


Spring 2023

## Poetics of Finitude: Time and Death in the Poetry of R.M. Rilke and T.S. Eliot

Isabel James Greene  
Bard College, [ig9727@bard.edu](mailto:ig9727@bard.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_s2023](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2023)

 Part of the [Continental Philosophy Commons](#), [Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

### Recommended Citation

Greene, Isabel James, "Poetics of Finitude: Time and Death in the Poetry of R.M. Rilke and T.S. Eliot" (2023). *Senior Projects Spring 2023*. 116.

[https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_s2023/116](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2023/116)

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Projects Spring 2023 by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@bard.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@bard.edu).

POETICS OF FINITUDE

Time and Death in the Poetry of R.M. Rilke and T.S. Eliot

Senior Project Submitted to The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by

Isabel James Greene

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2023



## Acknowledgements

Thank you, Matt, for all of your support and guidance. I would not have been able to achieve any of this without your constant belief in me. Thank you is not enough, but I don't think I have the words left in me after writing all of this to try to convey how deeply I have valued your clarity, insight, and empathy through all of these years.

Thank you to my dear friends Catherine, Emely, Mason, and Alley, who have been by my side since my first days at Bard and have been with me through everything since. I wouldn't be the person I am without you all. And Zoe, thank you for your endless clarity and genuine wisdom in my many times of need. Max, thank you for your never ending love and support.

Jim and Cole, your influence has been invaluable. Thank you for all the help and endless inspiration you've given me along the way.

Marina– you were the first person to give me the interest in really trying to speak my mind. Without you, I don't know where I would be...

Thank you to my family– Mom, Dad, Guilia, Maddie, and Lexie– I would not be the person I am without you all.

I'm glad I got the chance to exist in a world where you all do, too!



## Table of Contents:

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
On Death.....	4
Poetic Backdrop.....	7
Conceptual Framework.....	10
Introduction to the Poems.....	13
<b>The <i>Duino Elegies</i>.....</b>	<b>17</b>
The Void of God.....	22
The Angelic.....	27
The Space of Death.....	30
<b>The <i>Four Quartets</i>.....</b>	<b>38</b>
Multiplicious Existence: Burnt Norton.....	44
Eliot's 'Pattern'.....	53
Death in Life: East Coker.....	54
Temporality and Disintegration: The Dry Salvages.....	62
Unity: Little Gidding.....	68
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>81</b>



## Introduction

---

In 1915, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote a letter to a friend lamenting the aporia of being we have introduced into existence by separating ourselves from death. When he turned towards the world, he found that:

God and death were now outside, were the *other*, the *one* being our life that now, at the cost of this elimination, seemed to become human, friendly, possible, achievable, in a firm sense ours... While from every accepted meaning God and death seemed to have been subtracted (as something not here-and-now, but later, elsewhere and different), the smaller cycle of the merely here-and-now revolved faster and faster, the so-called progress happened in a world self-preoccupied and forgetful that, however it might exert itself, it was beaten from the start by death...<sup>1</sup>

Here, Rilke exposes a paradox that permeates through modern thought. We have cleansed ourselves from the looming darkness of death by making it into our *other*, thereby alienating it from our existence. Within this conception, death is a state which has been forced upon us as a debt-collector to our temporary gift of life: an immanent end to keep us from full and exuberant being, an antagonist which lurks in every corner. To keep ourselves distant from this cost that comes with being, we have made death into life's binary opposite: an undoing force at the *end* of our lives. We have cleanly removed death from its deep intertwinement with our innermost being— an act which damages our understanding of the intimacy of the unknowable within our lives.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, 148-149



This distinction of existence from death is utterly nonsensical and leaves a gaping wound at the center of our self conception. By virtue of existing as finite beings, we are living and dying at once. Since we *will* die, and our our future is just a much a part as our present self as our past is, death is as much a part of ourselves as our creation is. This is what Rilke indicates when pointing out that in the here-and-now, we are “beaten from the start by death”– we are not going to escape the problem of death by merely subtracting it from the our conception of the equation of existence. Thinking of death as an occurrence for “elsewhere,” never here or now, also forces us to think of life as purely linear with creation and death on opposite ends of spectrum.

The othering of death from our lives is indicative the broader pattern of humanity to limit understanding within conceivable structures and leave all that does not align within it on the outside. Attention towards that which is contradictory to our parameters of sense undoes that secure ignorance and is the only towards release from the reductive frameworks we impose onto reality.

It might have been easier to reduce death into our structures of sense if its absence from our conception of existence did not lead to a paradox at the deepest source of our being. It might have also been easier if this distinction was not rendered obvious by turning towards the lived world around us for, as Rilke writes,

Nature knew nothing of this removal we had somehow accomplished– if a tree blossoms, death blossoms in it as well as life, and the field is full of death, which from its reclining face sends out a rich expression of life... everywhere about us death is still at home and he watches us out of the cracks in things.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Rilke, *Letters of RMR*, 149

The removal of death from existence has led to a paradox in our conception of being. Death surrounds us in everything, for everything on this earth contains its own death. In attempting to pacify death by alienating it to only some eventual event, we have also over-simplified our own conception of existence.

Thomas Stearns Eliot, another prominent writer of the modern age, also claims a sharp stance against the oversimplification of existence imposed by purely epistemological frameworks. He is not tied to Rilke by any correspondence or influence— at least, Eliot has never mentioned Rilke by name in his writing, and given Eliot’s wariness towards the Romantic tradition which Rilke’s earlier works had ties to, he was not likely to study his poetry. Despite this, both poets’ works enlighten each other in comparison. Both wrote poetic series which direct attention towards physical human place in the world in response to the dangerous reduction of human relation to reality they saw overrunning traditional models of understanding: Rilke with his *Duino Elegies* and Eliot with his *Four Quartets*. In their aims to unravel the reductive orders we impose onto a world which is not entirely knowable within the limits of our understanding, these poets re-integrate the reality of lived experience with the presence of that which disrupts it.

Eliot wrote in an essay of his, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” that “it is not desirable to confine knowledge to whatever can be put into a useful shape for examinations, drawing-rooms, or the still more pretentious modes of publicity.”<sup>3</sup> His works vehemently unravel the false imposition of human logic over the the world in the attempt to release our awareness from the confines of reductive human models.

---

<sup>3</sup> T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

Rilke's *Duino Elegies* are majorly concerned with the human relation to the vastness of divinity and the necessity of freeing our conception of finite existence from its lower hierarchical order in comparison to infinitude. Eliot's *Four Quartets* approach human existence with a much more varied attention that crystalizes what Rilke's deeply emotionally evocative poems begin. Where Rilke reveals discrepancies as unjust and faulty, Eliot approaches from all directions with vigor and intellectual intensity. Neither mode of poetic engagement is superior, but both in conversation give a fuller perspective on human situation in the world than either would alone.

### **On Death:**

Rendering death an *other* has only served to make life easier for us to conceive by trimming it to fit completely within the clean parameters of human sensemaking systems. We live and experience life with every moment of our being; death, though, is an unfamiliar state, something impenetrable from within our lived lives. And since we do not have to face it until that immanent end, we leave it outside of our understanding and plant ourselves firmly within the conceivable— while on the edges, death seeps over.

In attempting to change the way in which we conceive human existence, it is necessary to point out the presence of the incomprehensible which cannot adhere to those limited frameworks as they are present in everyday reality. Rilke and Eliot both use a deeper attunement towards the lived reality as a way to illuminate the fragility of our conceptual structures. Both also make the shift to include death as a part of the everyday rather than a distant occurrence at the end of our existence.

Death and existence are necessarily connected. One cannot treat the nature of reality without understanding of what it is to live as a uniquely existing, singular, temporary human being, and one's eventual death is a part of one's finite being. Heidegger's discussion of the nature of death in *Being and Time* offers an interesting perspective into the notions of death held in general society which oversimplify and undercut our understanding. He argues that

Dying, which is essentially mine in such a way that no one can be my representative, is perverted into an event of public occurrence which the 'they' encounters... By such ambiguity, Dasein puts itself in the position of losing itself in the 'they'...<sup>4</sup>

Dying, Heidegger asserts, is possessed by the individual who holds death in themselves. Death should not be perverted into a generalized affliction which each human eventually undergoes, for to do so makes death, which is so essentially individual, public—lost in the “they.” Heidegger connects the perversion of death to a distance from *Dasein* (literally, there-being), a term which he uses to refer to the nature of human existence in the world as open, self-led, uniquely human way of being. In this way, a limited understanding of death damages our feeling of being at home in the world. A shortened view of death narrows our ability to face the fullness of our own existence, for our death is removed from ourselves even though it is an integrated part of deepest selves.

Living with a tranquilized, impersonal idea of death also eliminates one's potential recognition of a measurelessness towards which their being exists. Pacifying death into an occurrence which afflicts those around oneself but which “has nothing to do with us”<sup>5</sup> mutes an uncomfortable, uneasy vastness which we are being towards, for death is the ultimate

---

<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 297.

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 297.

incomprehensible: unschematizable, defiant of reductive logic, impossible to make comfortable and familiar because it cannot be known.

Death does not have to be made comprehensible or even comfortable, only understood as a part of our nature as existing beings. To Rilke and Heidegger, to make the incomprehensible comfortable eradicates any possibility of gaining a full view of existence. Heidegger refers to our turning our faces away from death as a “concealment in the face of death.”<sup>6</sup> Rilke’s *Elegies* turn our faces back towards death. Acceptance of incomprehensibility might open up our perspective of existence. Death is not the negation of life’s meaning, for death (but not death alone) gives our existence meaning.

We might respond to our death with rage and despair when it is identified as a force against life, a reversal, an unjust thief. But such a view only arises from the perspective of life being definable and schematizable within neat human constructs—and to this, death is a villain and destroyer. Understanding death as an integral part of the experience of every moment of existence, though, opens up the whole of human existence, not just the intelligible. Death could never be known from within human constructs or the reaches of knowledge, and this does not make it an evil or a negative space. Rather, it is a point of orientation from which we can reestablish our relation to the unknowable, and in this to open up our understanding of being as a finite, temporal creature who possesses both death and life.

---

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 297.

**Poetic Backdrop:**

In the wake of the Great War, a reengagement with the nature of death, time, and love was necessary as the world bore witness to tragedy on an unimaginable scale. This scale of suffering so unseen in the modern world prompted the need for a new understanding of the human being in a new world: a world which haunted by a spectre of darkness made visible by the total desolation of war.

Many post-World War I writers felt the need to pave a new path towards understand the nature of being within the fragility of finite time. In the twentieth century, there was a renewed attention towards the articulation of what it means to be a human being and how the structures of existence might be understood which diverged sharply from the frames of that dominated the nineteenth century. The rapid progress of science in the nineteenth century led to widespread attention to a more scientific mode of exploring and understanding the world as a whole. Positivism, which is an empiricist philosophical theory that adheres to the view that only reliable knowledge we have of the world comes from that which can be gained through observation, was a powerful philosophical force in the pre-war era. But positivism, like empiricism, rationalism,<sup>7</sup> and other philosophies which view data and objective reasoning as the only true way of understanding reality, shuns anything that is not understandable within their frames of reason. This strict adherence to epistemological frameworks encouraged a sever detachment from the world for the sake of arriving at truth.

When existence is schematized into rational structures, possibilities of self-discovery are contained to preexisting conceptions of what reality *is*. Material existence is discoverable,

---

<sup>7</sup> The difference between rationalism and empiricism is that rationalists believe that reality can be directly grasped through reasoning; empiricist belief focuses mainly on that which can be arrived at through experience.

manipulatable, and sensical within logical structures, while that which resides in speculation, or which is undiscoverable within systems of logic, is disruptive and an undesirable. This is not to say that it is only that which resides outside of material reality which is discredited, for assuming that one's material reality can also be completely reduced into simplifying empirical structures is similarly reductive. Such reductive thinking places man on a singular plane of residence: a world of sensical, self-derived structures. That which is not schematizable in mechanical systems is chaotic and ungovernable and, thus, ignored.

So, with the Intellectual and philosophical structures of the past were shaken by the no longer adequate for making sense of what it means to live in a world changed by war. In the midst of this existential tumult, poets like Rilke and Eliot engaged again the question of human existence in a holistic view that necessitated breaking from models of the past. The metaphysical conditions of existence were inextricably concerned with meaning of being in death and time and could not be satisfied by a disengaged, objectified picture of being that came with the mechanistic orders of the 19th century. Thus, their poetic pursuits were part of a new and unique orientation of philosophical and artistic engagement with the world. I will focus particularly on Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, the writing of which spanned 1912-1922 and Eliot's *Four Quartets* which spanned 1936 and 1942.

Thomas Pfau, author of *Incomprehensible Certainty*, focuses on the new tradition of thought which arose in the wake of the Great War. He formulates that in this emerging tradition, "whatever intellectual and spiritual orientation [the human] is capable of, unfolds at an intuitive,

preconceptual level rather than by drawing on inherited conceptual schemes and procedures.”<sup>8</sup>

Pfau points out that

Once [philosophers] supplant classical teleology with mechanistic explanatory schemes fueled exclusively by efficient causation, life— including human life—becomes but one more quality that may be predicated of certain material forms. Life is reduced from a mystery to an epistemological puzzle.<sup>9</sup>

Life, when seen through a mechanistic lens, becomes a mere problem which epistemological methods can solve. Mechanistic thinkers believed that existence and all of its features might be explained and understood within reductive empirical parameters, which severely limits the possibility of existential understanding by containing it within what is conceivable by human minds and derived from human perspective.

