

Reading T.S. Eliot

Four Quartets and the Journey toward Understanding

G. Atkins

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G. DOUGLAS ATKINS

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is the book I have been pointing toward for fifty years. The “journey towards understanding” that I trace in T. S. Eliot is, at once, what I find in his own developing point of view as that appears in his poetry and prose and what has a long, distinguished but too little studied tradition in Western literature beginning with Homer; it also names what constitutes the arc of my own life, professional as well as personal—that is, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional. Whoever said that literary criticism is ultimately autobiographical accurately caught the texture of my efforts here. Autobiography emerges, though, only indirectly, which is appropriate, for my subject is squarely Eliot and his work, culminating in *Four Quartets*, which I consider the twentieth century’s greatest poem (and arguably the greatest religious work since *The Divine Comedy*). This remarkable writing, both a poem and an essay, captures magnificently arrival at (ultimate) understanding and, in dramatizing it, allows the reader to experience just such an arrival for himself or herself. It matters not a little that that work reaches climax with the statement that “The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation,” for *the* Incarnation of God in the man Jesus Christ functions as understanding in the triune awareness that love proceeds from being in, through, and by means of it, an indirect and mediated *approach*.¹ Eliot’s own “approach” was mediated by Anglo-Catholicism, which he formally embraced in 1927 and identified as his religious “point of view” (along with classicism in literature and royalism in politics).² Eliot also wrote in *Four Quartets* that “The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.” The idea of *approaching* Eliot’s understanding, I hope, keeps the faith. Religious understanding, like civilization of which it forms such an important part, is a matter of respect, and respect inevitably involves (the humility and the patience to accept) indirectness.

Specifically, this is a book about T. S. Eliot in context. The context I mean is literary; that “journey toward understanding” that typically involves a physical trek of some difficulty and a metaphorical “progress” of growth and education results in newfound awareness of the

self's limitations alongside a growing respect for others and for being itself, and features, usually, the predicate of an encounter with death or the dead; it thus climaxes in G. K. Chesterton's paradox that you know nothing until you know nothing.³ Eliot himself referred, after conversion to Anglo-Catholic Christianity, to "the *process* of the mind of the intelligent believer" and to "the *sequence* which culminates in faith."⁴ I argue that Eliot's own "path" or progress was itself a journey toward understanding, visible in the poems and essays and mirroring the sequence he posits. I devote considerable space to the end result of the "journey toward understanding"—arrival, in other words—attempting to make clear the (tensional) character of understanding reached.

I assume, further, that the reader so engaged is himself or herself offered the opportunity to participate, not exactly vicariously, in this same journey toward understanding. Difficulty marks the reader's journey—as it plays a critical role in Eliot's understanding of writing, of life, of God. Famously, or infamously, Eliot wrote early on that the "poets in our civilization . . . must be difficult . . . , must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into their meaning," and sometimes at least he deliberately made the reader's journey through his poems difficult—for more than one reason, which I shall be at pains to elucidate. Still, my way being indirect, I reckon myself as being in the middle—that is, between the (pseudo-)objectivity of the scholar, trying to tell the unvarnished truth, and the writer offering (only) his own point of view on matters of considerable importance.⁵ In the event, I write for a broader audience than the narrowly specialized; in this, too, I follow T. S. Eliot. Although the context in which I represent Eliot is literary, the "journey toward understanding" exists and functions as more than literary, pointing to a structure—a moral order—built into the nature of things.

A perhaps unsuspected, unexpected advantage of this context is that it points toward and indeed opens up another context, and that is the *intratextuality* of Eliot's writing. That is to say, the "journey toward understanding" leads to the recognition, appreciation, and understanding of myriad ways in which Eliot's poems "rhyme"⁶ with one another, and indeed work by means of these "rhymes."

An issue that I may as well address: these chapters are essays—that is, *attempts* to understand, and there is, willy-nilly, a good deal of repetition (as there is in *Four Quartets*), and at least much of it is both unavoidable and desirable. Eliot comes in time at least to forswear linear development, just as he does "simple" interpretations of

evolution. He also rejects circularity. The issues Eliot treats being difficult, and his poems being (hugely) difficult, or so it seems, I find myself coming back around to passages and points already discussed, considering them again, especially in new contexts of understanding, attempting to let speak the “intersection” of meaning with experience that in fact mirrors—and functions as answerable manner to—*Four Quartets*. Thus, like Dame Helen Gardner decades ago, I read the earlier poems in the context of the later.⁷

My enormous debts in making this book begin, of course, with Old Possum himself: *Magister*. Critically, they include my Wofford College professor Vincent Miller, who made the introductions and opened a way toward understanding. More recently, I owe a large debt to my first Eliot class, in the spring semester of 2001, the best class I have been privileged to learn from in forty-plus years of teaching. Without their engagement, constant questioning, and enlightened support, I would not have fared forward. I wish to thank, too, two members of my university’s support staff, Lori Whitten and Pam LeRow, for their unflagging patience, efficiency, and good cheer. Tod Marshall, of Gonzaga University, deserves special thanks for his careful, helpful reading of an earlier version of this book (he of course bears no responsibility for problems that remain). As always, deep and indomitable gratitude goes to my wife, Rebecca, who relieves me of more chores than I care to or can count, so that I can work in my man-cave; to our daughter Leslie, her husband Craig, and our granddaughter Kate; to our son Christopher, his wife Sharon, and our grandson Oliver; and last but not least, to Rebecca’s and my beloved Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, Millie.

CHAPTER 1



CRITICISM AND THE ENIGMA OF ARRIVAL

The power of the poetry is such that we cannot rest until we have both “experience” and “meaning.” And it is the arriving at the meaning, not the explaining of it, that matters. Anyone who attempts to ‘elucidate’ Four Quartets must be aware that the poems themselves supply the light.

—Raymond Preston, ‘Four Quartets’ Rehearsed: A
Commentary on T. S. Eliot’s Cycle of Poems (1946)

A hundred years ago, the Hungarian theorist Georg Lukàcs wrote that irony constitutes the essay’s essential characteristic—he was thinking principally of the literary or critical essay. “Most people,” Lukàcs said, “believe that the writings of the essayists are produced only in order to explain books and pictures, to facilitate their understanding.” The irony, he continues, “consists in the critic always speaking about the ultimate problems of life, but in a tone which implies that he is only discussing pictures and books, only the inessential and pretty ornaments of real life—and even then not their innermost substance but only their beautiful and useless surface.”¹ A certain modesty thus attends the effort, both Lukàcs’s and the essayist’s, just as humility marks the essayist’s tone and manner, reflective, later said E. B. White, of the essayist’s “second-class citizenship.”² While I hope to write modestly and humbly, in the form that Montaigne practically created out of whole cloth, I claim no irony, for writing about—that is, *approaching*—T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* takes me beyond such binary oppositions as Lukàcs’s “innermost substance” and “beautiful, useless surface” to “necessary conjunction” and, indeed, oneness

that *is* Word *in, through, and by means of* word(s), timelessness *in, through, and by means of* time, similarly beyond such other apparent oppositions as letter and spirit, meaning and experience, literature and religion (or theology).³

