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Louie Alexandris

College of the Holy Cross, ljalex24@g.holycross.edu

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Eliot's Raid on the Ineffable

Louie Alexandris '24

College of the Holy Cross

With the onward march of time, a pertinent question for all people in modernity is the appropriate balance between the maintenance of tradition and the need for invention - when pertaining to the artist or the thinker, how should they position themselves in relation to their predecessors? The continuity of the past and the potentiality of the future all weigh on the present (Oser 220). Additionally, the present represents an exclusive experience, and the continual movement from one present to the next creates a fragmentary timeline. In the poem *Four Quartets*, T.S Eliot employs a fragmentary form to dramatize the disjointed continuity of time. Within the poem though, the fluctuation or fragmentation of the form is also in service to the whole by showing the unending exploration of man to reach the "still point" of divine contemplation. As Eliot remarks in *The Music Of Poetry*, "[t]here must be transitions between passages of greater and less intensity, to give a rhythm of fluctuating emotion essential to the musical structure of the whole" (315). For Eliot, the fragmentary nature of the form in *Four Quartets* is in service to the whole, because the continual fluctuation of musicality embodies a journey or exploration for the "still point" of the world to achieve true contemplation. In that sense, Eliot's poem is an artistic success, due to the fluctuation or fragmentary nature of the form serving the whole of the poem. The point is that the unity of the piece comes from the fluctuation of musicality that reinforces the idea of a journey across time to the "still point."

The fluctuation in intensity not only exemplifies a command over the multiple modes of musicality and dissonance but demarcates the distinction between the aesthetic and the discursive

form. In the second part of *Burnt Norton*, Eliot begins the high lyric with, “[g]arlic and sapphires in the mud / Clot the bedded axle-tree. / The trilling wire in the blood” (2.1-3). In the first line, the repeated usage of two-syllable words, like “garlic” and “sapphires” in quick succession, creates an incantatory effect. Similarly, the repetition of these two-syllable words continues into the next two lines with “bedded,” “axle,” and “trilling.” The usage of multiple words with a similar number of syllables has a “yoking” effect on readers to make them draw certain heterogeneous ideas together. The connection between “garlic,” “sapphires,” and “bedded” implies a level of superficial materiality. The word “bedded” infers this idea of a layer or strata of rock deposits, in that these material objects act as distractions from the underlying truth. This idea is yoked though with the “trilling” of the blood as if the material world acts as a barrier, like the skin on the body, that prevents man from seeing the supernatural movement beneath it. Though, the usage of the word “clot” elicits a bodily image of platelets covering a wound, as if humans have lost their connection with the supernatural world due to their materiality, which blocks them from the movement beyond. The musicality of incantation and the yoking of heterogeneous objects all serve the aesthetic. This aestheticism though is characterized by egotism, wherein man is stuck on the superficial materiality of the world around him. In a sense, man cannot see beyond the interior self nor the superficiality of the material world. The aestheticism of poetry then becomes a distraction or rather a material limit that keeps man from the objective truth.

In the next section, Eliot changes to a discursive form to dramatize the unending process of contemplation needed to reach the “still point” of a constantly evolving world. Eliot begins his journey into the prosaic when he asserts, “[a]t the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; / Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, / but neither arrest

nor movement. And do not call it fixity” (2.16-18). Although Eliot discontinues his use of the high lyric, he still maintains the incantatory effect through the repetition of similar syntax across various fragmented phrases. Eliot repeatedly positions two oppositional ideas against each other with the conjunction “nor.” This repetition of similar syntax offers up an apophatic understanding of existence, wherein the incantatory negation frames the mind within the paradoxical flux and permanence of time (Wight 65). Similarly, the repetition of commas and semicolons divides these apophatic statements from each other, creating a fragmented structure. Out of these fragments though, Eliot creates wholeness by encasing these pieces within the more definite statements of the “still point” and the perpetual “dance” of existence (Levina 196). In a sense, the continual usage of apophatic statements dramatizes the journey for the “still point,” which embodies an unending contemplative life and the need to submit oneself to the forces of the universe. This discursive form becomes a mediative approach to thinking, comparatively to the egotistic nature of the high lyric, because the paradoxical form of these negated statements demonstrates the continual process of self-conscious contemplation and the need for suffering to reach the “still point.”