A more open integration of the self with the phenomenal world pushes the human being to cultivate their attention to the world. In an open, reflective engagement with the world which concerns the self as a living, experiencing being interacting with and acting within the world and not a mere receptor of sensations, one can formulate an understanding of existence based on what it is to be rather than how being is known. If we embrace lived experience as formative in human perception and direct our attention more deeply to this space, our understanding of existence becomes more significant to ourselves, for it concerns unique, changing, multiplicitous beings rather than mechanistic operators in a structured reality.

---

<sup>8</sup>Thomas Pfau, *Incomprehensible Certainty*, 299.

<sup>9</sup> Pfau, *Incomprehensible Certainty*, 299-300.



**Conceptual Framework:**

Rainer Maria Rilke and T.S. Eliot's turn towards the inexpressible is a part of this artistic and philosophical movement to reorient the human view of existence after previous structures were rendered weak and meaningless in the post-war world. Throughout this project, I will analyze the ways in which Rilke and Eliot renew our conception of embodied, temporal existence by breaking down the structures we use to understand reality and reckoning with the precariousness of our existence. Though these poets are forced to face total despair and desolation in war, and though they open themselves to the vulnerability and terror of existence, their poetics are neither desolate nor hopeless. Each aims to renew and revitalize our engagement with the world without the crutch of false answers or illusory stability. When the world is wrecked in chaos, these cannot stand at all, and the yawning abyss existing alongside our everyday existence is revealed. But to face this void without illusion reopens our pathway into the world.

We are finite beings embedded in the unstoppable movements of time, but it is also known that our understanding of what reality is is not completely comprehensive. Our existence within time does not mean that all things exist within time; thus, there is an incomprehensible space beyond what it is possible for us to know. While it is impossible to understand beyond the perceptual capacities we have in our embodied world, it is still possible to broaden the scope of those embodied perspectives to more fully recognize where the incomprehensible is present in our own existence.

As our lives are bound by materiality and temporality, we cannot fully conceive of or bring into focus anything completely exceeding those states. Even when we refer to spiritual or

religious spaces of gods and beings beyond our comprehension by names, we think our way outside of sensemaking systems we use to understand our world, which would be necessary to completely comprehend a space that is so absolutely beyond those systems. We are embedded in both an earthly and social existence. It is possible to move outside of societal and logical frameworks of sense through questioning, but it is impossible to know an existence outside of our own.

Our ways of reaching outside of epistemological assumptions favored by modern societies rely on through taking a closer look at what lies outside of those constructions. Turning our attention towards that which does not make sense illuminates the gaps in the framework. This is the endeavor of the poets of my study. But these methods of attention do not launch us beyond what is possible for the human mind to conceive. All that cannot be imagined is left with a term of reference indicating its 'beyond'-ness without clear indication of what that might be. This leaves the notions of that which is beyond our understanding yet addressable by turning towards the gaps in our knowledge which make us aware of our own limitations.

Death can be used as a feature of human reality which connects us to this space beyond reaches of human knowledge and which makes the existence of timelessness more intimate and tangible. Death is the most immediate and present link between human existence and the void beyond the known. I will continue to refer to a 'void' as a figure for death and for the space lying outside of human comprehension.

If one understands death as solely an event which eliminates being, one is trapped in a finite understanding of being as only existing in relation to the known. More open, holistic attention to the void of death which stands as an absolute contrast to the knowable world can

help us to reopen existence as unconfined to human systems. Rilke writes that “We have no reason to harbor any mistrust against our world, for it is not against us. If it has terrors, they are our terrors; if it has abysses, these abysses belong to us; if there are dangers, we must try to love them.”<sup>10</sup> The abysses that seem so outside of our reality are ours, for our world in its entirety is ours. The only alienation comes from our own attempt to protect ourselves from the uncertainty of the unknown. We belong to the world and it to us; reductive human structures of knowledge cloud this relation.

Vigorous reunion with the world is required of us, for this is “in the end the only kind of courage that is required of us: the courage to face the strangest, most unusual, most inexplicable experiences that can meet us.”<sup>11</sup> Rilke’s openness towards the unknown of Death is an attempt to face death, ultimate unintelligible, as something which can revitalize our conception of existence. Our treatment of this incomprehensible mystery within our existence reveals whether our attention to the world is full and open or closed within the limits of sense and understanding.

Both Rilke and Eliot use death as a means to explore the nature of finitude. Rilke grapples with existence within time in relation to a divine, timeless space which we have no access too. His poems are, as Elegies, laments for the dead— but though they do not completely adhere to the tradition of the elegy. Rilke aims to completely reorient our understanding of death and reframe the mourning and lamentation we express in response to death surrounding us. Eliot crafts a more rigorous conceptual framework which explores different aspects of earthly existence, including the nature of existence in what we call the *present* in an attempt to open up our conception of our human place within time. His *Quartets*, like the name implies, are

---

<sup>10</sup>Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, 31.

<sup>11</sup>Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, 30.

multifaceted arrangements which harmonize into a unified song which would be incommunicable from a single voice.

### **Introduction to the Poems:**

Rilke's Elegies are embedded in the grief of living alongside death and reckoning with the despair of finitude. His songs are all directed towards the angelic, who exist in a completely incomprehensible realm of infinitude and divinity. But this comparison to the divine does not degrade the human— instead, the poems rejuvenate the tragic but ultimately moving and enormously powerful nature of living with knowledge of one's own finitude. The poems commend the human spirit for loving and creating, existing vicariously through ruin, even within the briefness of life.

Rilke refers, throughout the elegies, as the reverberations of song as identificational features of this vibrancy of finite life, one which continues into an incomprehensible world of death but whose existence still resounds in the space it once occupied. He figures 'breath' as a symbol of this continued being diffused throughout the world, an invisible, intangible, but *occupying* force in the world. Space, he finds, is not empty— the howling wind, the air of the world, is not empty: it is full of earthly spirituality of perpetual being, for what once was never seems to completely disappear.

Rilke's *Elegies* reconsider what we understand of the nature of *absence* in death. In the form of the *lament*, Rilke reconsiders the unique nature of finitude in relation to the divine. Being as finite creatures knowing death can bring us towards a way of knowing existence that the divine have no understanding of. From the pain existing in contradiction— material and

spiritual at once— our particular contradictory nature imbues existence with a weight only possible for the material.

Meanwhile, Eliot recomplicates our conception of past, present, and future in order to radically reframe our perspective of being as an individual among an unknowable vast collective human history. Reorientation of human reality is possible through breaking down structures of sense which limit the perspective; thus, sense can be made by engaging with the incomprehensible rather than attempting to force totalities beyond full human comprehension into limited conceptualizations.

Rather than sit comfortably inside of the known, the poet aims to make us consider how we orient our lives in relation to the unknowable. Renewing our sense of being in reality makes it clear just how perspective into reality eliminates the need to escape the limits of temporality in the first place. Revelations can come from turning and searching deeper within the lived reality and not from shedding it, but from trimming off the entangling, suppressive vines of limited perspectives. As A. David Moody puts it, “The poet must place himself simultaneously within and above his experience; most hold together, in the double vision of his irony, the unreconcilable points of view.”<sup>12</sup>

While Eliot pursued a more complete view of experienced reality, he also employed a art of cosmic detachment to his writing. This arose from a significant influence on Eliot, symbolist poet Jules Laforgue. Rather than seeking the Ideal to escape the ordinary world, Laforgue uses this sense of the infinite to “sharpen awareness of the props and pretences, the habits and vanities which pass there for life.”<sup>13</sup> Timelessness beyond temporal reality should not be conceived as an

---

<sup>12</sup>A. David Moody, *Thomas Stearns Eliot, Poet*, 19.

<sup>13</sup>Moody, *TS Eliot, Poet*, 19.

ideal state to reach through transcendence. Rather, infinitude in all of its incomprehensibility should reorient one's perspective of existence as framed by absolute unknowability just beyond our frail, temporary, and limited human structures.

Eliot analyzes the predicament of the human existence in a finite reality in a vaster field of eternity, which is incomprehensible, but which could reframe our perception of our own lived time in comparison. Observation of the world stands at the core of his poems, not an ungrounded, overly-intellectualized set of empirical structures. Eliot idolizes a vision unclouded "by education or opinion or sentiment"<sup>14</sup> in his work which opens it more clearly to readers. When reading his *Quartets*, one is not fully and singularly within the viewpoint of a single angle, but experiencing a shifting assemblance of varied voices. Eliot takes an extremely logical and detailed approach to re-understanding our conception of existing within finite time that, in combination with Rilke's intimate, emotional poetry, gives a more precise layout of the human predicament in time.

The *Quartets*, though logical, are not detached into objectivity. They derive from Eliot's own memory and own connection to the world rather than attempting to act as a "detached eye and mind."<sup>15</sup> There is a combination of deep involvement with the elements of his own world, train routes and houses, manors and fields, with fascination of the point of view of the world from the infinite.

What this might alert us to in our lived reality is different for each poet. Rilke finds it most necessary and moving to reframe our conception of human existence in comparison to the space of the divine. Since we exist in space differently than anything divine above us or purely

---

<sup>14</sup> Moody, *TS Eliot, Poet*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Moody, *TS Eliot, Poet* 25.

material beside us, Rilke sees the capacity for death and continuation in memory as completely unique to humans. Eliot uses death as an indicator of the presence of a vast pattern of time which we are enveloped within, one which spans from the individual existence to the inconceivable space of infinitude. A renewed view of space might shift our understanding of what it means to be in time (as temporal creatures) and be in space (as material creatures). Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and Eliot's *Four Quartets* aim essentially to open up our inhabitation of the world to point to the false limitations we impose on reality and the necessity of rejecting them.

## ***The Duino Elegies***

---

### **Introduction to Rilke's Poetic Works:**

Though the strength and lucidity of Rilke's poetic works evolve greatly over his life, his poetic and existential concerns can be traced stemmed to a core source of interest in unifying our existence with that which we separate into otherness.

Earlier works test the reaches of poetic perspective of the world and experiment with the reaches of representation in poetry. His *Book of Images*, for example, attempts to recreate the act of seeing within language with specific orientation towards "things in themselves."<sup>16</sup> This exploration with what vision allows entry into was inspired by his close friendship with French sculptor August Rodin, whose works motivated his reconsideration of the place of senses within art. Pfau writes that "What Rodin imparted to Rilke was, above all, this possibility of the phenomenon's aesthetic salvation, of rescuing the thing—not by transcending its embodied, visible particularity but, on the contrary, attending to it with the utmost insistence."<sup>17</sup> In his practice of poetically engaging with the world, Rilke learned of the power and necessity of attending to its quality of being there in the world. He perceives this attention to the particularity of material existence as a way of salvation, as if his poetic endeavors might heal the world around him which he sees as damaged by distancing of self from physical, embodied reality.

This mode of thinking led Rilke to some of his most widespread and revolutionary works, the *Dinggedichte* or 'Thing Poems.' These featured continued intense focus on the material

---

<sup>16</sup>Lowell A. Bangerter, from *Critical Survey of Poetry*, 893.

<sup>17</sup> Pfau, *Incomprehensible Certainty*, 673.



presence of Things that showed a prioritization of prioritizes the physical reality of a thing over its symbolification. In the *Dinggedichte*, Rilke pays attention to the phenomenal world without aiming to look beyond it, instead attuning his perception to sensing the *presence* of the thing as there without needing redemption through aesthetic or abstract conception. Though he works within language, Rilke is intent on reuniting with the world through the power of the word in an attempt to close the gap that has arose between object and perceiver in over-intellectualization.

Rilke's developing style of poetic entry into the world attempts to engage with our lived, sensed reality before logical abstractions pull us too far away. Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out that as perceivers open towards the phenomenal world, "[our vision] must use words not according to their pre-established signification, but in order to state this prelogical bond. It must plunge into the world instead of surveying it."<sup>18</sup> Use of words to plunge into the world pinpoints the distinction between Rilke's use of language as entry and the more empirical, close-minded use of words as a removed tool for objective surveillance. A poetic mode of seeing which is more inclusive of the object of sight has the potential to plunge us into the world, which might free us from the damaging mechanical structures perpetuated by continued alienation of our selves from the world we are embodied within.

The heavy, depressive, untethered detachment that Rilke must struggle against in his attempt to reunite with the world around him with is made exceptionally clear in his first and only novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. The book is heavily inspired by Rilke's own experience living in Paris, where he suffered a period of deep depression that took a deep mental toll on him. Malte Laurids Brigge, who views himself as severely detached from all social

---

<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty 1968, from Pfau pg 675.

relationships as well as humanity itself, is an outcast of the most extreme degree while still living within society; his senses of the world become distorted and painful as he spirals further away from any attachment to the world around him. Homelessness in the world is the center of the novel, something which Malte cannot overcome by attention to the world around him. This reveals Rilke's fear of the impossibility of healing one's relation to the world, of recovering a sense of belonging which feels impossible at the depths of despair.

For though the existence in the world is extraordinary, it is also full of strangeness and terror. Reunification with a world which also contains despair, ruin, and death is not a simple task. Humans belong to a material world which is unbearably temporary. Everywhere are the rotting carcasses of buildings that were once homes, every home eventually becoming a thing that only exists in memory with no physical trace. Lives slip by unstoppably into oblivion. Humans are surrounded by this fate evidenced in every sensation and experience. How can we live when our own incompleteness faces us in every moment? How can we feel whole when permanence is impossible? Bodies turn into corpses and then into nothing. We live unstoppably in death.