Four Quartets is inexhaustible. No one can master it, and no one should try. I sometimes think that Eliot—at pranks, perhaps—sought to frustrate his reader, to embody a poetics of difficulty and adversity, to make his essay poem too strange for misunderstanding. That he was well aware of the likelihood and dangers of misappropriation and of accommodation appears, for instance, in his reiterated representation, *in the work*, of the slipperiness of words, of various enchantments, temptations, and seductions, and of man's tendency toward the one dimensional. The issue gets folded back into *Four Quartets*, in other words, where it becomes still another theme worthy of the reader's close attention. The fact is, you can enter the work just about anywhere, for every moment—in the essay poem as in life—burns with meaning, thus evincing the (governing) pattern that Eliot defines as Incarnation: “The hint half guessed, the gift half understood.” The *place from which you begin*, then, creates a line that you as reader commentator take out for a walk (to invoke the artist Paul Klee). What you see along the way is thus a function of where you begin that journey.

Arrival is very much the matter. Eliot says it, indirectly of course, which is the *way* of Incarnation, in “East Coker,” where “saying it again,” arrival and way meet and *intersect*, in the process, I further suggest, fructifying (to take his word from elsewhere in *Four Quartets*). In order to arrive there—that is, “where you are not,” “what you do not know,” or “do not possess”—you must, in each case, go “by” or “through” a way: one lacking ecstasy is “the way of ignorance” or that of dispossession, or by means of the way “in which you are not.” This is not the only time in *Four Quartets* that you may at first feel awash in gibberish, or wordplay. “Be mindful,” Eliot says in *Ash Wednesday*.⁴ At the very least, he alerts us to the play of words, their capacity to confuse and to deceive, their seductiveness and their promiscuousness. The emphasis here on “way” should also alert us to be mindful of our likely readiness to accept, unmindfully, the Heraclitean point of view, for example, represented in the epigraphs to “Burnt Norton” that the way up *is* the way down.

Representing a turn in the poem, “Little Gidding,” the last of *Four Quartets*, follows immediately upon Eliot's declaration in the fifth and final section of “The Dry Salvages” that Incarnation is the long-sought-for pattern of “intersection” that unlocks all meaning. “Little Gidding” differs from the previous three poems—many

readers consider it Eliot's finest achievement: it is not, of course, an afterthought, but at once embodies a moral (as well as ontological and theological) texture; it also features events *in another dimension*, that *other* dimension to which *Four Quartets* has variously referred, while insisting on "far[ing] forward," engaging in action—that is to say, embodying lessons learned, insight gained, understanding arrived at. Thus, following a scenic description of "Midwinter spring," and reverent in approaching the place made sacred by Nicholas Ferrar's devout Anglican community destroyed by marauding parliamentary forces in the 1640s, Eliot writes of this "other" dimension, represented by the juxtaposition of "may time" and "May," and embodying spring although in a "covenant" other than time's. Other times break in, intersecting with the present: the visit of King Charles I following his defeat at Naseby in 1642, *the* Incarnation itself, the paradigmatic instance of "Incarnation," *embodied* in description and represented idea alike. As if more concerned with his reader's understanding now that "Incarnation" has been revealed, Eliot ends the first section of "Little Gidding" with retrospective and conclusive words that themselves end in "necessary" albeit enigmatic, paradoxical "conjunction": intersection of the timeless with time is here and now. "Little Gidding" arrives at climax with the encounter of the poet, in the bombed-out streets of London at "the uncertain hour" between morning and night, with the Tiresian (and Incarnational) figure of the "familiar *compound* ghost" (*italics added*). They are, Eliot now writes, in "concord" at a temporal "intersection."

APPROACHING *FOUR QUARTETS*

One learns that a straightforward philosophical statement can be great poetry.

—T. S. Eliot, Dante

Criticism cannot stand in for the work of art; it cannot replace it or expect and or be expected to do more than elucidate (as Eliot affirmed).⁵ Its methods and procedures differ fundamentally from those of the primary text; and while respecting the text as *living* message and gift (it eschews dissection, therefore), criticism separates, viewing the text from a particular perspective (thematic, formal, or theoretical). Criticism can, therefore, not but be reductive, a conclusion it resists by "faring forward" from one elucidating perspective to another and so on.

Often—and this may be especially so with demanding, modernist works—criticism, willy-nilly, unties knots, loosens things up, and then straightens them out, making them linear, logical, and easier for the rational mind to grasp. This, of course, results in the production of very different effects from those of the primary, literary text. If, as happens with all good, responsible criticism, its reader is sent back to the original work, the critical effort bears positive results. For that work may then be elucidated, the reader enlightened and thus better prepared for the particular, indeed unique experience that the poems of T. S. Eliot, say, offer.

What *criticism* does, uniquely, is, after its initial work of separating, to recombine elements of the text in a new pattern. Literature, differently, begins with *and as* this combination or amalgamation. Beginning at the other end, as it were, commentary essentially produces a new and different text; that seems obvious enough, but I mean something precise here. Criticism is not a mirror image of the text on which it comments, the work that has called it into being and without which it would not exist nor have reason to exist. Nor is criticism a duplication of the primary text, innocently offered in other words and amounting to the same thing.

Criticism tries, nevertheless, to reproduce the experience of art, a vain attempt. It fails, inevitably, because its effort occurs in a form different from that of the poem or story, and form determines meaning. Literature starts with and indeed from similarity, whereas criticism starts from and exists as difference. Attempts to elide or obliterate this difference are doomed to failure and are dangerous in the extreme.

Criticism cannot duplicate the experience of reading the primary text because it does not deal directly with feelings; it can only write *about* them. Criticism can, of course, duplicate ideas, but the ideas of literature occur embodied.

Because form creates meaning, criticism can be “answerable” only to a limited degree (despite Geoffrey Hartman’s best efforts).⁶ Its style can and should be engaging, modest, and above all clear, but I doubt that it can ever do more than approach artfulness. The form of the essay—as distinguished from the article and the monograph—stands ready and potent to assist, but it remains a self-effacing creation.⁷ Little wonder that Georg Lukàcs thought the critical essay a “mere” John the Baptist, preparing the way—for, I might add, the reader’s reception and response.⁸ Literature, similarly, prepares the way.

“Relation” stands near the heart of *Four Quartets*. Here, it appears impossible to talk about one thing—one idea, one passage, one word—without talking about another, about others, for each and

every one is “attended.” In inelegant terms, we might suggest *Four Quartets* “thematizes” the parts-whole relation (so important to Alexander Pope, for one). Therein lies a complication, a difficulty, perhaps even a paradox. For criticism, I have said, separates, parcels out, in order to manage the complicated, complex text. *Four Quartets* resists attempts to make things easy, in the process embodying difficulty.

