we realize that both art and morality tend to ultimate ends in man's activity.

We have discussed, thus briefly, the question of art and morality in order to provide a background upon which to judge Eliot and his Four Quartets,

for those poems, if nothing else, are unquestionably religious and moral poetry. The extent of their success is quite another matter. But this discussion is of prime importance in considering Eliot and his later creative efforts for it is never possible to disassociate his poetry from his moral and religious thought.

Eliot's acquired religion is, as we have seen, Anglo-Catholicism. His poetic and critical aim attempts to refurbish the classic aesthetic concepts, and to clothe them in the permanent form offered by the philosophy of the church of his choice.

We have pointed out earlier that critics of Eliot have, in general, tended to disparage his religious affiliations, not because of any particular dislike of Anglo-Catholicism, but because of a dislike of religion as a whole. Only a few more discerning writers, however, have taken issue with Eliot because his new found faith led him to a schismatic church and essential heresy.

It would not be platitudinous to say that a true artist (in the finest and strictest sense of that often overused word) never compromises with the truth, yet the church of Eliot's choice is itself a compromise, and an insufficient answer to problems. If the primus and secundus of our syllogism are accepted, it would follow logically that Eliot is not a true artist. While this is probably quite true, it detracts nothing from his stature as one of the major critics of our day and one of our finer poets.

Eliot has never expressed his reasons for stopping short of perfection in his search for spiritual authority; we cannot understand why he has never taken the final step and come to Rome, and we wonder if he fully realizes the nature of the church of his choice. He accepts a church which permits

divorce and birth-control, for example, yet he personally rejects and deplures both of them. One wonders sometimes if his conscience does not bother him, particularly when, in practically the next breath he says that the church can never change in things which permanently matter. Apparently such things as divorce and birth-control are not, to Eliot, first principles, and are of little consequence.

Our position is not to question Eliot's sincerity but to wonder at his authority to persuade us of it. It would seem that Eliot's destiny lies in Rome.

Eliot's ability to persuade us of his sincerity remains almost unparalled, however, whatever his spiritual failings may be. The persuasion offered by the Four Quartets is his most notable example because those poems are extremely subtle religious lyrics whose full spiritual significance is not perceived at first reading, or even at second or third reading. The poems offer a way of instruction and show a method of action for the soul that almost makes us believe that the poems are not so much to be read as they are to be lived by.

A simple tracing of the themes of the various poems will make that point amply clear. We can presume that Eliot's major theme for the series is that the soul must be tried and tempered before reaching its ultimate destiny, community with God. In Burnt Norton the theme is movement through time, the time of clocks and history which holds men captive because

Humankind cannot bear very much reality.

Burnt Norton

The intersection of time with history in the present is Eliot's main

concern in East Coker. To conquer the multitude of obstacles which the soul encounters both from history and the present, it must acquire an asceticism which will lead it from the beginning of his life to its end into

...another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion.

East Coker

The Dry Salvages depicts the further travels of the soul and eventually the soul is given a purpose and a meaning in this life by the Annunciation. The only end to the movement of the waves, time, and history, is man's response to the challenge propounded by the Annunciation. Little Gidding, which concludes the series, traces the soul through the purgation of fire; the fire of Hell, of Purgatory, of the Holy Ghost, and the fire of our modern civilization. The poem, and the series, concludes with a final statement of faith and hope for the soul:

All shall be well and
All manner of things shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

Little Gidding

The poem, and the entire series for that matter, would perhaps be better understood if the final word were "One", instead of "one".

The Four Quartets are a series of developments upon a theme and each development has its own elements of beauty. At the same time each of the Quartets is not equally successful as poetry. Beethoven wrote only one Opus 135 quartet, and Dante wrote only one conclusion to the Paradiso. While there is no single passage in any of the poems that equals in beauty either of the

works mentioned, and while there are definite failures in some of the poems, the Four Quartets succeeds in its major purpose: to impress the reader with the necessity of recognizing the supernatural eternal life and the salvation of his soul as his primary purpose in life.

The failures of the poems are obvious. There is no real reason for the Krishna and Arjuna passage in The Dry Salvages. It teaches the reader nothing except that Eliot believes there is something fine in the Bhagavad-Gita. Similarly the intricate mazes of

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps contained in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

Burnt Norton

will not be completely clarified by almost any amount of explication. For these reasons Burnt Norton and The Dry Salvages are the least successful of the four poems. Their very tone, and the relative tenuousness of their content mitigates against complete success.

However, the critical charge that Eliot's poetry since his conversion has been extremely lacking in content is given ample refutation by the very range of reflection and feeling in East Coker and Little Gidding.

These two poems will stand with any that Eliot has ever written and despite the general tone of vagueness given by the antique images in both of them, there are parts that make an immediate and unforgettable impression; an impression that is heightened by the unity of dramatic suggestiveness in each of the poems. In the sense of unity that approaches the theatrical, East Coker and Little Gidding are very closely related to his earlier poetry. That poetry too, provided its own peculiar difficulties which were, however, easily

resolved upon close application and study. The content of the later poems is more profound and the poetry consequently requires more intensive study, but will give the reader more after that same study.

Despite the surface similarities of the two poems to Eliot's earlier verse, there is a wide range of difference. Where poems like Prufrock and Gerontion were extremely dramatic, the only theatrical passage in the Four Quartets is the second movement of Little Gidding which describes the meeting of the air-raid wardens. Even in that passage Eliot's purpose is only secondarily a dramatic one, for the movement shares, with the rest of the series, a sense of deeper meditation than was provided by his previously published work.

Once the reader realizes that much of the content of the Four Quartets is a series of meditations upon a theme, understanding of the poems becomes only a problem of grasping the central theme and letting the variations carry him along.