Malte, like Rilke, sees himself as an outside observer of a world he has no concrete place within. Malte is a vessel for painful insights and a receiver for all the agonies of being in the world, a figure who Rilke hoped might, through mirroring his own agonies to the reader, aid in reaching some consolation or realization themselves. Later in life, Rilke notes the *Notebooks* as a work which have a deeply intimate concern with the impossibility of life within the despair of incomprehensibility— for to Rilke, to be constantly full of questions and to turn up unfulfilled in every inquiry means that incomprehensibility lingers at the root of existence itself. Existence

itself seems unreal when we cannot *know* it: “how is it possible to live when after all the elements of this life are utterly incomprehensible to us?”, Rilke asks in a letter. “If we are continually inadequate in love, uncertain in decision and impotent in the face of death, how is it possible to exist?”<sup>19</sup>

There is no resolve in the *Notebooks* on these questions that drove it. The *Duino Elegies*, though, are Rilke’s ultimate answer to the incomprehensibility of life he senses in the *Notebooks*. As one of Rilke’s final works before his death in 1926, they are a culmination of the questions Rilke had been approaching throughout his poetic career which refine every mode of questioning he had previously employed. The *Elegies* delve into the material nature of material things around him and questioning the nature of human relationships. But most importantly, Rilke redefines his understanding of life and death itself through an exploration of the finite, earthly space we inhabit. Through this, Rilke, though starting from the same postulates” as the *Notebooks*, finds that “life becomes possible again.”<sup>20</sup>

Life is finally made possible because the *Elegies* examine the material world without originating concern in terror at materiality’s enmeshment with death. On his project as a poet, Rilke writes in one of his later letters that:

In the universal turbidity and bewilderment of human affairs... I still see one task set clearly detached before me, it is this: to confirm confidence toward death out of the deepest delights and glories of life: to make death, who never was a stranger, more distinct and palpable again as the silent knowing participant in everything alive...<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup>Rilke, *Letters of RMR*, 146.

<sup>20</sup> Rilke, *Letters of RMR*, 372.

<sup>21</sup> Rilke, *Letters of RMR*, 188.

Reconceiving death is the key to Rilke's lifelong attempt to reunify with the world. He finds that death, which is so often conceived of as a force acting from outside of our lives, cannot be perceived as a stranger if we are ever to truly understand the nature of our human existence in the world. Plunging into the world completely means reconceiving the limits we impose on life in our human conceptions of its limits. In fear of unfamiliarity, we alienate death from us, make it a stranger, and thus imbue our existence with the contradiction of living over and against death, its opposite. Eliminating this false binary and accepting the presence of the unknowable as intimately within our lives is necessary if we are to face the world with true openness.

Rilke's *Elegies* begin their investigation into the nature of death by continuously turning attention towards what appears as silence lingering lingering after death. In the absence following death, we come into contact with the void of nonbeing that we cannot possibly understand, nor can the poet hope to make directly sayable. But Rilke avoids falling into the trap of oversimplification of reality that he sees as rampant in society around him, especially, as he references in his letters, within organized religion that makes human spiritual existence too cleanly divided between physical existence and spiritual ascension. Though his poems are elegies, they do not despair over death; rather, they praise death as what makes us uniquely human and as a part of our existence that connects us to the space of infinitude.

Human contradiction drives the incomprehensibility of existence. We are capable of sensing our limitations within temporality, that our concepts of time make reality comprehensible but are not total, but cannot understand reality beyond this limitation. We can sense what we lack by the borders and edges we can reach within what we possess, but we cannot exist outside of this space. This plagued the *Notebooks*, which did not find a way outside of existential despair.

But in the *Elegies*, Rilke makes the move to reframe our understanding of reality within the bounds of human existence. Rilke cannot make infinitude comprehensible, but he can reorient the way we perceive finitude and death and open our understanding up to a truer sense of reality. The route to this understanding of self in the world is in attention towards death: an ultimate unknowable which connects us to the void.

### **The Void of God:**

The first elegy begins with the line: “For who, if I cried out, would ever hear me among the angels / and archangels?”<sup>22</sup> Immediately, readers are led into the poems with an outcry at the pain of being left to wail into the wind, unheard by those whose existences are far beyond our own, our voices directionless and fading into the unresponsive air. Rilke endeavors to use his place as a poet to receive and transmit the pain he feels around himself from this starting point of receiving of what it means to be finite and thus in vast isolation from the space of God.

It is necessary to clarify the reason for Rilke’s addresses towards the angelic without mention of God before delving deeper into the *Elegies*. In his *Elegies*, Rilke is attempting to reclaim a relationship to reality that he feels is lost in an unjust and misguided understanding of human existence that arises from within human social structures— especially, as he refers to repeatedly in his letters, organized Christianity. Many of his works throughout his lifetime do feature reference to God, but the God he puts forward is never strictly a Christian God; rather, Rilke leaves the idea of God as an open space, resembling a force of creation rather than a singular entity.

---

<sup>22</sup>Rilke, Rainer Maria, *Duino Elegies*, Trans. Alfred Corn, 5

With the church being no adequate compass in orienting oneself towards God, an openness, especially an openness discovered through artistic engagement with the world, is something which Rilke finds as far more fruitful guide into the infinite. This openness allows one to discover what resides outside of the originations and relations preordained in Christian faith. In a letter to a friend in February of 1923, after the completion of the *Duino Elegies*, Rilke describes his changed relationship to God as compared to his earlier years as a poet:

There is an indescribable discretion between us, and where once nearness was and penetration, there stretch new distances, as in the atom, which the new science also conceives as a universe in the small. The comprehensible escapes us, is transformed, instead of possession one learns relation, and there arises a namelessness that must begin again with God in order to be complete and without evasion. The experience of feeling recedes behind an endless longing for all that can be felt . . . **attributes are taken away from God, the no longer expressible, fall back to creation, to love and death...**<sup>23</sup>

Paradoxically, Rilke conceives of a closeness to God that is only comes through our extreme distance from Him. In earlier years as a poet, Rilke felt close to God as though he were an intimate part of a himself. And so Rilke “lived a long time in the anteroom of his name, on my knees,”<sup>24</sup> worshiping the figure of God he felt in the closeness of possession of His name. But to be in *possession* of a concept of God then gives us a feeling of knowing that infinite space, rather than figuring ourselves in relation to it as we should if we are to truly orient ourselves in relation to the infinite.

---

<sup>23</sup> Rilke, *Letters of RMR*, 324. Emphasis mine.

<sup>24</sup> Rilke, *Letters of RMR*, 324.

In realizing the true incomprehensible vastness of human distance from God, Rilke transforms the space of the human as surrounded by void, even entire universes of distance at the scale of the atom. This extreme space does not imply emptiness as the name of the ‘void’ might incite—rather, the concept indicates a space of total unknowing. Being incapable of penetrating the void with a sense of knowing forces one to turn towards *relation* instead of possession, relation which replaces “the experience of feeling” with “an endless longing for all that can be felt.”<sup>25</sup> Infinitizing the abyss between ourselves and God allows us to feel longing for what we do not possess—and in rendering God inexpressible, we untangle ourselves from a straightforward relation to creation, love, and death. Closeness to God makes the world too easy, too expressible, while distance allows for a truer orientation towards existence and all of its incomprehensibilities.

Thus, the void which we dread as a sign of separation and alienation is actually a space in which we might open ourselves to *all* of the vast incomprehensibilities of reality. Rilke does not attempt to comfort his readers with illustrations of the closeness of humans to the divine, for such a comfort would be untrue and incomplete. Instead, we are guided towards reframing our relation to the existence in a void.

Understanding of Rilke’s orientation towards God and space casts new light on the opening lines of the first *Elegy* where he cries out into the howling, directionless wind. In one of his letters, Rilke writes that “the abyss is granted between God and us, but this very abyss is full of the darkness of God, and where one experiences it, let him climb down and howl in it (that is more necessary than to cross over it).”<sup>26</sup> What appears to be an unbreachable, isolating space

---

<sup>25</sup>Rilke, *Letters of RMR*, 324.

<sup>26</sup>Rilke, *Letters of RMR*, 325.

between humanity and God is really the presence of a void which exceeds our understanding. Instead of attempting to cross that void, to make the leap of faith and cross over into the space of God, Rilke entreats man to “climb down and howl in it”– that is, to enter that in-between when it becomes apparent to us rather than seeking to move beyond it or retreat from it. The desperate isolation which Rilke felt at the beginning of the *Elegies* was also the moment where he faced the incomprehensibility of the abyss and did not turn away, but turned back towards the world with knowledge of the void.

And so Rilke continues his *Elegy* in light of the void between ourselves and the angels, with an intent to return to the *world* in order to more clearly understand our existence, a world renewed in its relation to the void of the divine.

Whom *can* we turn to  
 in our need? Not Angels, not humans,  
 And the sly animals see at once  
 How little at home we are  
 in the interpreted world. That leaves us  
 some tree on a slope, to which our eyes returned...<sup>27</sup>

Angels are not able to answer our needs, for they cannot understand our place in a finite world containing death. Humans do not have any clarity, either, in their insecurity within interpretation. But the world itself is imbued with death and turning with openness towards it will therefore allow us to heal our relation to finitude. Rilke entreats us to “listen to the wind’s breathing, / the unbroken news that takes shape out of silence. / It’s rustling toward you now from all the

---

<sup>27</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. Edward Snow, 283.



youthful dead.”<sup>28</sup> The wind is the voice which emerges from the void, but, as we have revealed, the void is not barren. Thus, attention towards the wind, towards the space of the void as it is revealed on earth, connects us to the dead and all that exists intangibly around us.

Our death is always beside us, our nonexistence imminent throughout our entire existence; but dividing all that is incomprehensible away from us is only reducing existence into something more comfortably conceivable. Recognizing that absolute void is intertwined with every atom of our existence allows us to see that the incomprehensible, which we fear and label away into false comfort and simplicity, is inseparable from our lives. Rather than keep ourselves safe in enclosed definitions and false comforts, then, we must turn *in* to the void, even though it exceeds our understanding. It is more necessary to climb *down* into the void than to leap across it. The chore of finite existence is not to derive new comforting relations through possession but to clarify our existence in *relation* to all that we do not know. Existence without elimination— this is the perspective we must try to achieve if we are to reach a truer understanding of what it means to exist in all the tumult of death. Eradicating the reductive simplification of the human relation to death and divinity makes a new understanding of finite existence as itself uniquely divine clearer.

---

<sup>28</sup>Rilke, *DE*, trans. Snow, 285.

### The Angelic:

O stand in wonder, Angel, for it was *us*,  
*us*, O great one, tell the others of the things we shaped:  
 my breath lacks power for that praise. So then  
 we *haven't* failed these generous spaces—, these spaces  
 that are *ours*.<sup>29</sup>

In this address to the angelic from the Seventh Elegy, Rilke demands their wonder at the beauty of human creation, reversing the relationship of human reverence towards the grandeur of the divine. This is a stark shift from his pleading outcry in the beginning of the series. In his full embrace of his inhabitation of the earth, Rilke begins to find new, revelatory awe awakened by the enormity of our accomplishments even within the briefness of our individual lives. The scale of human history as a whole reveals incomprehensible magnificence in every part of life, from the towering monuments of human strength to the quiet endurance of lovers. Art, music, destruction and reconstruction— these are all only in the powers of the human realm, all features of existence which arise from having our own ends within us. Despite its briefness, our lives are enriched beyond comprehension by mere virtue of being finite.

The Ninth Elegy continues to describe the contrast between the eternal realm and the time-bound worldly existence. “Among the stars,” Rilke finds, “the unsayable *reigns*.” But *here*, we have words for every Thing, words which have an intensity in that the saying of the Thing give it a quality of being known: “each single thing should know ecstasy.”<sup>30</sup> “*Here* is the time for the sayable, / *here* is its home.” Speech exists on earth alone. Speech arises from death, from the

---

<sup>29</sup>Rilke, *DE*, trans. Snow, 325

<sup>30</sup> Rilke, *DE*, trans. Snow, 335

constant falling away of those we live with, the disintegration of the world as known at every point in time. Words themselves are fleeting, quickly evaporating into time as soon as they are uttered; but the *speaking* of words means that they do not reside solely in their temporal existence of being spoken. Their being named, being said, continues to reverberate in meaning, in reabsorption into the world. In speech there is continuity and continued presence of the thing; recall the nature of reverberations in song, the ongoing presence of a thing in its being carried on in song.

Without any sense of a here and now, the Angel cannot understand the elegies that Rilke directs towards it. Its occupance of the void of infinitude means that it is without death but also without the vision of existence that death allows. Without this world, the Angel has no understanding of poetry or human speech, for these are creations which arise from our making sense of existence in a temporal world. Though man cannot comprehend of the vastness of divine infinitude, the angelic is unable to breach the world of man.

... *life* here compels us, and because everything here  
seems to need us, all this fleetingness  
that strangely entreats us. Us, the *most* fleeting...

... But to have been  
*once*, even though only once:  
this having been *earthly* seems lasting, beyond repeal.<sup>31</sup>

Here again we see the splendor of belonging to the Earth. We, because we are only once, have an existence that is completely unique within its time and particularity of creation, never to exist

---

<sup>31</sup>Rilke, *DE*, trans. Snow, 333.

again. The singularity of our existence cannot be revoked. We are not homeless in the void of infinitude because of our impermanence; rather, our brief occupation of material form gives us a completely unique view of being only *once*. Once we consider our existence on Earth with the gravity it deserves, as not a fault of our materiality but a gift, we might be awakened to the significance of our belonging to it.

Rilke entreats his readers to “Praise the world to the Angel, not what’s unsayable.”<sup>32</sup>

Humans are mere “novices” to the grandeur of the cosmos; our language is not one which suits speech of the cosmos— “You can’t impress *him* with loft emotions,” Rilke insists, because what is unsayable to us is all he knows. But of *things*, of human creations, of feelings and states of being, of music and death, of all things transient— *this* is astounding to the Angel. Speaking of things, he says that “these things / that live on departure know that you praise them; transient, / they look to us, the *most* transient, to save them.”<sup>33</sup> Our transience in time is also where our incredible value to existence begins, for we are *most* transient among our world of things. The human world of the sayable is unique to us alone, in all of the universe.