What eventually dawns on the responsible reader of Eliot is, I suggest, earned recognition that, even as you enter his greatest work at any point in it, eschewing the sequential and the linear (as well as the circular), you nevertheless end up at the same point: the still point around which everything else revolves, that intersection of timelessness with time, which is Incarnation. The pilgrim reader, journeying toward understanding himself or herself, and so engaged in “the course of interpretive discovery,”⁹ can do no better than to heed Eliot’s own account of criticism as *comparative* and analytical and to take to heart his description and embrace of Lancelot Andrewes’s related way of reading and writing: he may seem “pedantic and verbal,” but we must “saturate . . . ourselves in” his writing, for he—like Eliot—“takes a word and derives the world from it; squeezing and squeezing the word until it yields a full juice of meaning which we should never have supposed any word to possess.”¹⁰

Contestation and controversy have always swirled about *Four Quartets*. Even such astute and sympathetic readers as the acclaimed contemporary poet and critic Geoffrey Hill find fault with the poem, and think Eliot’s later work a falling-off from earlier masterful achievements. The difficulties evidently stem from the very nature of the work itself.

Denis Donoghue lamented some time ago that we do not know how to read such a poem as *Four Quartets*, lacking a “poetics of discourse” and stuck in a conception of a poem as “an action (or a structure) of words chiefly concerned with the development of the resources of imagery and symbolism within the fiction of a dramatic monologue.”¹¹ What Donoghue seeks, and in this case he is following the lead of D. W. Harding, is what he tantalizingly calls, without elaborating, “a critical method sensitive to poetry as a work in the creation of new concepts.” This would differ from “arguifying in poetry,” the strategy concocted by William Empson, nor would it be quite a “poetry of statement.”¹² This last is often applied, although neither convincingly nor particularly well, to the Augustan poetry of John Dryden and Alexander Pope in particular, from whom we might, in any case, turn for a sort of rhyming with what Eliot undertakes. Harding thinks the modernist poem of Eliot “a linguistic creation”

of “a new concept,”¹³ and Donoghue writes against critics such as F. R. Leavis, contending that “The discrimination of concepts (not this precisely . . . or even that) is regarded as fit matter for an essay, but not for a poem.”¹⁴

I assume here that *Four Quartets* is indeed a poem, just as are, despite critics who think otherwise, Dryden’s *Religio Laici* or *A Laymans Faith* and *The Hind and the Panther* and Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism* and *An Essay on Man*. In fact, *Four Quartets* is, like those works, an essay poem and should be treated as both poem and essay.¹⁵ So to say may be seen as addressing a related difficulty surrounding *Four Quartets*, one still attracting combatants. Assuming that it *is* to be read as a poem, is *Four Quartets* to be read *as a religious poem*? A host of recent commentators say yes; these include John Booty, Robert Howard, Kenneth Paul Kramer, and Michael D. G. Spencer.¹⁶ In *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and the Pleasure of Words*, Mutlu Konuk Blasing says no. “To read *Four Quartets* as a religious poem . . . is to misread [it].”¹⁷ Such a reading, she insists, “leave[s] out” the poem itself.

I join, as I said, with Blasing, Donoghue, Harding, and others in affirming that Eliot’s greatest work is indeed a poem. I differ from them, treading a middle way, in saying that it is also a religious poem. Not only do I think Eliot himself right in “Religion and Literature” in claiming that literary criticism “should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint,”¹⁸ but I believe that you begin with *Four Quartets* as poetry and proceed in, through, and by means of it as literary text to its understanding of matters religious and universal. This is the pattern of Incarnation.¹⁹

Four Quartets offers important instruction via the reiterated advice to return to the beginning, which one may come to “know for the first time.” “Burnt Norton” dramatizes the point by returning us to the Garden, which does, indeed, look different, and is, after our study of the whole of *Four Quartets*. Eliot also returns us to the Incarnation, in a sense the beginning, at least of precisely Christian understanding. And also important, Eliot returns us to *words*, which we must keep on exploring. We thus return, but at the same time, he insists, we must *fare forward*—as we grasp, in accepting the gift (of Incarnation), that past intersects with present.

Four Quartets makes especial demands of the reader, placing a heavy burden on her or him. The poem does not *look* especially difficult, unlike Eliot’s previous poems: sentences have replaced fragments, the verse bears the appearance of prose, allusions are evidently few, and except for scattered enigmatic assertions, meaning *appears* to be graspable. Reality belies appearance here, too, however. Structure

and form account for much of the difficulty, including, perhaps especially, the way one word, one phrase, a single “idea” resonates and rhymes with another and others, in the poems and with other Eliot works. At some point, you have to deal and come to terms with these rhymes and repetitions, similarities and differences: the style and manner of *Four Quartets* thus begin to appear as internally or intrinsically *unanswerable*. The point you ultimately arrive at is that of the meaning and significance of “intersection,” predicated on the central concept of Incarnation and directly stated at the end of “The Dry Salvages.” Even then, difficulty attends and abounds. Most of us, indeed, will *not* understand: for us, there is only the “unattended” moment, which is “in and out” of time. For most of us, you and me no doubt, such words as Eliot has used here “are only hints and guesses.” Except perhaps for one or two requiring a dictionary, the words are perfectly clear; they make sense in a straightforward, linear fashion. But they convey Eliot’s meaning only when intersected with other words, other parts of the poem(s), and an understanding of the whole *Four Quartets*. Form imitates—participating in—“idea,” “message,” “content,” which actually, of course, it *creates*.

Words themselves, moreover, are a huge part of the problem (and the solution), no matter what the text, no matter how masterful the writer. Eliot first makes the point in drawing “Burnt Norton” to a close: “Words move.” In fact, burdened and forever in “tension,” they “strain,” “crack,” “sometimes break,” unable or refusing to “stay in place” or “stay still”; they also “slip, slide, perish” and over time deteriorate, becoming imprecise. This is cause not merely for difficulty but for (very nearly) impossible reception of meaning. In other words, because *words*—alone, “unattended”—move, their being as being in time, they “Can only die.” The only way toward life lies in the way one is *attended*, rhyme effected, intersection enacted. Form—or pattern—*creates*: only pattern allows for or reaches stillness. There it is!—recognizable, ready for reception, and calling for response. All you need do is to have heard, and hearing requires not the words alone, but the words in and as form, pattern, and thus meaning.

Eliot approaches conclusion in *Four Quartets* via a return to the issue of words, the tension that marks them, and the necessity for meaning of pattern. As it happens, the passage opening the final section of “Little Gidding” also rhymes with that in “East Coker” concerning the Elizabethan rustics engaged in “daunsinge,” which signifies “matrimonie,” and that is a sacrament involving “necessarrie coniunction.” The couples holding “eche” other by the hand “betokeneth

concorde.” The return at the close of “Little Gidding” puts the matter of words in words that rhyme with the preceding verses in “East Coker”: every phrase that is right and appropriate supports “the others,” amounting to the “complete consort” in dancing. Concord is built upon (mutual) support(iveness), and dancing emerges as a pattern governing movement; it also serves as an invitational response as it functions as a metaphor for the patterning that gives meaning to the movement, and for the constant *turning* that denotes life.