The transition from the high lyric to the prosaic may seem at first to create a fragmented structure, but in reality, Eliot uses this transition or fluctuation of intensity in the service of the whole. As Eliot remarks later in *The Music Of Poetry*, “[i]t is time for a reminder that the music of verse is not a line by line matter, but a question of the whole poem” (320). Eliot’s criticism expounds upon the fact that the musicality of a poem, or lack of it, must be in service to the wholeness of the piece. In that sense, Eliot’s ability to incorporate different intensities and other aspects of poetic form, not only shows off his mastery, but the journey of self-conscious exploration of the human experience. As he later laments in the prosaic form, “Time past and

time future / Allow but a little consciousness...only through time time is conquered” (2.38-39, 44). Again, the repetitious use of the word “time” not only draws the reader's attention to the word, but it creates that incantatory effect as if Eliot is trying to reach a state of divine contemplation to discuss the nature of time. The incantatory effect hints at Eliot's need for divine revelation, in order to meditate on the nature of time. Further, the specific usage of the verb “allow” implies a level of impassivity in terms of man’s experience of time. The verb “allow” brings the audience back to Eliot’s early career and his conception of impassivity, as man is passively experiencing the process of time. This idea is reinforced by the phrase “little consciousness,” dramatizing the little control or even awareness that man has over the passage of time (Moses 134). In a sense, man can only truly conceive of time in the present, as the future is unknowable and the past is only perceptible in imperfect memories and the effect of previous events. For Eliot, the “conquest” of time does not embody an active role by man, but instead, man’s passage through time becomes a passive experience wherein man submits himself to forces beyond his understanding. The point is that the fluctuation of style between sections of the poem demonstrates the fragmentary nature of time in man’s limited mind: the actualization of time becomes an unknowable force that exerts pressure on humans. In turn, the only solution for man is to achieve true contemplation by giving up the egotistical self and surrendering his being to this unending process.

The ability of Eliot to vary his poetic intensity and form represents the fragmentary experience of man in relation to his movement throughout time itself. As Eliot remarks later in the fifth section of *Little Gidding* about man’s continual movement through time, “[w]e shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started” (5.26-28). The use of enjambment across all three of these lines creates a circular loop, in terms

of man's exploration always bringing him back to where he started. On the other hand though, Eliot breaks this one sentence down into three separate lines, striking a surprising balance between fragmentation and wholeness. This tension between the whole and the fragmented represents the artistic success of this poem because Eliot is able to employ a fragmentary form that acts as an experiential reference to how man interprets and experiences time. The point is that the fragmentation of the form serves a larger purpose to the whole of the poem, by showing how man experiences the flux and permanence of that "dance" through time.

The fluctuation of different poetic forms is not just a technical novelty, but a serious attempt at communicating experiential knowledge to the audience. The word "end" is repeatedly used throughout the entire poem, which elicits this idea of finality or an endpoint in the near future. This destination or telos is consumed in the circular structure of these lines as if man's ultimate goal or endpoint is a continual process of exploration across time that will turn man towards divine contemplation and submission to the divine will of God. This continual process embodies a synthesis of past, present, and future, wherein man is caught within the effects of the past, the current experience of the present, and the potentiality of the future. In that sense, time becomes a process of continual reinvention and exploration, as every new moment becomes a new present situation. Although every new present is an entirely different experience, the past moments in time have formed the current period and left their mark on us. In the end, the continual process or movement of time embodies a synthesis. In a way, Eliot is demonstrating the necessary balance between tradition and invention, as the past leaves its effects on the present and it binds us to history. On the other hand, the freshness of each experience in the present offers up a need for reexamination and exploration to readjust to the current situation. As Eliot remarks in his famous essay *What Is A Classic*, "[w]e want to maintain two things; a pride in

what our literature has already accomplished, and a belief in what it may still accomplish in the future” (680). Although he is talking specifically about literature, Eliot strikes a balance between respecting the past for its accomplishments and the need for reinvention in modernity due to changing circumstances. At the center of this circular process is the “still point” of a constantly evolving world, in which man must seek a state of divine contemplation and give himself up to this divine will in order to gain some sort of objectivity.

The fragmentation and fluctuating intensities of this poem are all in service to the wholeness of the piece’s message. This embodies the human journey or continual search for a state of divine contemplation and complete self-sacrifice. In that sense, Eliot’s poem is an artistic success, because he is able to employ various modes and forms that contribute to the whole piece by making the reader feel the experiential process of time. On top of that, Eliot is able to conceptualize a complex circular process of time that synthesizes the past, present, and future into one looping cycle of continued preservation and reinvention.

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