---

<sup>32</sup>Rilke, *DE*, trans. Snow, 335.

<sup>33</sup>Rilke, *DE*, trans. Snow, 335.

## The Space of Death:

In comparison to the divine beings he addresses, death belongs to material, temporal beings alone, and human death is among material things unique. As represented in an earlier work, the *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, every human has “your death *inside* you as a fruit has its core.”<sup>34</sup> Death, to Rilke, is within life and exists as an intimate part of our selves. Death is not a mere occurrence, not a force we fall victim to, and certainly not a temporally contained moment. Death grows with you, inside of you, ever a part of you and entirely your own.

Rilke sees the Elegies as songs of praise towards life and death both. Celebration of one without the other is a limitation on one’s view of existence which shuts all possibility of contacting the infinite. Neither realm is divided to Rilke; both circulate through the other, an endless flow between spheres which is wrongly and consequentially divided by humans. Limitation of the view of death and life means a limitation of the view of the self in time: “We of the here and now are not for a moment hedged in the time-world, nor confined within it; we are incessantly flowing over and over to those who preceded us, to our origins and to those who seemingly come after us.”<sup>35</sup> The *Elegies* embed themselves into the quality of the here and now and within this space point attention towards the qualities of incomprehensibility, the empty space, within the seemingly limited space. Degrading the earthly by calling its temporality limiting and lowly ignores the deep and incredible relationship between human beings and the earth they exist on. After all, Rilke sees concentration on Nature and the space of human life as the route to more clearly recognize the Godliness of the void around us.

---

<sup>34</sup>Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, 10.

<sup>35</sup>Rilke, *Letters of RMR*, 374.

Part of Rilke's task, as he sees it, is to "gently dispel / the air of injustice that sometimes / hinders a little their spirits' pure movements."<sup>36</sup> This air of injustice he refers to is the outrage with which we often respond to death— that it has 'taken' lives far too soon, that this infliction of death was undeserved. Treatment of death as a punishment to the living only disrupts the movement of the dead. As Rilke understands, death is no actor distinct from life. The two states are only so separate in the human imagination. The dead only "outgrow" life.

As he stands before tombs of long-dead, their names carved in stone as if to prolong their presence on Earth beyond their body, Rilke considers death as only a strangeness, a departure from ordinary and customary ways of being "only recently acquired."<sup>37</sup> These human reactions such as clutching one another in "relentlessly anxious hands," say, or attempting at every moment to flee the permanence of our end, are all responses to the swift imminence of death. But death lets all of this go. Even our own name— we must "let it drop like a broken toy" as we move unstoppably into the void. It is strange, this change in being, and strange again "to see all that was once interlocked fly apart / and scatter through space."<sup>38</sup> In reaction to this strangeness, we separate ourselves completely from the state of death in reaction to its incomprehensibility, for it is a total empty space that we cannot imagine occupying from the perspective of being within our carefully interlocked life.

But "The living all make the same / mistake: they draw too sharp a distinction,"<sup>39</sup> Rilke finds. Although death appears as an opposite to life, this is only a reaction to its total unfamiliarity as well as its lack of visibility which humans find so comforting in orienting life.

---

<sup>36</sup>Rilke, *DE*, trans. Snow, 287.

<sup>37</sup>Rilke, *DE*, Trans. Corn, 9.

<sup>38</sup>Rilke, *DE*, Trans. Corn, 9.

<sup>39</sup>Rilke, *DE*, Trans. Corn, 9.

Death is a becoming one with space, a space which humans fear for its invisibility, but a space which Rilke sees as unjustly separated from our lives.

Rilke ends the first Elegy with the question:

Is it a tale told in vain, that myth of lament for Linos,  
 in which a daring first music pierced the shell of numbness;  
 stunned Space, which an almost divine youth  
 had suddenly left forever; then, in that void, vibrations—  
 which for us now are rapture and solace and help.<sup>40</sup>

There is a difference between outcry of injustice and a *lament*. The song pierces numbness— it opens us from the shell of unfeelingness, a music which stuns Space— it fills “that void” with vibrations. This is another call back to the idea of howling into the void, an act which, in Rilke’s understanding, is the only way to become truly close to the void of God.

The myth of Linos has a wide variance in content of the story. Some scholars cite stories “in which the void left by Linos’s death was so sudden and severe that its trembling amazement was called music,”<sup>41</sup> placing the origin of music as arising from void in a literal sense. Other scholars reference the lament for Linos which spoke of the power of music in reviving those who had been left utterly numb by the death of Linos. Whatever the specificities of the myth, its significance is its description of the origin of music as a power arising from the human which continues to emanate throughout the human realm. Music, in every case of this myth, arises from grief and the shock of sudden absence or void; and in existing, its continual resonance soothes.

---

<sup>40</sup> Rilke, *DE*, Trans. Snow, 289.

<sup>41</sup> Rilke, *DE*, trans. Snow, 289.

We must not focus on the instance of death as we see it and look instead at the space it leaves behind and how it is transformed.

“For we, wherever we feel, diffuse, oh, we breathe  
ourselves out and away; ember to glowing ember  
We release a fading scent of smoke.”<sup>42</sup>

The first reference to ‘diffusion’ of human beings, which implies a constant seeping into space throughout life rather than return to space and earth only in death. The world around us becomes imbued with ourselves, but at the same time, we are constantly ‘vanishing.’ For “Though someone might say: / Yes, you’re seeping into my bloodstream, this room, this spring / is filling up with you... Does it matter?”<sup>43</sup> We cannot be *held on to*, even though our echoes continue to resound as we disappear. There is still an almost insurmountable tragedy to this diffusion, for we dissolve into the world, yes, but our completeness can never fully resemble ourselves again. “Does the space we dissolve / into then taste of us?”<sup>44</sup>

This diffusion is contrasted with the weight of existence and the firmness of our inhabitants. We cannot let the world go by like an exchange of breath just because we know it all returns to breath eventually.

So we cling to one another. Lovers  
touch each other so ardently because the caress  
holds fast: no place your hand rests on, tender souls,  
ever vanishes; because under it you sense a pure  
Continuing. You exchange the promise of eternity almost

---

<sup>42</sup>Rilke, *DE*, Trans. Corn, 15.

<sup>43</sup>Rilke, *DE*, Trans. Corn, 15.

<sup>44</sup>Rilke, *DE*, Trans. Corn, 17.



In your embrace alone”<sup>45</sup>

Embracing one another with ardent love holds us fast, for an instant, in the feeling of another being existing so steadfastly in the instability of existence. We cling to what is human in a way that can only be acted by the human: with a desperation for continuance.

Our embrace is weighted with the knowledge of death, so though the touch of lovers is one respite from diffusion in the solidity of tactile contact, it is also an astonishing show of the force of the finite, the incomprehensible beauty that emerges from finitude. The eternal is felt in breath, wind, a space that cannot be reached but can be distantly sensed in the space around us— but humanity, unlike divinity, is briefly material. In this, love also represents a purely human history in the cosmos. “When we love, a primordial sap / rises into our limbs.”<sup>46</sup> In our love, Rilke finds, there is also our entire human history “strewn like rubble from a mountain range / at our deepest foundation.”<sup>47</sup>

In another consideration of human love as an escape or reprieve from the suffering of worldly isolation, Rilke compares lovers’ caresses to the human gestures carved in statues. Art is so often considered a more permanent residence for human spirit and emotion, carrying on the love once felt in the world through representation— but Rilke observes that these statues are distinct from the form of living lovers. Without the desperation and longing weighting the touch of the lovers who hold each other fast in rapid movements of the world, feeling comforting continuance in tactile presence of another’s body in the “pure / continuing”<sup>48</sup> of contact rather than dwindling time in the empty space around oneself, the carvings seem “composed of a

---

<sup>45</sup> Rilke, *DE*, Trans. Corn, 19.

<sup>46</sup> Rilke, *DE*, Trans. Corn, 27.

<sup>47</sup> Rilke, *DE*, Trans. Corn, 27.

<sup>48</sup> Rilke, *DE*, Trans. Corn, 19.

material / different from ours.”<sup>49</sup> Human gestures “laid... so lightly” make the gestures unrecognizable, their touch without desperation of beings aware of their own brief finitude. Rilke’s observation of the lightness of human gestures in Athenian carvings (grave markers, no less) and the unfamiliarity of this resting without pressure indicates the strength with which we cling to the world around us in our time on earth. Their touch does not convey desperation at grasping their world, their love, their material being for just a moment longer. The grave marker carvings are thus insufficient tributes to the dead they stand over, their portraits of life lacking the essential element awareness of that contact within the surroundings of emptiness, that weight of being while each breath brings one closer to loss.

Finitude makes one’s contact take on more weight. One whose existence is filled with such pressure of eventual death that every touch is weighted with the knowledge that what is grasped here will so soon depart. Existing in the world is bearing witness to all that passes by and knowing that all that is felt and seen will eventually be gone, dissolved into nothingness: a hand that once rested on the shoulder that will never again be felt, a voice once so clear that is now full of silence. Things that are *gone* are not negative; they exist *in absence—felt* in their not-being-there. But it is in this space of absence that Openness exists. The reverberations of being are carried in the spaces full of absence, humming, filled with the echos of being. Humans diffuse into space, reverberate like a song not tangible but still felt... .. So song arises from response to the void of absence, the ‘true’ death uninhibited by perception of injustice or numbness.

---

<sup>49</sup>Rilke, *DE*, Trans. Corn, 19.

And so, when the wind sweeps by and pulls at our faces, we are not feeling the outcry of the world at the emptiness of the air, of nonbeing. The air is full of reverberations of all that has been. The void is full of God—and it is full of *us*, too. We continue to reverberate beyond our material existence. Death is not a thief of life but a part of our most intimate inner selves. Attention towards the void and the space that death leaves behind shifts us out of our ignorant and short-sighted conception of being in time. And as the dead pass on into a realm which cannot echo back to us, Rilke considers the last image they might direct our attention towards:

...Suppose the endlessly dead were to waken an image in us:

they might point to the catkins hanging  
from the empty hazel trees, or direct us to the rain  
spattering black earth in early Spring.

And we, who always think of happiness

*rising*, would feel the emotion

that almost confounds us

when a happy thing *falls*.<sup>50</sup>

With the quiet guidance that the dead give us, we can see, with some surprise, that *descent* is not the punishment we imagine it to be. Ascension is not the ultimate reward at the end of our existence, for we do not exist in a space which is contained to such simple directions. We only conceive of ascension as the ultimate reward because of our intent grasp on rising upwards into the space of divinity— but, with renewed attention towards our relation to the divine, such a warped conception of rising as beautiful and falling as despairing is challenged. Death and

---

<sup>50</sup>Rilke, *DE*, Trans. Snow, 345.

disintegration is a return, likened to the rain enriching the soil of the earth. Even if we conceive death as a fall, falling is not tragic or wretched— it is only a change in being which we cannot understand.

In Rilke's attempt to renew our understanding of being in the world, he untangles existence from the limiting conceptions we impose upon it. We are not unfortunate creatures fated to descent into nothingness in death. Rather, death is a reunion with a timeless, immaterial space we cannot conceive from our material forms— but its inconceivability is not a reason to despair. When we cross the threshold of death into an other way of being, we carry with us the privilege of once having lived, having spoken of the world, having existed temporarily among other temporary beings and experienced the singularity of an existence which is *once*. The infinite is not a higher state by mere virtue of being beyond us in timelessness— despite its pains, being within time, too, is a privileged existence.

## ***The Four Quartets***

---

*“The contradictions the mind comes up against—these are the only realities: they are the criterion of the real. There is no contradiction in what is imaginary.”<sup>51</sup> - Simone Weil*

Contradiction, Weil finds, is necessary to find our way back to reality. What is most real does not belong to the easy and comfortable structures of human. As a way to detangle the falsifying empirical structures of reality which give illusory comfort among what should confront us, we must challenge ourselves with the contradictions of the world *without* withdrawing into mental comforts. Imagination, as it arises from within us, is likewise limited to the contours of our minds. Contradictions can only be met in openness to the *real*, as closely as we can come to it. It is only through this that we might detangle ourselves from the reality that is constricted from human definition of the world around us, from intellectual abstractions disconnected from what might be found in a full engagement with the lived world.

A contradicting intellectual belief of Eliot’s time was that the most real reality can only be reached through the most precise language. This implies that only logical deductions are capable of uncovering or approaching truth and that the ungrounded, unsymbolizable abstractions in non-empirical philosophy is unfit to discover and convey the real. This new realism, according to April Pierce,

“holds that language “mirrors” or “represents” facts in the world, and that one understands reality better through more literal languages. Vagueness, ambiguity, and

---

<sup>51</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 98

indefiniteness were undesirable aspects of language, leading to muddled, unscientific thinking.”<sup>52</sup>

Eliot vehemently rejected the overly empirical pursuits of the new realism. He wrote in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that “it is not desirable to confine knowledge to whatever can be put into a useful shape for examinations,”<sup>53</sup> thus renouncing the overly reductive model of pursuing exactness through attempting to eliminate the undesirable ‘unscientific’ modes of thought. Rather than leading to more empirical truths about reality, this interaction with reality only makes the realm more convenient for human models of scientific sense. Eradicating the ‘ambiguity’ and ‘indefiniteness’ of language would not make what is being said more true—only more constrained by the brief phases of human idea of what is most sensical.