To my mind, no one has written better on these issues²⁰ than Vincent Miller in “Eliot’s Submission to Time,” published in the *Sewanee Review*:

Eliot critics have tended to see the *Four Quartets* as an attempt to relate a mystic’s insight into a realm beyond time to his sense of the world in time. That, in part, the poem certainly is . . . My emphasis is radically different: that Eliot, disliking time as much as Plato but having become a Christian, found himself like Augustine forced to try to understand this world’s importance despite his desire to escape its seeming meaninglessness. The platonic pull is no doubt present in Eliot as in Augustine, but in both men it is—as both of them say—at war with what they see as the meaning of the Incarnation (“the hint half guessed, the gift half understood”), and so a temptation to be resisted.²¹

Even Miller, though, does not pay sufficient attention to Eliot’s omission of the word “the” in the crucial verse in “The Dry Salvages” regarding Incarnation.

Tension characterizes words, says Eliot, not so much complaining as observing and laying groundwork. He came to understand—Miller alludes to it—that “man lives in a world where tension rather than unity gives significance to his life.” In Eliot’s own words, “It must be kept in mind that even in a Christian society as well organized as we can conceive possible in this world, the limit would be that our temporal and spiritual life should be harmonized: the temporal and spiritual would never be identified . . . There would always be a tension; and this tension is essential to the idea of a Christian society, and is a distinguishing mark between a Christian and a pagan society.”²² Precisely this sort of thing—this tension—which derives from a thorough understanding of Incarnation, manifests itself in Miller’s interpretation of Eliot: thus he learned “to understand this world’s importance *despite his desire to escape* its seeming meaninglessness,” a “pull” that is “*at war* with . . . the meaning of the Incarnation . . . *and so a temptation to be resisted*” (italics added).²³ Miller thus distinguishes Eliot’s

point of view—his “submission to time” and acceptance of necessary tension—from his friend Pound’s “totalitarianism,” in which, claims Miller, “man would abandon the very agonies that make him fully human.”²⁴ Eliot once more, this time in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1949): “Totalitarianism appeals to the desire to return to the womb. The contrast between religion and culture imposes a strain: we escape from this strain by attempting to revert to an identity of religion and culture which prevailed at a more primitive stage; as when we indulge in alcohol as an anodyne, we consciously seek unconsciousness. It is only by unremitting effort that we can persist in being individuals in a society, instead of merely members of a disciplined crowd.”²⁵ Remaining in tension is thus hard, demanding, but it is also a necessary burden, a blessing in disguise.

Tension marks the relationship between belief and doubt. Eliot said as much in 1931 in “The *Pensées* of Pascal”: distinguishing the Christian from the “thorough-going” skeptic Montaigne, he wrote of Pascal’s “facing unflinchingly the demon of doubt which is inseparable from the spirit of belief.” And in the long essay *Dante*, three years earlier, Eliot declared that “*acceptance* is more important than anything that can be called belief,”²⁶ a statement that rhymes with his account, in “Lancelot Andrewes” a year before that, of such examination as “terminat[es] in the ecstasy of assent.”²⁷

A critical style and manner “answerable” to Eliot’s in *Four Quartets* would then entail respect for the complexity that marks his understanding of Incarnation and the Christian point of view. It would neither simplify nor make easy the position that Eliot understood as *tensional* and thus involving great difficulty. For most of us, the best to be expected is those hints and guesses. The difficulty of understanding is so great, indeed, that Incarnation itself is but partially understood: we may arrive at understanding of time *or* timelessness, immanence *or* transcendence, but to arrive at understanding of their “necessary conjunction,” their “intersection,” paradigmatically given and revealed in *the* Incarnation of God in man in the person of Jesus the Christ, may forever escape us. We do not put the two halves together. Nevertheless, Eliot wrote *Four Quartets* to help us to arrive precisely at that point.

As such a work as I have been describing, *Four Quartets* presents great difficulty for the commentator, which Eliot, I suppose, would say is just the way it should be. It may not be sufficient to say, as I may be tempted, that the respondent to the great poem must forever keep in mind and respect the difficulty of the point of view at which the poet guides us to arrive; even negotiating the twists and turns,

inversions and complications, repetitions and scrupulous distinctions may not fulfill the job of difficulty that the commentator must enact. Of course, as early as *The Sacred Wood*, his own first collection of critical essays in 1920, Eliot maintained that the job of the critic is, although not simple, to *elucidate*: “He must simply elucidate.”²⁸

If, as has been observed, the poem elucidates itself, then the critic’s situation becomes more difficult, not less.²⁹ If such be the case, and I believe it is, the critic’s responsibility lies not just in respecting the poem’s difficulty and that of the prevailing point of view, as important as they are, but also in showing how the poem elucidates itself, in bringing the reader, in other words, to the point of understanding Incarnation. The critic is charged, then, with revealing—if not *embodying* as well—the way in which *Four Quartets* brings you to meaning: you arrive there and know the place for the first time. The critic’s *manner* is involved here as well as point, argument, and understanding.

There is a certain pastoral quality, or texture, involved in interpretation. Accommodation does not triumph, at least not directly, or as such. There is translation, for meaning is “carried over,” in the fundamentally hermeneutic spirit, but always the critic must remain aware of, and scrupulous in respecting, the difficulty and especially the tension of the point of view from which Eliot writes, that point of view that he understands himself as serving as medium and mediator of. Structurally at least, then, Eliot found himself in the same position as the commentator on *Four Quartets*.

Eliot concludes *Four Quartets* with telling, resonant verses about “complete simplicity” that costs everything. Eliot’s words here describe and account for, too, the critic’s situation in face of his poem. In any case, despite—or because of—the difficulty, “complete simplicity,” but simplicity that costs nothing less or other than everything.

TOWARD THE KINGDOM OF THE DEAD: FROM HOMER TO SWIFT (AND BEYOND)

In what the translator W. H. D. Rouse calls “the best story ever written,”³⁰ the great Trojan hero Odysseus, following victory and seeking home, literally comes face to face with death, the dead, and nothingness, and emerges from his visit to the kingdom of the dead a changing man. In *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), Jonathan Swift’s great satire on abuses of the human condition, the form of the “journey toward understanding” functions in its virtual absence as the thesis, to which “le mule’s” actual voyages serve as antithesis: Gulliver learns nothing

of a moral nature; he learns much, to be sure, but in keeping with his basic nature, it is of the factual and the technical kinds. *As a man*, he is the same upon his return from Houyhnhnmland as upon setting out on the voyage of marriage, which state he enters upon being “advised to alter [his] condition.”³¹ He is the same—only worse: more confirmed in his ways, more misanthropic (he, not Swift), prouder, more sanctimonious, and more ridiculous.