To achieve this meditation, Eliot has taken a universal theme and clothed it in language that is, at times, singularly beautiful. Having rejected current conventions and modes as inadequate to his needs, Eliot is committed to thorough-going stylistic and philosophical innovation. Actually the problems in versification that Eliot found in the writing of the poems with the consequent wide range of meters thus necessitated, are closely allied to Eliot's fundamental purpose and cannot be isolated from his problems as a poet. One of his preoccupations throughout the Quartets as we have seen, has been the use of words to convey his exact meanings or meaning. The words of some of the poems, and particularly Little Gidding, are almost intersection

points of the two worlds of human experience and supernatural insight. They always relate to what we know about life and living but they also try to suggest unexplored realms of the supernatural at the same time. Perhaps it is because Eliot has always been a particularly fine artificer of words that the language and versification of the Four Quartets is its single most uniformly successful feature.

Eliot's continual search for the exact word, the eclectic phrase, led him inevitably into the problems of a new structure to house his precision of imagery. The over-all structure of the entire series has already been commented upon earlier in this chapter and needs no further explanation, but the particular verse forms and lyric techniques embodied within the series requires further examination.

The first example of Eliot's adaptation of a verse form into something that completely suits his own expression is found in the fourth section of East Coker. The movement is composed of five-five-line stanzas rhyming ababb, and the seeming artless simplicity of the lyric is echoed by the content of the verse, which appears, on first reading, as a simple picture of illness and health. Yet the metric complications are evident upon close analysis; the first three lines of each stanza are in iambic tetrameter; the fourth line is in iambic pentameter and the last line in each case is iambic hexameter. It almost seems as if Eliot had taken a well known verse form and stretched it into something big enough to contain his content, which is, upon examination, an involved metaphysical allegory showing the significance for us of Good Friday.

Similarly the lyric which opens the second movement of The Dry Salvages points to the importance of the Annunciation. The thirty-six lines of the lyric are divided into six-line stanzas and the whole poem contains only six rhymes. There is no apparent reason why Eliot has gone to the Provencal lyric as his source for this form, but the poet manages to mould that form into an extremely beautiful expression of movement leading to the Annunciation. Eliot has, however, managed to keep intact the major conventions of the Provencal chanson by the use of repetitive rhyme words and by the stress of the word "end" in the first line of each stanza. In this particular poem, the scansion is difficult and the metrics range from a tight iambic pentameter to an extremely loose trochaic heptameter.

The five sections of Little Gidding contain three lyric passages which have elements of formalism about them. The simplest of the three is the three-stanza poem which pictures the death of the elements. Each of the eight-line stanzas contains four couplets, with the first line of each couplet being an iambic trimeter and the last line of each couplet an iambic tetrameter. Trochees are often substituted for iambs.

The concluding portion of the section, the meeting of Eliot and his alter-ego, is written in a modified terza rima with assonance, phraseology, and alliteration taking the place of rhyme. The opening six lines will illustrate this technique:

In the uncertain hour before the morning
 Near the ending of interminable night
 At the recurrent end of the unending
 After the dark dove with the flickering tongue
 Had passed below the horizon of his homing
 While the dead leaves still rattled on like tin...

Nowhere has Eliot better adapted a form to suit his own usage than in this section. The forceful and insistent alliteration in such lines as

...as the passage now presents no hindrance
To the spirit unappeased and peregrine...

effectively combines a sense of urbane superiority with the desolate and macabre to achieve its effect.

The tremendous rhymed passage which comprises section four of Little Gidding is another illustration of Eliot's complete mastery of poetic techniques, something too often over-looked by too many competent critics. Here, in a variation of the Chaucerian stanza or Rhyme Royal, is a lyric which almost defies any type of description other than a technical analysis. But again, Eliot has adapted the form to his own needs. The lines are tetrameter instead of pentameter, and the rhyme scheme involves a slight change. Instead of ababbcc we have ababacc. The third line of each of the two stanzas is, curiously enough, a trimeter.

This mastery of the English language that Eliot has so amply demonstrated is no new thing to his poetry, and neither are many of the lyric techniques used in the Four Quartets.

Chief among these, of course, is the device of incremental repetition, sometimes of words and occasionally of entire lines. Examples would range from the rather startling:

Distracted from distraction by distraction...

Burnt Norton

to lines which could have been taken directly from Prufrock:

There is a time for the evening under starlight,
A time for the evening under lamplight
(The evening with the photograph album).

East Coker

Other lyric techniques, such as literary allusion and religious quotation are already obvious to the reader of this thesis and need no further elaboration here, but it is remarkable to note that one of the major poetic devices of Eliot's early poetry, that of twisted or inverted images, is almost completely lacking in Four Quartets. Such images as "depraved May", from Gerontion, or "April is the cruellest month," from The Waste Land seem to have interested Eliot only in his early work when he was primarily concerned with startling the reader rather than in meditating with him.

Only five years have passed since the first publication of Four Quartets, too short a time for critical opinion to have crystalized about the poems and come to a final conclusion regarding them. Even today it is fashionable to think of Eliot as a writer who was, at best, an admirable versifier and consummate journalist in his early work and to believe that poetry which he has written since his conversion is a retrogression into religious senility. This is entirely too harsh an estimate to make of a man whose finest poetry has still to be completely evaluated. At the same time, it would be a definite critical error to maintain that the Four Quartets are a complete artistic success and the greatest poetry of the present century. It would be an error, but an error only of degree and not of basic misintepretation.

Whatever their ultimate success, Four Quartets are a sensitive illustration of Eliot's religious acceptances, poetical affirmations of attitudes and beliefs that have been defined both concurrently and antecedently. They are Eliot's answer to his own poetic problems.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Willis E. P. McNelly has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

June 30, 1948
Date

James J. Young
Signature of Adviser