Thus, one of the underlying qualities of Eliot’s poetic entry into reality which I will focus on is his attunement towards what is left outside of the limited parameters of what is considered knowable. Turning towards the indefinite does not muddle our understanding of reality; rather, observation of the limits of our empirical systems can orient us towards a less constricted way of knowing the world. Eliot’s *Quartets* emphasizes the complexity of the relationship of humanity to time, complicating one of the most basic pretenses that humans engage with in our experience of the world: that we reside in a quickly-moving present with the past stretching behind us and the future before us. I find that time itself is constructed into falsifying, limiting structures which not only hinder the fullness of our vision of our own existence, but also stunt the capacity to reckon with what is outside of our comprehension.

---

<sup>52</sup>April Pierce, “T.S. Eliot, Phenomenologist, 116

<sup>53</sup>Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

Rather than mystify reality into unnecessary abstractions, which realism might presume of poetry, Eliot uses the constructive capacities of poetry to reenter the world which exposes the in-between spaces of our logical structures and the truly vast and incomprehensible patterns surrounding our existence. Poets, as well as artists in general, have the ability to exploit the confusion of indeterminate understanding that their audiences reside in before being able to make sense of any perceived meaning. The ambiguity and indefiniteness of art actually has the additional advantage of stripping audiences of the comfort of clear context and sense. Preservation and exploitation of the moments of confusion between experience and knowing, that floating, indefinite space before reality grounds itself in reason, becomes the space of occupation of art which aims to uproot and question what we call the real. Such is the nature of Eliot's *Quartets*.

Understanding which is confined to the limits of prejudgement only allows the perception of a world which already fits into its own reflective lens. What is familiar repeats itself in undisturbed language. If speaking from comfortable existence alongside the world, one cannot say anything new, for it only emerges from the structure of place which has already been defined and deemed understandable. What is visible remains visible and what is invisible remains invisible.

With contradiction, interruption, and discomfort, we might disturb the image of the real enough to see through the ripples a picture become unfamiliar, a world sensed outside of what it is 'known' to be. Between the ripples a new picture emerges.

Redefining individual sense of being within reality is a core concern of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Both poets direct their attention towards the incomprehensible

as much as it appears in our everyday, experienced reality and aim to untangle our reductive structures of understanding from our lives. Rilke sees the space of death and finitude as deeply complex and containing an unknowability that is left outside of formulaic structures of life and death. Reinvigorating our perspective of death leads to a necessary complication of our conception of existence. From this understanding, he posits death as a companion which is always intertwined with our lives, meaning that there is an incomprehensible aspect of our own lived existence that resides with us through all time.

Eliot also rejects the straightforward determinations we have imposed on existence with such binary structures as life and death. His poetry asserts the necessity of an leaving behind our linear conception of beginning and ending that dominate our understanding of existing towards death. In a fuller, more multiplicitous view, our existence more closely resembles a vast pattern extending from our individual lives into cosmic incomprehensibility. In this way, then, we can trace the residue of this pattern in the everyday and begin to feel the true intricacy of existence within time.

Because Eliot uses the figure of a *pattern* to disturb our linear understanding of reality, I would like to propose a geometrical analogy that clarifies the intricacies of his visualization as I see them. My conception of Eliot's cosmic pattern which undoes the sharp borders between life and death, and finitude and infinitude, is a pattern resembles a fractal. What makes fractal patterns distinct is that their symmetry and structure at any minuscule part is identical to the whole of itself on a larger scale. Fractals can be described as an infinite structure whose "every piece holds the key to the whole structure."<sup>54</sup> This comparison is not an attempt to reduce Eliot's

---

<sup>54</sup> B.B. Mandelbrot, "Fractal geometry: what is it, and what does it do?"



idea of an inconceivably vast pattern into an empirical structure, only to clarify the relationship he poses between the minute spaces of individual human lives and the infinite timelessness extending beyond them.

In fact, fractal geometry is distinct from the extreme linearity of Euclidean geometric orders, whose structures are limited bound strictly to human mathematical systems. Their geometric patterns made visible structures of mathematic problems which could not be solved within known mathematic systems and revealed definite geometry on an infinite scale-- a previously unimaginable discovery only made possible with the more advanced visualization capacities of computers. Fractals made it possible to see a pattern where there was once only white noise. Reaching into the senselessness and making visual a complexity incalculable by the human hand, fractal imaging reveals the short bounds of sensical structures which deem that which lies outside of it nonsensical. Having also had to break free from the confining structures of empirical tradition, fractal geometry is more in line with schools of thought which challenge the limited structures of conceivable knowledge than reductive frameworks imposing absolute order even though they are an ordered geometrical pattern.<sup>55</sup>

Using fractal geometry as a reference point for Eliot's idea of the cosmic pattern is helpful in representing the nature of a pattern whose incomprehensible vastness as a whole is still accessible within the comprehensible human scale, beginning from individual experience. Traces of the cosmic pattern repeat infinitely across time, permeating through the most miniscule spaces

---

<sup>55</sup> In a time where much of the mathematical establishment favored symbolic processes over visual systems such as graphs, complex functions which resisted traditional analysis and were uncalculable within the mathematic parameters of the time, they were labeled "monsters" and largely ignored. Fractals changed the terms on which mathematicians and people in general *think* and thus engendered an entirely new way of visualizing and understanding the world. Interestingly, fractals are also geometric structures which are compatible with the nonlinear, irreducible shapes of nature.

of reality. Throughout the *Quartets*, Eliot will hone in on the patterns which occur through human history as a way of broadening our perspective outward towards the infinite. Even though the vastness of the cosmic pattern is irrepresentable within human means, the presence of an incomprehensible pattern can be approached by tracing microsmic resemblances as in the human space.

With a vision of a pattern stretching across time whose incomprehensible vastness might be glimpsed within smaller human structures, Eliot reframes human time into something intertwined with infinity beyond it. The boundaries delineated by humans sense are exposed as incomplete. Instead, Eliot attempts to make space for the vastness of the incomprehensible within our lived reality. In this pattern, human empirical structures of linear time do not falsify the vaster space of timelessness beyond the human; on the reverse side, the existence of infinitude beyond human time does not render human experience in time negligible or inconsequential. Neither infinitude nor finitude eradicate the other when both are part of a cosmic pattern.

Each of Eliot's *Quartets* are inspired by different locations which were significant to him. "Burnt Norton" is named for an old manor house he traveled through with a past lover, "East Coker" for Eliot's ancestral home which connects him to his heritage, "The Dry Salvages" for a group of rocks on the coast of Massachusetts where Eliot visited, and "Little Gidding" for a religious community Eliot visited as its historic site years before the poem was written. The earthly grounds for each poem is a driving force for its meaning and intention, for it unifies Eliot's temporal contemplations with the human world and his own lived experience. Each poem essentially arises from the landscape which prompted its contemplations. As *Quartets*, the poems

are all themselves harmonies of distinct lines of thinking and perspectives while the poems as well are a set of four. All quadrangulate a sense of reality which would not have been approachable from a single voice.

### **Multiplicious Existence: Burnt Norton**

Time present and time past  
 Are both perhaps present in time future,  
 And time future contained in time past.  
 If all time is eternally present  
 All time is unredeemable.

Within the first lines, of “Burnt Norton,” a possible interesting assertion against the nature of time as we, the reader, might understand it emerges. By considering whether “Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future,” Eliot evokes an image of time in which the past and present reside in the future, not just in themselves. This is not an unfamiliar image, as what has occurred or is occurring will have already occurred and be carried into the time that follows. But the reader is challenged by the companion line: “And time future contained in time past.” The existence of time future within time past interrupts the linear stream of time as it is ordered from past to present to future. Breaking this flow and complicating ordinary understanding, Eliot sets the reader on unfamiliar terrain where one of the most implicit features of existence in reality is made unclear. That is, that past proceeds into future and present stands between them, and that a clean, segmented division of temporal existence places us comfortably within a comprehensible world. When the reader is shaken loose in what could

normally be held as a comfortable understanding, Eliot's questioning of our automatic orientation within the world begins.

Time, for Eliot, is one of the structures of our reality that must be reevaluated if we are to come to a fuller understanding of our lives. Linear structures which orient human experience in a present bordered by past and future limit the full engagement and understanding of lived existence.

Eliot's representation of a nonlinear image of time in the *Four Quartets* is part of a culmination of philosophical advancements early in his poetic career. As a college student Eliot was influenced by the philosopher Henri Bergson, who rejected the mechanistic view of time as a spatially-structured set of juxtaposing states and strove instead to delineate the multiplicitous nature of existing within time. The *experience* of reality, for Bergson, is not properly represented among the conflicting schools of thought like rationalism, idealism, or empiricism.<sup>56</sup> Part of Bergson's endeavor was to draw attention to the erroneous application of scientific method to the experience of reality, the effect of which was to create a schism between ideas of existence and experience itself. Although Eliot later distanced himself from Bergsonian theory, Bergson's theorizations on the realm of experience as a necessary groundwork to any clear treatment of existence helped set Eliot on a path towards uniting lived experience with philosophical formulations.

This, in part, led to Eliot's own experimentation in the handling of experienced time and linear, schematized time. In the very first lines of "Burnt Norton," Eliot confronts our superficial notion of linear time, according to which we move forward in a series of distinct phases, a

---

<sup>56</sup> Leonard Lawlor and Valentine Moulard-Leonard, "Henri Bergson," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Winter 2022 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/bergson/>.

linearity that Bergson also criticizes as detrimentally spacial construction. Experience, for Eliot, is necessary to any philosophical examination with aims to clarify or examine the grounds of human existence.

Within the practice of poetry, it is possible to make this problem clear in a unique way through artistic engagement of a reader in an imaginative world. Eliot's *Quartets* combines narrative experience in a physical-poetic landscape (such as entering into a rose garden) with surreal abstractions that push the limits of what appears sensical to us. This alone makes readers question how we make sense of the world and what confinements our unquestioned assumptions might construct around us. Forcing the reader to reckon with the security of their assumptions about their world, self, or existence is not unique to poetry, of course, but the intimate imaginative landscape which poetry can operate within embroils these philosophical engagements in the context of worldly experience.

In the *Four Quartets*, Eliot sets each contemplation in the setting of a real, experienced landscape. He *does* intertwine space with time, but not in a spatially-oriented notion of time; rather, Eliot uses occupied space as the essential grounds on which to contemplate reality and work through limiting notions of temporal existence. "Burnt Norton" handles the nature of being within a body that experiences time and reality, beginning with establishing the human situation in time as eternally present at the center of all past, future, and possibility.

After illustrating an complicated perspective of time, Eliot adds that "If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable." Within the very first few lines comes the finality of time's irredeemability, a statement which is left undefined and uncertain within the context of the first lines. The concept of 'redeemability' is often defined by Eliot scholars as relating to the

nature of the past as impossible to recover or bring back, given its context in a poem which will go on to struggle with the irrecoverable world of possibility in the poem.<sup>57</sup> But theme of the possible redemption emerges in every *Quartet*, so this clarification in the context of “Burnt Norton” does not give a full picture of the concept of redeemability in the *Four Quartets* as a whole. I will return to this concept after it becomes more present in the progression of the *Quartets*.

Now traveling into the landscape of the poem, the reader is introduced to the grounds of the Burnt Norton itself, an abandoned manor-house left crippled and decrepit by fire. Eliot entreats the reader to follow him as he ventures into its grounds:

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...

Other echoes

Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?”<sup>58</sup>

With this, we open the door into the unknown: a world of echoes. Echoing words of the poet resound in the reader’s mind, as do the “other” echoes that inhabit the imaginative landscape we, the author and the reader, direct our attention towards in the opening of the door as we follow Eliot into the first physical landscape in the poetic world of the *Four Quartets*.

---

<sup>57</sup>Harry Blamires, *Word Unheard: A Guide Through Eliot’s Four Quartets*, 7.

<sup>58</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 13.

The manor has a special significance to Eliot. It isn't just an imaginative construction but a real place he once visited with Emily Hale, a woman he loved deeply and considered a future with, at the time of his walk. His current walk through the manor house now reverberates with thinly-tangible sensations of the possible world that Eliot does not and could never inhabit of his untouched future with Hale. The entirety of the poem is not derived from the particulars of this personal experience, but this memory was a point of inspiration which contributes a personal layer to his contemplations on the nature of possibility. In its present ruined state, the life the house once held and lives it could have held captive as tangible absences, ghosts lingering on the property just outside of sense-perception.

Where opening of the poem is difficult to follow in its dense philosophical implications, the physical landscape of "Burnt Norton" colludes to likewise keep the reader just outside of comfortable sensemaking. Eliot keeps the *physical* world as disorienting as his philosophical engagements. With rapid movements that resemble the traveling of sight over surroundings, the poem pushes the reader into a world melding imaginative abstractions with genuine uncertainty. As will occur throughout each of the *Four Quartets*, the reader is shoved from their perch as a spectator of theory unfolding before them and into an interactive sense-making landscape where they are kept in indefinite uncertainty. In Burnt Norton, this takes the shape of a landscape of possibility layered within the presently experienced..

As we travel into the garden, we encounter the ghosts of possibility that fill this space with echoes of nonbeing. The "invisible" move "without pressure" "over dead leaves," the bird calls in response to "unheard music," and some unseen figure must also have passed through this garden, for the roses "had the look of flowers that are looked at." The world is seen and not seen

at once, lived and unlived, an in-between space of echoes and indirection. In this at once empty and full landscape, we can only recognize that forces imperceptible to us reside there by the indirect residues they leave in their lingering.

Exposure to these reverberations of what never was but which is still *felt* disturbs and disrupts a sensical pathway through the garden, a sentiment echoed by the guiding bird who says that “human kind / Cannot bear very much reality.”<sup>59</sup> This implies that the world of the garden is in some way truer than the one humans inhabit, but human beings cannot bear to reside in it because of our difference in ways of inhabiting the world. The echo-world full of resounding unlived realities is then a more real space of existence, only one that humankind has no way of fully perceiving.