The Odyssey inaugurates the “journey toward understanding,” representing human life as a voyage of discovery and of education. The poem validates the power of the *mind*, pointedly comparing and measuring its capacity for understanding with its equally strong temptation to abuse it or use it ill—a point signaled from the very beginning as we learn that the story before us is that of a man who “saw many cities of men, and learnt their mind.”³² In fact, Homer’s great poem was long believed to contain everything a man needed to know, a notion discredited in our post-Enlightenment world. If Gulliver is the epic hero’s inverse, reluctantly returning home to a wife very nearly as long suffering and faithful as the famous Penelopeia, his is in all respects a reduction of the power of the mind to understand and of the heart to sympathize. Gulliver knows, and learns, nothing about the Hindu apperception invoked by T. S. Eliot at the end of *The Waste Land* and prominent, too, in *The Odyssey*: give, sympathize, control. In the eighteenth-century ship’s surgeon and proud “projector,” distorted and further reduced by “the new science,” the final chance for growth is lost when, in the third book, Gulliver has the opportunity to visit a version of Homer’s kingdom of the dead. This is the land of the Struldbruggs, immortals who long for relief from life never ending but ever worsening. Whereas that central voyage in *The Odyssey* serves as the hero’s single most important learning experience—his coming to know nothing(ness)—which changes him forever and for the better, Gulliver squanders his great gift, and so is thereafter unable to give himself: wishing only “to be entertained with scenes of pomp and magnificence,” Gulliver learns from Alexander the Great that “he was not poisoned, but died of a fever by excessive drinking” and from Hannibal, “passing the Alps,” that “he had not a drop of vinegar in his camp.”³³ Gulliver thus becomes the type of the antihero.

Odysseus, on the other hand, is the type of the hero, his story an epic but also a Bildungsroman. The result of that education, as well as its very nature, Homer captures magnificently when the poet remarks, after Odysseus, back in Ithaca and disguised as a beggar, resists the taunting of the suitors and their entourage and endures the slow, steady destruction of his home at their greedy hands: “His

heart came to heel like a hound, patient now until the end.” The strength of his new control is highlighted as Homer portrays the work of discipline—in language precise of metaphor: “He felt as fierce as a bitch standing over her litter of pups, snarling and growling at some one she does not know, and ready to fight; so his heart growled in him at their shameless ways. For a while he did not know whether to kill them all . . . But at last he rated his heart with grim humour.”³⁴

In *The Odyssey*, the pivotal site of education is the visit to the kingdom of the dead, Chapter 11. This is the *nekuia* with which Ezra Pound opens his monumental intellectual journey of the mind around ideas ancient and modern, *The Cantos*. Circe had advised Odysseus to go to “the house of Hades,” specifically “to ask directions from Tiresias the blind Theban seer,” who had spent part of his life as a man and part as a woman and thus was blessed with unparalleled sympathetic understanding.³⁵ He is also, according to Eliot’s own estimation, “the most important” figure in *The Waste Land*, able to foretell all that will happen between the amorous “young man carbuncular” and “the typist home at teatime” indifferent to his advances yet tolerant of them.³⁶

When, after a year’s dalliance with the beautiful Circe, who turns men into pigs, they reach the kingdom of the dead, a place eternally dark, Odysseus orders his men to hold “fast the victims,” while he digs a pit into which he immediately pours, as prescribed, “the drink-offering for All Souls.”³⁷ Thence he prays to “the empty shells of the dead,” promising to sacrifice a farrow cow when he gets back to Ithaca. Once he cuts the victims’ throats, “the souls of the dead who had passed away came up in a crown from Erebus,” among them “the soul of my comrade Elpenor,” who had not yet been buried: “We had left his body at Circe’s house, unmourned and unburied, since other tasks were pressing.” But adds Odysseus, “I was moved with pity for him”—a welcome sign, from his feckless leader. To Elpenor’s request that he be cremated and buried, Odysseus then promises, “Be sure I will do this for you, my unhappy friend.”³⁸

Next up is Anticleia, Odysseus’s grieving mother, whom he did not know had died. I detect a subtle movement in Odysseus, a just-beginning compassion, stirrings of a heart heretofore frozen. “My tears fell when I saw her,” he reports, and “I was moved with pity.” All the same, he does not forget his primary obligation, and so quite properly he “would not let her come near the blood before I had asked my questions of Tiresias.”³⁹ After drinking the blood, the Theban seer offers the sought-for information and advice, a both-and figure who functions much like the Portuguese sea captain Don Pedro de Mendez in the important fourth book of *Gulliver’s Travels*;

that is to say, Tiresias acts as an in-between, a figure of tension, both male and female. His prophecy is both exacting and uncompromising, every word of which is fulfilled in time; he does not let Odysseus forget the cause of woes, but neither does he suggest that Odysseus's fate is determined: all still *depends*, depends on how Odysseus acts, and regardless, there is to be much suffering:

"You seek to return home, mighty Odysseus, and home is sweet as honey. But God will make your voyage hard and dangerous; for I do not think the Earthshaker will fail to see you, and he is furious against you because you blinded his son. Nevertheless, you may all get safe home still, although not without suffering much, *if you can control yourself and your companions* when you have traversed the sea as far as Thrinacia. There you will find the cattle and sheep of Helios, who sees all things and hears all things.

"If you sail on without hurting them you may come safe to Ithaca, although not without suffering much. But if you do them hurt, then I foretell destruction for your ship and your crew; and if you escape it yourself, you will arrive late and miserable, all your companions lost, in the ship of a stranger. You will find trouble in your house, proud blustering men who devour your substance and plague your wife to marry and offer their bridal gifts. But you shall exact retribution from these men."⁴⁰

Once Tiresias's testimony is over, Odysseus notices his mother "in silence near the blood."⁴¹ She responds to his tender ministrations, telling him of his wife and his doting son and explaining that she herself had died from grief: "I missed you so much, and your clever wit and your gay merry ways, and life was sweet no longer, so I died." Odysseus is deeply moved: "A sharp pang pierced my heart."⁴² Anticleia further explains, as if looking about her and pointing to the utter deprivation of light and the nothingness marked by these "shells": "this is only what happens to mortals when one of us dies." Odysseus has long known death, of course, having brought it to scores of persons, but it has always seemed a light thing to him that, as Adam Bede comes to understand in George Eliot's nineteenth-century novel of that name, others have suffered and are suffering. Anticleia's parting advice is direct: "Make haste back to the light; but do not forget all this, tell it to your wife by and by."⁴³

While Odysseus is still talking with his mother, "a crowd of women came up sent by awful Persephoneia, wives and daughters of great men."⁴⁴ Homer reports their several conversations indirectly: Tyro first, daughter of Salmeoneus and wife of Cretheus Aiolides; next Antiope,

daughter of Asopos; then Alcmene, wife of Amphitryon, followed by Epicaste, mother of Oidipus; after whom comes “beautiful Chloris, whom Neleus married for her beauty, bringing magnificent gifts”,⁴⁵ and she is followed by Leda, wife of Tyndareos and mother of Castor and Polydeuces; next Iphimedeia, “the wife of Aloeus, who could say she had lain with Poseidon; then Phaidra, Procris, and Ariadne, Maira too, Clymene, and ‘accursed’ Eriphyle. I will not stay to name all I saw, wives or daughters of heroes, or night would end before I had done,” says Odysseus.⁴⁶ The focus throughout these conversations is relations, personal and family.