In traversing the garden, we, the narrator and the reader, move through the empty space filled with life which is present only in the reflections which can be felt. The scene is “vibrant” and bright air with music and laughter, but the pool is empty and the garden covered in leaves. For an instant, though, in the sun, the pool might be filled with “water out of sunlight,” “The surface glittered out of heart of light,” and the unseen presences caught, for a moment, in the reflection of the pool of light. But the passing of a cloud ends this sudden sight. All time is eternally present, as Eliot mentioned in the beginning; so, it seems, is all possibility. But we cannot see or live in the realm of possibility— we are not beings capable of living beyond time and reality, at least not in life. So we are left with lingering echoes of the reaches of our perceptible reality and the furthest stretches of our senses.

---

<sup>59</sup> Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 14



What is unreal and impossible still exists, only outside of our human reality. In the world of the poem, these unreal worlds become present in the form of ghostly echoes. The music is only known to be there because the bird calls in response, and some unseen presences must be here because their “unseen eyebeams” pass over the flowers. The unreal is only sensed in its refractions from the real, out uncertain glimpses only revealing possibility of their truly *being there*; and so these ghosts remain in echoes and we leave the garden.

It seems, then, that Eliot conceives the answer to what is beyond the reach of reason and the senses to be possible through attention towards the world of echos: a focus on what is *not* there rather than what is. In order to reach beyond what we know, we must move as far as we can into the unknown. And this, for him, is done by bringing the reader into the space of non-being by finding and looking through the cracks of what *is* there. “Burnt Norton” is a world of echoes which probe the invisible by tracing the shapes of what cannot be seen and cannot be made tangible, but whose reverberations still occupy the world in brief points between the noticeable.

The edges of the perceptible are only accessible with the abandonment of a firm grounding in the known world. Remaining within the unquestioned known means staying in a contained ignorance, comforted by a feeling of firm footing and the satisfaction that all can be reasoned through and found by means of our thinking and deduction. The world of echoes is the beginning of a full exposure on the possibility of contacting what lies beyond our human world, what lies within the void surrounding our senses.

April Pierce remarks that Eliot’s poetry “[echoes] in our living consciousness, creating a kind of dialogue between our own associations and Eliot’s own experiences,”<sup>60</sup> encapsulating the

---

<sup>60</sup> Pierce, “TS Eliot, Phenomenologist,” 123.

the essentiality of empty space in the writing to allow for the reader's place in conversation with the poems. To Eliot, conscious *experience* is at the center of sensemaking. The formation and experiential occupation of a poetic landscape which communicates abstractions that would otherwise remain unbreachable makes this concern for the centrality of experience clear. In the rose-garden, Eliot orchestrates a physical, sense-oriented engagement with an imaginative world in order to orient the reader towards his earlier unfamiliar abstractions, such as the eternity of the present. Inclusion of lived experience is essential to any philosophical conversation if it is not to fall away into senseless abstraction or overly-intellectualized empiricism. In Eliot's *Quartets*, this assertion is furthered—for in his poetry, the level of personal sense of experience is not just a philosophical acknowledgement but the necessary ground for any conceptual exploration to occur.

Eliot uses the grounds of earthly reality to question and disrupt the most familiar, most basic, immediate level of human existence. Rather than remaining in the theoretical abstraction of the opening lines, he seeks to ground conceptualizations of time firmly in the lived world. If philosophizing and theorizing are all attempts to understand our existence, then their contemplations cannot be separate from the grounds of our lived experience. Doing such would reduce one's conception into unintelligibility. Deconstructing the empirical schemes which limit our reality allows a truer understanding of the world, one which is grounded in and arises from embodied, temporal experience.

A primary method of delving into and deconstructing the sensemaking systems surrounding the human reality is to expose complications at the crux of human systems through confusion and contradiction. Eliot sees it as necessary to represent reality from the point of

experience, not an empirical exterior. The poetry, which refuses to give the reader definite footing in understanding, constantly shifting the focus, style, and subject, keeps the reader in an indefinite space where multiplicity of meaning and understanding come to life rather than stagnating in two dimensional understandings.

Simone Weil writes, “when the attention has revealed the contradiction in something on which it has been fixed, a kind of loosening takes place.”<sup>61</sup> Only through contradictions can we be drawn upward. Disquieting the comfortable continuity of existence allows opportunity to be drawn upward and renew one’s perspective on that which seemed fixed. Contradiction, troubling the concrete sensical engagement with reality, brings potential for this “loosening,” or shift in footing of reality which might give way from the inattentive perspective. Attention to the details of existence loosens their easy fitting into the world, frees them from the glaze of an uncaring eye or ignorant, removed experience.

Attention to what lies at the boundaries of our understanding can bring us towards contradiction. When the mind comes up against the void, we are driven out of our unquestioned imagining, pushed upwards by the force of our collision. “Contradiction alone is the proof that we are not everything. Contradiction is our wretchedness, and the sense of our wretchedness is the sense of reality.”<sup>62</sup> Contradiction reveals to us the absence of total sense. And within this void, a truer perspective into reality might be met.

---

<sup>61</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 98.

<sup>62</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 96.

### **Eliot's 'Pattern':**

The bird ends the section with a reprise of the opening lines: "Time past and time future / What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present." That which is, that which is not, that which has been, and that which has not yet been all "point" towards the present. The space we exist within at all times is never just one segmented section of the temporal scheme or a section on a linear plain. The present is the presence of "Time past and time future / What might have been and what has been." Odd, though, is the final line of the first section: "Point to one end, which is always present." time past, time future, possibility and actuality only *point* to one end, which is not *the* present as we refer to it, but which is *always present*. We are in the middle of all directions of possibility and time— an *end*. The present is the center of all ends of time and possibility not in the linear structure which it might be imagined but more so a point of overlap between time and possibility.

A multiplicitous, many-layered point of all directions is the true temporal space of residence human beings as opposed to the detached linearity of methodical, scientific structures. This vast, open network of time and existence rather than a straightforward, end-to-end, unidirectional plane makes Eliot's movement against empirical reduction clear. Eliot's pattern is more than just a reimagined construction of time, though: it also aims to figure human existence in relation to cosmic infinitude, first by comparing the nature of human time as always set in motion and movement to the infinite stillness of non-temporal being.

This sets up Eliot's continued references to the 'pattern' which is intertwined with experienced life and the cosmic scale of human existence throughout time. From the perspective of the individual, the pattern cannot be seen, only felt in its refractions and appearances

throughout the human space, or made visible to readers through metaphorizing within the real and known. Eliot is attempting to conceive something outside of what the human senses and human individual could possibly perceive through combined interaction with the vast scale of human existence and the *felt* reality of individual existence. There is an order, a shape, a pattern to existence that perpetuates throughout human time whose entirety is in the space of God but which reverberates within every individual created life.

### **Death in Life: East Coker**

The second Quartet introduces a natural-cyclical experience of time arising from human cycles of life and death. Beginnings and ends are each within the other, neither opposite points on a linear timeline. Each of the four Quartets provides a distinct view on the nature of being within time. Where “Burnt Norton” considered the nature of time as varied and engaged with the plane of possibility alongside experienced reality, “East Coker” considers human history as it has occurred across time on Earth. The poem opens with an ancient dance spanning generations that melds beginnings with ends, for it exists as a part of ancient histories and continues to recur through all time.

This dance is tied innately to death. Human existence means that death is a part of selfhood as an embodied, temporal form. Degradation and reemergence of material in the infinite pattern of decay and creation is a cycle which defines the nature of existing as a human, a feature of the pattern which now considers the actual timeframe of individual human lives.

Here, though, death is not an end and birth is not a beginning. “In my beginning is my end,”<sup>63</sup> the poem opens, and “In my end is my beginning”<sup>64</sup> it ends. Each is within the other: neither are separate and distinct points across one linear line of ‘one human lifetime.’ But what this cycle describes is not a straightforward path from beginning, through life, to end, and to beginning again, either. Instead, the cyclical nature of life implies more of a multiplicitous intensity to lives, or what the poem later calls a “lifetime burning in every moment.” The entirety of existence is always within every moment. As the Earth contains its relics, human lives contain distant pasts. With this patterned relation of death, life, and Earth, human time becomes embedded in its essential materiality which is always moving towards death and whose death indicates a vastness always within existence and always intertwined with ourselves. The end is not a becoming-nothing; it is a union with a void that is already enmeshed within all matter.

The poetic landscape of “East Coker” begins in a field on a summer night where “If you do not come too close... 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.”<sup>65</sup> If you stand far enough away so that the distant field is a blur, out of this dark and vacant night the long-dead past might inhabit the same space it once did. The moment is reminiscent of the rose-garden, where the poet might only glimpse indirectly and peripherally the presence of the realm of possibility. Here, the poem pays attention to the relationship of humanity to their finite forms as the movements of ancestors dance on the peripherals of the present. In one life is a repetition of all past lives, like houses built and destroyed and built again on the same grounds housing new faces and forms, over and over and over again.

---

<sup>63</sup> Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 23.

<sup>64</sup> Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 32.

<sup>65</sup> Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 24.

The time in the rhythm of the dancers in the circle, in their clumsy, human movements, is the rhythm of their life across seasons, across birth, sex, and death. The earthly dance is its own time, a time kept in coupling and harvests and growth and decay on the earth, a perpetually emerging repetition which blurs distinctions between birth and death. This pattern – which emanates throughout every fragment of existence and rests at a central still point of total void – clarifies the relation of being to the void of death. But this pattern finds its antithesis in yet another pattern: that which emerges from the imposition of human knowledge onto reality. Human wisdom emerges from the “knowledge derived from experience,”<sup>66</sup> passed down by elders through generations. But for Eliot, these human structures paradoxically inhibit a full enmeshment in reality by creating false footholds in a total void. This bold claim that human knowledge from the perspective of *only* human experience could be a total truth assumes that wisdom derived from the part might be magnified onto the scale of the whole. The wisdom of ages is only another arrogant assumption of assuredness in a world which cannot be confidently known. The chaos and unease of tumultuous human lives makes these simplified wisdoms appealing, for they make existence more bearable; but they simultaneously yield a false comfort, blind to the insights which chaos and uncertainty allow.

This theme returns in the third Quartet, “The Dry Salvages,” which criticizes the ramifications of oversimplifying human history and existence into theoretical frameworks which suit our comforts. In this poem, the past

has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence--

Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy

---

<sup>66</sup> Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 26.

Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution,  
Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning the past.<sup>67</sup>

This refers to the recently emerged school of thought which applied christian belief to a plainly biological view of evolution, resulting in a secular-spiritual chimera which posited evolution as moving towards a certain image of creation. For Eliot, a progressivist view of history means a “of disowning the past” by retroactively applying an ultimate destination towards which the past is moving. We must renounce these human frameworks which falsely presume power over forces far vaster than human conception, far beyond what can be reached and conquered with human structures.

The only true wisdom, Eliot eventually reaches, “Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless. / The houses are all gone under the sea. / The dancers are all gone under the hill.”<sup>68</sup> Here, the movement of humility in the spiritual sense is mirrored in the descent of human structures, matter, and evidence of existence through time. Decay and disintegration is a lowering of matter into earth and into the sea; humility is the lowering of the soul, true and honest release of the deception of false attachments. ‘Humility is endless’; endless, too, is the descent of matter into the earth. The only way to arrive at truth through human wisdom is in practicing its undoing— for we cannot raise ourselves above the Earth when our only fate is to descend. Understanding that you know nothing resembles death in its lowering into absence, absence of confidence and false knowledge. With death as our only entryway into eternity (whether one believes in eternity of the soul or eternity of nonbeing, both are eternal...), entries towards death in life hold at least some promise of truth.

---

<sup>67</sup> Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 39.

<sup>68</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 27.



In reaching towards this humility, Eliot considers the vacancy of everyday life and its nearness to the void of God. In the hollow, aimless, mundane routines of human movements of the world there arises a vacant cold of emptiness. Life begins to feel numb, direction seems to be aimless. This is the confrontation of existential aimlessness that brings great fear in moments where we must confront it: for example, when the audience at a theatre are left to sit in the dark as the scene changes onstage— even though we know the play will resume, we are left in a startling blankness, a sharp contrast of emptiness to the extravagance of performance. Or 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 growing terror of nothing to think about:” a horror scene in the everyday where the void behind reality stares you back in the face. In these in-between moments, we confront a void between our seamless being in the world, and suddenly we are ungrounded and uncomfortable. But we can reach the void that is a void of God in this emptiness.

In this space, all is transformed.

So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing...

The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy

Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony

Of death and birth.<sup>69</sup>

Arriving at truth requires turning *into* the empty space, not trying to avoid it by filling it with sense and reason. These untethered spaces Eliot describes are an opportunity to reach into timelessness and prompts an advice of reversal: turning into the void rather than filling it. “To

---

<sup>69</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 28.

arrive at what you do not know / You must go by way which is the way of ignorance. / In order to possess what you do not possess / You must go by the way of dispossession,”<sup>70</sup> he probes. In order to stand face to face with what one seeks, the only path is through the emptiness, the lacking that one already has. For the structures that we create to fill the void will inevitably break down. Made of and by material, all things of the earth will return to nothingness, to void. All is already infused with void. Rather than combating this by building even more, we should recognize what becomes open in vacancy and nothingness, which is the void.

“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,”<sup>71</sup> Eliot continues. This ties into the nature of the pattern as felt through echoes and reverberations, something which cannot be arrived at through sensemaking mechanisms but whose contours can be felt through contact with the contours of absence around it. To become whole, we must go through what is empty. Reaching understanding means moving completely within what one does not have. We have no way of seeing what is utterly beyond us, but we might reach it by embracing fully the emptiness we have instead.

This is implicitly tied to an idea of redemption through death-- death, the ultimate form of nothingness, as far as we can conceive. A total nonbeing in any way we can understand is fated for us, but we have no way of truly reaching this until we reach death itself. But if death is within us, if it is not a mere point in time to be reached but a deep and essential part of our being, then this death might be contacted in the voids between knowledge we see around us. The emptiness

---

<sup>70</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 29.

<sup>71</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 29.

of the unknown is the path to fullness; for if we are “to be restored, our sickness must grow worse.”<sup>72</sup>

East Coker ends with a final reflection on the patterns we seek in reality and the ignorance brewed in our reaction to the strangeness and complications of life. We exist through time stretching from starlight to lamplight to photographic preservations; the “here and now,” Eliot finds, “cease to matter.”<sup>73</sup> The pattern is not just of life into death, it is: “A lifetime burning in every moment / And not the lifetime of one man only / But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.”<sup>74</sup> First, this indicates that our experiences are not isolated moments we might conceive them to be but, with a “lifetime burning in every moment,” a totality of temporal existence within every seemingly isolated point in time. This again connects to Eliot’s dissolution of harsh boundaries between past, present, and future, but this poem goes further than totality within the individual scale of human existence. Eliot suggests it is not just our lifetime that permeates in every moment but also the relics of past ages, the “old stones” of long distant histories. Whether these burning lives are present in only relics left behind or in a spiritual quality of continuance is unclear, but the poem is clear to emphasize the necessity of moving into deeper union with “the dark cold and the empty desolation,”<sup>75</sup> exploring the vastness of what we do not know, the void beyond the cover of lamplight.

East Coker’s emphasis on old age and human histories leads to some resemblance between the “dark cold” and “vast waters” and death, itself a dark and unknown vastness stretching out before us, one which all men, in their movements into life, will eventually reach.

---

<sup>72</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 29.

<sup>73</sup> Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 31.

<sup>74</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 31.

<sup>75</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 32.

But if plunging with intensity into these dark waters forms a “deeper communion” with this unknown, then union with death, with eventual ending, is needed to redeem our own lives.

“In my end is my beginning,”<sup>76</sup> the poem concludes. Death is not a true end in that it is not the stopping point of existence. One conclusion to draw is that endings and beginnings emerge out of one another in constant cyclical motion, constantly renewed. But with concentration on the significance of nonlinearity, of non structured engagement with time, this line also indicates an eminence of all time throughout all stages of life. *In my end is my beginning*: not a cycle begun anew, but a continued existence indifferent to any stopping point.

The multiplicitous nature of life as revealed in “East Coker” unites individual existence with the totality of humanity across time. The patterns of humans in the world are infinitely repeating, and in this, the human self is not simply one singular existence contained to her plot of time. By being within a pattern that spans beyond what one could possibly see or comprehend from their space and place in time, the individual is beyond themselves at all moments of existence, not just in the unification with God, or void, or nothingness in death. All which exists, has existed, or will exist is a part of the present by virtue of its existing. If death is a part of every human being, and the void is a space of death, then all of existence is linked to every extant.

---

<sup>76</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 32.

## Temporality and Disintegration: The Dry Salvages

The rhythm of the old gods in “The Dry Salvages” reaches back further than the ancestral histories of “East Coker,” bringing the vast powers of the earth into perspective. We cultivate stability in our intellectual patterns which comfort and secure us, even as false footholds in the the unknowable, and our intellectual tradition shows the endless tussle of philosophical sects and ideological differences. But in the *physical* world, our constructed comforts amount to nothing in the face of forces which far outstrip them. Represented as the old gods of the earth, the ancient world will always remind us of the lack of control humans have on this universe, undoing with absolute ease our comparatively fragile structures. Drawn from Eliot’s observation of the coast of Cape Ann, Massachusetts, a graveyard and wrecking ground for ships as long as humans have sailed there, “The Dry Salvages” finds that the most illustrative unbinding of man’s power lies in the forces of the earth.

We forgot, dangerously, the power of the sea once we believed we had conquered it, just as we forget the untamability of the river in crafting the bridge. In questioning the strength of human structures outside of purely human perspectives, we need not look further than the elements of Earth to remind ourselves of the fragility we are made of. We lose perspective of how truly miniscule our lives are in comparison to the forces we imagine we’ve tamed.

The sea is the land's edge also,

...the beaches where it tosses

Its hints of earlier and other creation...

It tosses up our losses, the torn seine,

The shattered lobsterpot, the broken oar

And the gear of foreign dead men.<sup>77</sup>

The sea has no time. Deep and ancient, water is “older than the time of chronometers”-- its only count the endless swells and tides that lap against our shores. But remnants remind us: the evidence of creatures far greater than we can know, pieces of “earlier” creation lost in the uncaring movement of the earth, and these little fragments of our own-- shattered pots, broken oars, bits of men swallowed up by its waters long ago.

Our ships are confident, precise structures, their engineering arising from countless generations of our forefathers’ knowledge. They are “believed in as the most reliable— And therefore the fittest for renunciation.”<sup>78</sup> Again, human structures are exposed for all of their frailty when framed within the vastness of the incomprehensible. Like the old man’s false wisdom of ages, man’s endless journey into the sea exemplifies the brittle construction of their most confident powers. The sea breaks all time with absolute ease. What is seen by humans as most powerful, most reliable, must be renounced. To redeem our lives in time, we must abandon structures that only serve to give us false confidence in the face of forces beyond ourselves. Instead, we must open ourselves to our own frailty and the imminence of our deaths. Redemption necessitates full openness towards incomprehensibility embedded within our existence; that is, the presence of void.

However, the sailors in “The Dry Salvages” are not necessarily blinded by ignorance, like the old man in his confident wisdom. To journey into the sea means constantly reckoning with the whims of the water and weather. A miniscule blip in the enormous, untrenchable depth of the ocean, sailors are constantly at the mercy of forces outside of themselves and keenly aware of

---

<sup>77</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 36.

<sup>78</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 37.

that fragility. The journey into the sea resembles the venture into the dark waters of the unknown that Eliot entreats the reader to take at the end of “East Coker.”

We cannot think of a time that is oceanless  
 Or of an ocean not littered with wastage  
 Or of a future that is not liable  
 Like the past, to have no destination.<sup>79</sup>

As long as the ocean has been, wreckage of ships has littered its floors. Time is an ocean, unconquerable and brutal, but man’s nature will forever be to journey into it despite the sufferings he bears for his relentlessness in the face of what is unperturbed by his resolve.

Such ceaseless attempts to search the unknown, be it probing the sea by brittle ship or apprehending the meaning of life in time in the momentary, is an utterly human pursuit. To go on trying in the face of such constant agony to just to try to know, to probe, to *understand* our existence among forces so beyond us is brave but insufficient. So we go on making sense of existence in our own human ways. We “Describe the horoscope, haruspicate or scry, / Observe disease in signatures,” we “fiddle with pentagrams / Or barbituric acids, / ... explore the womb, or tomb, or dreams,”<sup>80</sup> and on and on. We continue exploring because it’s all we can do, even if the bounds we push to are still not far enough to reach realization, and even though most methods are only shallow comforts which merely placate us.

Our curiosity is boundless, but we do not have the “Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender” of the saint which might allow us to “apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / With time.”<sup>81</sup> Mere men, our “curiosity searches past and future/ And clings to that

---

<sup>79</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 38.

<sup>80</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 43.

<sup>81</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 44.

dimension.” We reside only in the moment, where we can only apprehend brief glimpses of a sphere beyond ourselves. Only in Incarnation, Eliot claims, might all be reconciled and unified, might action be both movement and nonmovement, might we be freed from the past and the future— but humans are not incarnate. Even without ignorant structures of rationality, our endeavor towards redemption seems hopeless if our very forms prevents unification with true meaning.

This is where the metaphor of the sailors against the waves becomes key. For despite the fact that reconciliation with the spiritual world is impossible, like in our endless forays into the sea in the face of gods much bigger than our own lives, we keep on going despite the wreckage. It’s all we can do to continue to try if it might someday lead to a redemption that seems impossible in our own present. On a rather idealistic note to a brutal poem, Eliot ends with the lines:

We, content at the last  
 If our temporal reversion nourish  
 (not too far from the yew-tree)  
 The life of significant soil.<sup>82</sup>

Ashes to ashes, our body returns to the earth, feeding the soil of history along with the endless ruins of human wreckage. We are contented by the possibility of our return to death feeding the soil of the earth we leave behind.

According to Servotte and Grene’s annotations, the yew tree “carries a double symbolism: of mortality, because it is the traditional graveyard tree; but as an evergreen, also of

---

<sup>82</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 45.



immortality.”<sup>83</sup> Death is the end of existence as it is known to humans. But our “temporal reversion” also brings us into an eternity incomprehensible from within time. Our death nourishes our understanding of human existence just as it nourishes the yew-tree.

This final drive of the poem stands in stark contrast to Eliot’s earlier work, “The Waste Land,” where the barren soil promises no possibility of spiritual restoration. Here, and with an openness towards time taking place on the grounds of our lived, experienced reality, our existence might be redeemed by constantly dedicating ourselves towards a revived world that might promise redemption for future inhabitants.

This is not so desolate for the present experience. Though there is no fully clear path outside of the limiting schemes of human life, Eliot aims to bring our attention to its presence and the necessity of facing incomprehensibility with open arms. Nourishing the soil of the earth with the spiritual guidance he has to offer might contribute towards a richer landscape for future humans.

Given the fact that Eliot lived and wrote through war, his his hope to nourish the soil of the yew-tree takes on additional significance. Bearing witness to the extremities of desolation could have made life appear hopeless and inconsequential and death appear as a violent, cruel fate. It also makes the importance of renewing one’s relation to the world even more clear. To eventually reach towards an open union with the world despite the suffering that comes with life and finite existence means facing the insecurity of absolute void and seeing in it also the boundless possibility in its unknowability.

---

<sup>83</sup> Herman Servotte and Ethel Grene, *Annotations to TS Eliot’s Four Quartets*, 12.

“The Dry Salvages”’s reckoning with desolation at the hands of forces far beyond human imagining or hope of conquering positions humanity within their fragmentary space of existence. Death in this poem is not like the death of “East Coker,” a part of an inevitable but ultimately peaceful cycle; death in the third *Quartet* is brutal and unforgiving. Forces which bring on death here are destructive and distinctly violent. There are no spirits of sailors present on the edge of the reader’s vision like the dancing ancestors of “East Coker”— only an expanse of wreckage and the alien vastness of the sea.

Life is painful and so are the remnants of what once was. But still, Eliot’s view of death ends gently; he only hopes that his might nourish the soil of the yew-tree. It’s all we can do keep on trying to redeem our lives. “The Dry Salvages” entreats us not face death as an injustice to an individual but a part of our infinite movement into a pattern larger than ourselves. We might leave behind something which might heal, protect, or guide— it is this emanation after death, not knowing the space of death, which is all we can concern ourselves with. It’s all we can do to continue our attempt to reconcile our being with our and future even if full union seems impossible.

### Unity: Little Gidding:

“Little Gidding,” the final Quartet, is named for a Huntingdonshire village which is known for its combination of religion with community, where the “religious disciplines of regular offices and vigils were combined with active works of charity among the poor and sick.”

<sup>84</sup> The community was short-lived as it was raided and broken up just twenty-two years after being established, but its existence symbolized the possibility of union between spiritual existence and individual life.

The final destination of the *Four Quartets* is a transitory space which creates a distinctly surreal poetic reality. “Little Gidding” opens with the scene of a “midwinter spring,” a brief season suspended in impossibility which underlines the unreality of the landscape. This in-between season catches nature between growth and freezing a moment not at all “in time’s covenant.” Rather than bearing witness to brief snatches of the unreal as has happened in the three previous poems, we are embedded completely in a distinctly unique landscape. Eliot describes the space as the “world’s end” which, by any path, at any time, would always lead you to the same place: before a simple hedgerow.

You are not here to verify,  
 Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
 Or carry report. You are here to kneel<sup>85</sup>

As the culmination of all stripping of overly rational limitations, entry into this space requires abandonment of all desire for sense, education, or self-satisfaction. Such holdovers would reveal one’s clinging to structures of sense, therefore an attachment to human limitations

---

<sup>84</sup> Blamires, *Word Unheard*, 123.

<sup>85</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 50-51.

when full renunciation of all human orders is required to open oneself to truer understanding.

This poem is the final movement towards absolute renunciation of the false patterns of sense we construct. A final, completely open, completely bared turn towards the void is described in this poem as the essential ground for redemption.

Reunification in this space requires total baring of the soul in the face of powers and mystery incomprehensible to oneself. It is here at the “intersection of the timeless moment” that the dead can be heard with their language of fire “beyond the language of the living.” These paradoxes of impossibility and contradiction— a timeless moment, of a language spoken by the formless dead— are, it seems, only impossible within our conceptions of reality. Humility is described as essential to reaching truth once again, for total humility within the surreal “world’s end,” thus a total barring of the soul before the unknown, is the only way to hear the language of the dead. A total lowering of oneself makes one open to the voices which speak from beyond our understanding. This poem describes the essentiality of turning towards death and the void space of timelessness in order to be redeemed.