Odysseus says he soon encountered Agamemnon Atreides, whose death in the house of Aigisthos is a thread that Homer weaves in and out of *The Odyssey*. As to that “ghost,” the Trojan hero reports, “But there was no strength or power left in him such as there used to be in that body so full of life. I shed tears of pity myself when I saw him.”⁴⁷ Agamemnon follows with details of his death, concluding with strong advice to Odysseus—an inverse of Proverbs 31 and its relevance to Lemuel Gulliver—about women. Married to Helen, whose face, said Christopher Marlowe, launched a thousand ships and ignited the Trojan War, Agamemnon knows whereof he speaks. The women he now speaks of contrast at once with the wives and daughters of heroes just encountered *and* the faithful Penelopeia (such an account might have inspired Gulliver’s thoughtless misogyny). With specific relevance to Odysseus’s own situation, the great Agamemnon then concludes his lecture: “Then take warning now yourself, and never be too kind even to your wife. Never tell her all you have in your mind; you may tell something, but keep something to yourself. However, *you* will not be murdered by your wife, Odysseus. She is full of intelligence, and her heart is sound, your prudent and modest Penelopeia.”⁴⁸ And yet, after his solicitude and earned advice, Odysseus refuses to entertain Agamemnon’s heartfelt questions and concern, responding to him intemperately and with the same reckless disregard of feelings and propriety that he has so prominently displayed earlier. Clearly, Odysseus has not learned much—yet.

“But there is something I want very much to know. Have you heard anything about my son’s being alive somewhere in Orchomenos, or in sandy Pylos, or perhaps with Menelaos in Sparta? My Orestes is certainly not dead yet.”

I said, “Why do you ask me that, Atreides? I know nothing, whether he is alive or dead; and it is a bad thing to babble like the blowing wind.”⁴⁹

Next appears Achilles himself, to whom Odysseus at first seems very nearly as insensitive, albeit differently. "Now you are a potentate in this world of the dead," says the Trojan hero, greeting him. "Then do not despise your death, Achilles." So far, despite some pressure on his heartstrings, Odysseus has not grasped the nature of *death*, its nothingness (which is, of course, literally ungraspable). Achilles answers him, with appropriate shortness and sharpness, "'Don't bepraise death to me, Odysseus. I would rather be plowman to a yeoman farmer on a small holding than lord Paramount in the kingdom of the dead,'" Then he asks what Agamemnon asked: "'But do tell me something about that fine son of mine,'" To him, Odysseus responds very differently, sensitively and respectfully, calling Neoptolemos "the bravest of the brave"⁵⁰ and detailing his triumphs. "When I told him this, the ghost of clean-heeled Achilles marched away with long steps over the meadow of asphodel, proud to hear how his son had made his mark."⁵¹

In short space, Odysseus has rated his friend Agamemnon for asking exactly what Achilles does, the latter receiving a courteous and gracious account denied to the former. If there is some animosity toward Agamemnon, latent or otherwise, we are given no clue, here or elsewhere. Are we perhaps to conclude that Odysseus simply treats one man one way and the next in another, quite different way? Or is there perhaps a *process of education*, a journey toward understanding, under way in Odysseus's heart and mind, one that the visit to the dark and nothingness initiated and that we can follow from the encounters with Elpenor through that with Anticleia and beyond?

Before concluding, consider the next encounter, the last in the kingdom of the dead to be reported in detail. Odysseus first affirms what we have suggested about the nature of the inquiries posed by the shells of the dead:

The other ghosts of the dead halted in turn, and each of them *asked what was near to his heart*; but alone of them all the soul of Aias Telamoniades kept apart, still resentful for my victory over him when there was question about the arms of Achilles. The goddess his mother set them up as a prize for the best man. How I wish I had never won such a prize! What a noble life was lost for that! Aias, first of all the Danaans in noble looks and noble deeds, except Achilles the incomparable. And so I addressed him in gentle words.⁵² (italics added)

"Gentle words"—preceded by thoughts unfamiliar in Odysseus, whom we have not seen to be regretful, certainly not for besting

someone. Then his response to Aias, delivered with gentler words and greater sympathy and understanding than even to Achilles: “Aias, great son of a great father! were you never to forget your anger against me for these accursed arms, not even in death? That prize was a disaster, seeing that we lost a tower of strength like you. Our whole nation mourns your loss continually, no less than we mourn Achilles Peleides . . . Nay, come this way, my lord, and listen to my pleading: master your passion and your proud temper.”⁵³ Odysseus has begun to show signs of understanding what is important, what matters, what *should* matter. We thus see a heart responding, and “what was near to” it is at last worth preserving. Rather than hypocrisy, I suggest, Odysseus’s last words here represent the results of a dawning recognition; it is as if in Aias’s pride he sees himself, his own temper, passion, and pride.

After further encounters, summarily represented, with other great figures, including Minos, Orion, Tityos, Tantalus, Sisyphos, and Heracles, differently fearful, Odysseus returns to his ship and orders his men “to loose the hawser and get away,”⁵⁴ eager now to get back to the light, thence to get home, to his wife, his son, his father, his land, and his people.

The story of Odysseus is far from over, and so is that of his education. In fact, the voyage to the kingdom of the dead completes Book 11 of 24. The point that the hero’s education is just begun, and that it is an ongoing process rather than anything like a single act of enlightenment, is made in the next book, when Circe has to berate him: “You hot-head! Fighting and asking for trouble is all you care about,”⁵⁵ Prompting her outburst is Odysseus’s reckless declaration of intent vis-à-vis the horrible Charybdis. In the event, after lying to his men about Circe’s injunction, he experiences genuine emotion and expresses deep feeling upon Scylla’s grabbing “six of my men out of the ship, the best and strongest of the crew.”⁵⁶ Here and elsewhere in *The Odyssey*, thematic weight is conveyed by means of comparison and measurement, for the reader recalls an earlier, like situation and marks, especially, the difference in the hero’s response: Scylla “devoured them, shrieking and stretching out their hands to me in the death-struggle. *That was the most pitiable sight my eyes ever beheld* in all my toils and troubles on the weary ways of the sea”⁵⁷ (italics added).

The second half of *The Odyssey*, the remaining 12 books, treats the hero’s return to Ithaca. The pace here is, for several books, massively slow, at least relative to the preceding. Counseled by Athena, Odysseus returns disguised as a beggar. The aim is to test the suitors, to see who will sympathize and give, and to learn thereby who deserves to

live. There is a further goal, unknown to Odysseus, for disguised as a beggar he too will be tested severely, his test being of self-control.