One of the most interesting retrospective frameworks “Little Gidding” establishes is its relation of every previous *Quartet* to a symbolic element. “Burnt Norton,” a poem of dust, the disintegrated remnants of matter lingering behind what once was still left in suspended in nonbeing as if floating in space, tells of “the death of air.”<sup>86</sup> “East Coker,” a journey into the human histories of the earth which tell of endless clawing for life against the indifferent soil tells of “the death of earth.”<sup>87</sup> “The Dry Salvages,” a song towards the insurmountable power of water

---

<sup>86</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 51.

<sup>87</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 52.

which so easily crushes man, is the “death of water.”<sup>88</sup> “Little Gidding,” the final Quartet, is the death of fire. Fire is destruction, but also rebirth—disintegration into ash, but also a renewing.

Each poem is not just aligned with an element but with the *death* of that element. This seems to indicate again the necessity of facing the void, ‘death,’ in order to reach truth and reunion. Every earthly element is stripped of all obstacles that human constructs place between ourselves and our existence. Each poem is a sort of cleansing of elemental ground until we reach a final eradicating fire through which existence might be completely renewed. Fire is the essential final element because it unifies divinity and humanity, given that fire is associated with the passion of humans as well as pentecostal fire.

Opening oneself to the tongues of fire of the dead is made more explicit in the poem as Eliot joins in conversation with a ghost. The spirit, a “compound ghost”<sup>89</sup> of Eliot’s poetic influences,<sup>90</sup> speaks to him with the wisdom of the dead described just before. The entity converses with him and ends with the advice that: “From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit / Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire.”<sup>91</sup> This makes explicit that restoration *through fire* is the necessary path to redemption. Without this purification, the “exasperated spirit” is only trapped in endless reflection with no direction, recognizing its wrongs without having a path forward. This state resembles a purgatory of the spirit which one can only be freed from by purgatorial fire. Only a total renunciation of all that is known which only traps oneself in spiritual purgatory will bring total freedom. The moment of total desolation comes before a total reunifying release.

---

<sup>88</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 52.

<sup>89</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 53

<sup>90</sup>Servotte and Grene, *Annotations*, 29.

<sup>91</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 55.

The third section describes the nature of the hedgerow referenced at the beginning of the poem as a trinity of human conditions which flourish together in the same bush. These are:

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,  
 Being between two lives—unflowering, between  
 The live and the dead nettle.<sup>92</sup>

The first condition of existence is attachment, the second detachment, and the third indifference. Attachment is the live nettle—full of vitality, but capable of stinging and dangerous, for attachment is rooted in desire which confines oneself to the temporary conditions of life. Indifference is unflowering, completely unconcerned with human interests and existence, which bears resemblance to the mindsets of empiricist and mechanistic thinkers towards experienced life.

Detachment from “self and from things and from persons” is distinct from indifference, even though each resemble the other. But where indifference severs all concerns towards existence, detachment is only a distance from the individual existence without releasing oneself from it. Eliot gives the example that “love of a country / Begins as attachment to our own field of action / And comes to find that action of little importance / Though never indifferent.”<sup>93</sup> This makes clear the short-sightedness of attachment which is confined to our singular existence. Enduring love brings you beyond your own existence, but reveals true size of existence.

---

<sup>92</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 55.

<sup>93</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 55.

Detachment is not a total cutting off of self from reality but a distance which allows perspective on one's own existence.

The realization of the smallness of one's own being among the vastness of an infinite pattern makes the significance of one's own existence all the more clear. Detachment is seeing oneself as a part of the void of timelessness as well as an existing, temporal being. The self also has death within them, a tether of the material form to existence beyond all comprehensibility. Death does not render all life pointless. It only points us towards the vast pattern we will always occupy, a pattern of cosmic incomprehensibility outside of time.

Unification with the pattern is redemption. As has been present throughout the *Quartets*, singular, limited formulations of one's relation to existence are only ignorant comforts. Multiplicious openness towards the world, an acceptance of incomprehensibility but a refusal to limit oneself to a singular understanding, is the only way to open oneself up to the realization which might lead to redemption. Redemption is not just a buying back of time gone or a recovery of the lost. It is a unification of the self through all time. This requires a union with the void: a recognition of the space of death and a total openness towards that existence.

We love in our own lives, in our own small field of action, in our own brief bursts of existence. Though our existences are contained and, among the vast expanse of history, our actions are miniscule, the world is not indifferent to us. Our small realities are eradicated by the movements of time: "See, now they vanish, / The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them."<sup>94</sup> All of our memories are lost to the world when we die; but they "become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern" in death. Absent from the visible does not mean gone

---

<sup>94</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 55.

from existence. Believing that death is an eraser would mean limiting one's concept of existence to only the current, visible, reachable existence. Death is only transfiguration into "another pattern" where existence is expanded beyond human history.

Every Quartet has featured a different view of the cosmic pattern as it is possible to conceive of it through earthly existence, and each contributes to the ultimate end that "Little Gidding" reaches. "Burnt Norton" reached beyond the known, sense-perceivable world and considered the nonlinear multiplicity of our everyday reality. "East Coker" considered the nature of human history which, though long distant, remains intimate to us and is never fully removed from the present. "The Dry Salvages" reckoned with the desolation that death leaves behind and the strength of the human spirit to continue to attempt to know the void. Each one figured human existence in relation to the incomprehensible aspects of existence which are made clear in Eliot's poetic vision.

"Little Gidding" is the final is the final contemplation of a whether a redemption is possible. The incomprehensible void-space glimpsed in moments free from human constructs of self make the infinite pattern we occupy visible, but the question of whether it is possible to unify with the incomprehensible still lingers. The final Quartet finds that "The only hope, or else despair / Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre- / To be redeemed from fire by fire."<sup>95</sup> Redemption from damnation and despair is achieved by accepting fire willingly—that is, freeing oneself from desolation by detaching from the patterns which confine and damn us. Redemption comes from entering into the void more fully. This renews existence and redeems the self.

---

<sup>95</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 57.



The poem ends with a testament towards the unceasing explorations of humanity reminiscent of the themes of “The Dry Salvages.” What we find in the end of our exploration is the place “where we started,” now known again for the first time. We do not launch ourselves from the confines of our earthly reality by ceaselessly exploring the unknown—our exploration only allows us to see again our earthly situation with a renewed vision and clarity. There is no end to this journey, as all of human existence is an endeavor to constantly reopen the world in clarity and strip ourselves of falsifying lenses; we continue through the cycle which ends in finding our own beginning renewed constantly.

For Eliot, the distant traces of the intangible remain “half-heard, in the stillness / Between two waves of the sea.”<sup>96</sup> Existence is not renewed in a glamorous reawakening of the real. The vastness of the unknown surrounding us is still far from clarity. But in attention to the in-between spaces of reality, such as “between two waves of the sea,” the reverberations of the incomprehensible beyond is traceable.

The *Four Quartets* end with the lines:

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

---

<sup>96</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 59.

And the fire and the rose are one.<sup>97</sup>

The mystical language of these lines make them impossible to clearly understand, but the image the poem concludes with is nevertheless vibrant and striking. Complete humility, first of all, is restated as the necessary step to reaching truth— “A condition of complete simplicity.” Humility costs “not less than everything” because to reach it, we must abandon all knowledge, all attachments, and all human desires. This ultimately reaches what Eliot had been illustrating throughout the *Quartets*: that human time cannot be redeemed from within human structures.

And when the “tongues of flame are in-folded” with the “crowned knot of fire,” “the fire and the rose are one.”<sup>98</sup> The unity of the fire and the rose seems to represent the unity of the temporal, the rose, and the eternal, the fire. The rose is a living thing which grows and decays in a short lifespan, though whose seeds continue to repeat its same pattern endlessly on and on through time. It also recalls the rose-garden of “Burnt Norton,” which was the poet’s own beginning in the entire journey of the *Four Quartets*— one which might now be renewed in its ending. The fire, meanwhile, is the elemental force of the final Quartet, a symbol of life within death, for life begins anew in the wake of all that is abandoned to fire. Fire is also connected to the eternity of death, for the dead speak in their “tongues of flame.” Thus, with total renewal and total renunciation, the temporal and the timeless are in-folded and unified into one.

Eliot does not wait for death to face eternity; he seeks the furthest reaches of temporality while still living. And though his own redemption might be impossible, as implied in “The Dry Salvages,” where he referenced the endlessness of human endeavor into the unknown, he seeks to make the clarity that comes with total humility apparent to his readers. Through contradiction

---

<sup>97</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 59.

<sup>98</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 59.

and confusion without abandonment of the lived field of reality, a new relationship between temporality and eternity is evoked. Forces which were incomprehensible through systems of logic were made present in his abstract field of poetry, for the *Quartets* themselves attend to the universe as perceived from our human point of view, essentially grounded in the earthly reality. Concepts beyond human conception— infinitude, divinity, the center point of total stillness— are made accessible in an imaginative landscape which straddles the void beyond human reality and the sense-bound integrated world of human occupation. And in this restructured set of relations, a new vision of reality brings us closer to redemption. In total openness, we find ourselves closer to a true reality than any derivative empirical structure brought us towards. Only through full openness towards multiplicity and incomprehensibility is any worthwhile understanding of human time possible.

## Conclusion

---

I opened this project with attention to empirical and mechanistic structures dominating the 19th century and 20th century poets like Rilke and Eliot's movements against them. This may seem to limit the relevance of this project to a conversation of the past, but I view the attention to the world that these poets have cultivated as the essential guiding path towards stepping away from understanding of the world which is contained to the cleanly conceivable.

The open, holistic view of existence that Rilke and Eliot propose is not specific to their time period; it stands as an argument against all reductive sensemaking systems that arise in response to the human state of being as existing within forces far outstripping our conception. This is not to say that human structures of sense are the ultimate evil which should be eradicated: it would be impossible to function in the world without sensemaking systems, not to mention impossible to be sensually embedded in a world as thinking, pattern-seeking human beings and not derive some sense of order from the reality we engage with. What is most important is remaining attentive to the void beyond our understanding and, rather than assimilating it into the sensical, turning towards the unknown with understanding of its incomprehensibility. This opens you to a more holistic way of engaging in the world. The in-between spaces in our lives are especially deserving of our attention. The void is not empty.

I chose to focus on death in my study of temporal space of these poets. I have struggled myself with what it means to be vulnerable to death at every moment when in death you are completely and totally erased from the world—for no one is ever truly capable of knowing anyone else. All the remnants you leave behind in death would only be pieces of the constructed version

of yourself others held, all of which are empty, only shadows and traces of what they thought you might have been or might have looked like, or a name that was used refer to you with no person anymore behind it. But I haven't thought this way for a few years. Existence cannot be so self-centered and it feels shallow to take it this way. It is we who only die. All the rest are the ones who feel that death.

When my dear friend died, I wasn't hit by grief. Not immediately. I felt sadness and numbness but no despair.

This went on until I was standing in the church where his funeral was held. I realized, suddenly, that no one would ever hear his laugh again. It was not just that I wouldn't hear him laugh, but that it would never be heard in the world at all, that he would never again be the one who is laughing and that there is no one here to hear his voice anymore. This was a piece of him, a little detail of his being that is now lost forever and can never reappear. Death is not just the loss of a person but the loss of their voice and every piece of their being that will never be felt again. It is here that the yawning abyss of forgetting feels closest and most horrifying— where everything slips and falls into until nothing is recognizable and the world becomes indifferent.

I will not say that memory is somehow enough to fill the space we leave behind. It is incomplete and fades with every recollection until it is lost completely with our own end. But death is also not an enemy. It's been with us since birth, an end to our beginning.

An end is not a negative, only an unknown. It is only a limit to where we can follow. I am not claiming any particular religious or non-religious allegiance in terms of what happens after death— only that by virtue of having had existed, we will always exist. This can be conceived of in reverberations in the space we leave behind or as a part of an inconceivable cosmic pattern

encompassing all existence. Timeless cannot really be known, but at least we can understand that we are not linear, and that our forward-moving line does not suddenly stop at the moment of death. All which has existed will always continue to exist for all which has been, by virtue of having existed, is not erased; only, to us, unreachable.

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. And every phrase  
And sentence that is right (where every word is at home)...  
... is an end and a beginning,  
Every poem an epitaph.<sup>99</sup>

---

<sup>99</sup> Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 58.



## Bibliography

---

- Bangerter, Lowell A. "Rainer Maria Rilke." In *Critical Survey of Poetry*, edited by Rosemary M. Canfield Reisman, 4th ed. Vol 3. Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press.
- Blamires, Harry. *Word Unheard: A Guide Through Eliot's Four Quartets*. London: Methuen And Company LTD, 1969.
- Eliot, Thomas Stearns. *Four Quartets*. Boston, New York: Harcourt Publishing Company, 2021.
- Eliot, Thomas Stearns. "Tradition and the Individual Talent by T. S. Eliot." Text/html. Poetry Foundation. Poetry Foundation, May 2, 2023. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>.  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69400/tradition-and-the-individual-talent>.
- Lawlor, Leonard, and Valentine Moulard-Leonard. "Henri Bergson." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Winter 2022. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022.  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/bergson/>.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being In Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. London, England: Blackwell, 1978.
- Mandelbrot, B.B. "Fractal geometry: what is it, and what does it do?" New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
- Moody, David A. *Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Pierce, April. "T. S. Eliot, Phenomenologist." *The T. S. Eliot Studies Annual* 1 (2017): 114-130. [muse.jhu.edu/article/878494](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/878494).



Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Duino Elegies*. Translated by Alfred Corn. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Duino Elegies*. Translated by Edward Snow. New York: North Point Press, 2009.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke Vol II 1910-1926*. Translated by Jane Bannard Greene and M.D. Herter Norton. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1948.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters to a Young Poet*. Translated by Stephen Mitchell. Portland, Oregon: Scriptor Press, 1973.

Servotte, Herman and Grene, Ethel. *Annotations to T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets*. iUniverse, 2010.