There can be little doubt that Odysseus is a *changing* man after and as a result of his visit to the kingdom of the dead. I say "changing," not "changed," because a process is involved, a journey, that begins there and does not end even at poem's end. Odysseus is, simply, on the way. Homer thus sets the pattern not just for representations of the so-called dark night of the soul but also for stories of education and development. A striking point is the way in which the ancient Greek poet brings together revelations of moral incapacity, accordant necessary *purgation*, and clear and pointed difference and development. What Odysseus lacks, moreover, is a universal condition, and the kind of purgation in the kingdom of the dead, not just the mere fact of purgation, is held forth as perhaps the critical one in the clash of contending approaches to life and living. Death precedes life, and you have to come face to face with nothingness before you can "make haste . . . to the light." Homer sets in motion a *process* of education, a series of steps or stages along the way toward enlightenment that is never easy nor ever complete: thus even at story's end, on the last page in fact, Odysseus is shown to be still changing, still progressing, yet subject to reversion.

In *The Odyssey*, the visit to the kingdom of the dead serves as climax or, better, *peripeteia*, the "turn" marking the critical event in the hero's spiritual, intellectual, and moral journey *toward* understanding. Without it, Odysseus would likely have remained proud, egoistical, and reckless; as such, he surely would not have been able to win out over the suitors or to reclaim his kingdom and his wife. The "detour" to Hades thus turns out to be no detour at all, although it represents incarnation of indirectness.

GULLIVER'S TRAVELS

In a letter of September 29, 1725, just as he was finishing *Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift wrote to his good friend, the essayist-poet and fellow satirist Alexander Pope affirming that "the chief end I propose to myself in all my labours is to vex the world rather than divert it."⁵⁸

The *form* of the "journey toward understanding" functions here in its virtual absence as the thesis to which Gulliver's actual voyages serve as antithesis. Most apparent, perhaps, is the lack of moral education in the title character. He learns much, to be sure, but in keeping with his basic character, it is of the factual and the technical sort. Eminently adaptable, as well as gullible, Lemuel Gulliver learns nothing

about the love of a good woman—indeed, his first name derives from Proverbs 31, whose theme is precisely that. Nor does he, possibly as a result, care more for his country or home at the end of his travels than at the beginning. His judgment of England varies throughout the four voyages, evidently depending on his author's own immediate satirical purposes and needs.

It is impossible to imagine a more un-Odysseus-like character than Gulliver upon his return home from Houyhnhnmland. He had departed on his fourth and last voyage with his “poor wife big with child.”⁵⁹ No necessity attended this possible escape, and the land of the horses and the yahoos becomes his utopia, a garden of Eden, where there is no falsehood. In fact, says Gulliver, never one to understand exactly what he is revealing about himself—the *Travels* is thus a sort of dramatic monologue, in prose, pre-Browning—he finds so much that “opened my eyes and enlarged my understanding, that I began to view the actions and passions of man in a very different light, and to think the honour of my own kind not worth managing.” His “understanding” extends no further or deeper, leading him not to wish desperately to return home, as did his ancient predecessor on the seas, but rather to wish to remain where he finds himself, with no apparent thought of wife, children, or home: “I had not been a year in this country before I contracted such a love and veneration for the inhabitants, that I entered on a firm resolution never to return to human kind, but to pass the rest of my life among these admirable Houyhnhnms in the contemplation and practice of every virtue; where I could have no example or incitement to vice.”⁶⁰ Gulliver thus imagines vice as the product of environment, oblivious to his own evil nature and to the Fall that occurred in that other garden. What Gulliver seeks—although he cannot, of course, articulate the desire—is to escape *human nature*. His previous voyages—that to Laputa and so on, which Swift actually wrote last—exposed him to various nonhuman possibilities, and he was readily smitten with the Brobdingnagians as well as the Laputans, but his fourth and last seems the most attractive precisely because the horses are “rational animals”—that is, beings governed perfectly by reason, a perversion of the double nature that he has sought to escape in the first place. He cannot abide the tension that characterizes human existence, where we dangle, writes T. S. Eliot, over “a grimpen.”

While in Houyhnhnmland, Gulliver says he thought thus of his family and humankind: “When I thought of my family, my friends, my countrymen, or the human race in general, I considered them as they really were, yahoos in shape and disposition, only a little

more civilized, and qualified with the gift of speech, but making no other use of reason than to improve and multiply those vices whereof their brethren in this country had only the share that nature allotted them.”⁶¹ Gulliver simply cannot abide himself—that is, his nature as human, fallen, mixed, an incapacity already apparent in Brobdingnag, “because the comparison gave me so despicable conceit of my self”;⁶² “When I happened to behold the reflection of my own form in a lake or a fountain, I turned away my face in horror and detestation of myself, and could better endure the sight of a common yahoo, than of my own person.”⁶³ “Know then thyself,” Swift’s friend Pope would soon write in *An Essay on Man*.⁶⁴

Back home at last, in Redriff, Gulliver amuses himself in his “own speculations in my little garden,” applying the lessons he says he learned from his Houyhnhnm master and trying “to behold my figure often in a glass, and thus if possible habituate myself by time to tolerate the sight of a human creature.”⁶⁵ In this, even after much time, he has little success. In fact, he concludes his *Travels* with these confirming and revealing words (Pope took his fondness for horses and made a series of poems out of his peculiarities, suggesting an unspeakable reason, in “Mrs. Mary Gulliver’s Lament,” for his fondness for the Sorrel Mare):⁶⁶

I began last week to permit my wife to sit at dinner with me, at the farthest end of a long table, and to answer (but with the utmost brevity) the few questions I ask her. Yet the smell of a yahoo continuing very offensive, I always keep my nose well stopped with rue, lavender, or tobacco leaves. And although it be hard for a man late in life to remove old habits, I am not altogether out of hopes in some time to suffer a neighbor yahoo in my company without the apprehensions I am yet under of his teeth or his claws.⁶⁷

Gulliver had earlier confessed that, upon his return, as his “wife and family received me with great surprise and joy,” he found that “the sight of them filled me only with hatred, disgust and contempt, and the more by reflecting on the near alliance I had to them.”⁶⁸ The recognition that “by copulating with one of the yahoo species I had become a parent of more . . . struck me with the utmost shame, confusion, and horror.”⁶⁹ There is a total lack—a complete absence—of sympathy, as of giving *because* there is no moral understanding.

His *human* nature Gulliver simply cannot accept or grant. Thus he comes to say, in the book’s penultimate paragraph:

My reconciliation to the yahoo-kind in general might not be so difficult if they would be content with those vices and follies only which nature hath entitled them to. I am not in the least provoked at the sight of a lawyer, a pickpocket, a colonel, a fool, a lord, a gamester, a politician, a whoremonger, a physician, an evidence, a suborner, an attorney, a traitor, or the like; this is all according to the due course of things; but when I behold a lump of deformity and diseases both in body and mind, smitten with pride, it immediately breaks all the measures of my patience; neither shall I be ever able to comprehend how such an animal and vice could tally together.⁷⁰

Gulliver embodies what he rails against, this pride of which the horses knew nothing, having no name for it, the same that he observed beginning to affect the loathsome yahoos. Here follows the last paragraph: "But the Houyhnhnms, who live under the government of reason, are no more proud of the good qualities they possess, than I should be for not wanting a leg or an arm, which no man in his wits would boast of, although he must be miserable without them. I dwell the longer upon this subject from the desire I have to make the society of an English yahoo by any means not insupportable, and therefore I here entreat those who have any tincture of this absurd vice, that they will not presume to appear in my sight."⁷¹

In the introductory "Letter from Capt. Gulliver to His Cousin Sympson," dated April 2, 1727, Gulliver continues on this note, stupefied that, "after above six months' warning, I cannot conclude that my book hath produced one single effect according to my instructions."⁷² Therefore, he writes, defiantly, sounding very much like the self-claimed socially conscious and selfless Projector of "A Modest Proposal": "I must freely confess, that since my last return some corruptions of my yahoo nature have revived in me by conversing with a few of your species, and particularly those of mine own family, by an unavoidable necessity; else I should never have attempted so absurd a project as that of reforming the yahoo race in this kingdom; but I have now done with all such visionary schemes for ever."⁷³ Gulliver thus fails to set his own lands in order. Because he has not first corrected himself, then his family, the cultivation of his garden producing only spiders and weeds, he cannot possibly reform his "race," which he would, via his "visionary" and "enthusiastick" scheming, do without mediation.

The negative points to the positive, functional in its absence. The same is not quite true of the visit to the kingdom of the dead. In the course of the structurally dissonant third voyage, Gulliver visits

Glubbdubdrib because it promises “no disagreeable amusement.”⁷⁴ The word signifies, apparently, “The Island of *Sorcerers* or *Magicians*,” the governor “By his skill in necromancy” having “power of calling whom he pleaseth from the dead, and commanding their service for twenty-four hours”⁷⁵—the kingdom of the dead thus reduced, sadly, to something of a freak show. Gulliver spends little time in Glubbdubdrib and devotes little space to his visit. He is still given a remarkable opportunity, for his Highness the Governor “ordered me to call up whatever persons I would choose to name, and in whatever numbers among all the dead from the beginning of the world to the present time, and command them to answer any questions I should think fit to ask; with this condition, that my questions must be confined within the compass of the times they lived in. And one thing I might depend upon, that they would certainly tell me truth, for lying was a talent of no use in the lower world.”⁷⁶ Odysseus, of course, seeks directions to get safely home, and talks first with a recently deceased mate and then his own mother, who died for missing him so. The great hero learns what others have come to value in life. If Odysseus learns through suffering, Gulliver fails to learn (anything of real importance) because he seeks, thoroughly modern he, to be diverted and entertained: “And because my first inclination was to be entertained with scenes of pomp and magnificence,” he chooses Alexander the Great, who *might* have revealed something akin to that which the great heroes Agamemnon, Achilles, and Aias do. But no: “He assured me upon his honour that he was not poisoned, but died of a fever by excessive drinking.” Hannibal’s response confirms the nature of Gulliver’s interests and so the kind of question he poses; it is merely technical: “Next I saw Hannibal passing the Alps, who told me he had not a drop of vinegar in his camp”—with which to operate, says Livy, on a rock blocking his army’s way in Italy. And so with Caesar and Pompey and Brutus, Gulliver concludes, very much in and true to his character: “It would be tedious to trouble the reader with relating what vast numbers of illustrious persons were called up, to gratify that insatiable desire I had to see the world in every period of antiquity placed before me. I chiefly fed my eyes with beholding the destroyers of tyrants and usurpers, and the restorers of liberty to oppressed and injured nations. But it is impossible to express the satisfaction I received in my own mind, after such a manner as to make it a suitable entertainment to the reader.”⁷⁷ There is no hint of purgation here, no controlling of reckless disregard, no check on the ego or the will. Instead, there is satisfaction and entertainment—for Gulliver, who then shares the same with his (gentle) reader.

Unlike Odysseus, Lemuel Gulliver—the mule, the jackass—does not journey to understanding. His is the reverse of the classic form that Eliot invokes in *The Waste Land* and insists on, especially in *Four Quartets*. Gulliver's author does, however, understand, and he makes the necessary understanding clear in positive and not merely negative ways.

The positive force in the "Voyage to the Houyhnhnms," and perhaps the most effective of Swift's mouthpieces in *Gulliver's Travels*, is the Portuguese sea captain who rescues Gulliver. Don Pedro de Mendez, whose surname sounds like but is different from *mendax*, is expert with "the wheel," in firm control of his ship, his men, and himself. He also gives Gulliver quite a lot, sympathizing with him and his plight.

Of him, Gulliver says first that "he was a very courteous and generous person," who immediately offered food and drink. After he "assured me he only meant to do me all the service he was able," Gulliver observes that he "spoke so movingly, that at last I descended to treat him like an animal which had some little portion of reason."⁷⁸ There is no "descent" on Don Pedro's part, nor arrogance or presumption. Instead, while he is, as a human, an animal, he also has reason, as well as compassion and sympathy. He thereby functions as an effective rejoinder to the representation of the major either-or that Gulliver has erected: either the horses or the yahoos, either a beast or a rational animal. In the aforementioned letter to Pope as he was finishing *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift wrote that he had "got materials toward a treatise, proving the falsity of that definition *animal rationale*, and to show it would be only *rationis capax*"—exactly Don Pedro's rhetorical effect.

Don Pedro proves not so gullible as Gulliver, nor of such "easy belief," seriously questioning his charge and doubting much of his story. Gulliver begins to call him "a wise man" and confides that he "would suffer the greatest hardships rather than return to live among yahoos."⁷⁹ After further solicitations, including the proffer of "a suit of clothes newly made,"⁸⁰ Gulliver manages to say this of the good captain, condescension again apparent, along with some apparent envy:

The captain had no wife, nor above three servants, none of which were suffered to attend at meals, and his whole deportment was so obliging, added to very good *human* understanding, that I really began to tolerate his company. He gained so far upon me . . . By degrees I was brought into another room, from whence I peeped into the street, but

drew my head back in a fright. In a week's time he seduced me down to the door. I found my terror gradually lessened, but my hatred and contempt seemed to increase. I was at last bold enough to walk the street [of Lisbon, where they made port] in his company, but I kept my nose well stopped with rue, or sometimes with tobacco.⁸¹

Don Pedro *embodies* compassion as he shows, *pace* Gulliver, very good human understanding.

He does more, urging Gulliver not only to consider home, as Odysseus's men had to do before his visit to the kingdom of the dead, but also to return there. He even recalls the voice of Proverbs 31:

In ten days Don Pedro, to whom I had given some account of my domestic affairs, put it upon me as a point of honour and conscience, that I ought to return to my native country, and live at home with my wife and children. He told me, there was an English ship in the port just ready to sail, and he would furnish me with all things necessary. It would be tedious to repeat his arguments, and my contradictions. He said it was altogether impossible to find such a solitary island as I had desired to live in; but I might command in my house, and pass time in a manner as recluse as I pleased.

At last, Gulliver complies. Don Pedro "lends" him twenty pounds, taking "kind leave of me, and embraced me at parting, which I bore as well as I could."⁸²

Don Pedro de Mendez is a *via media*, and as such he may be more a locus of humanity than a positive force, at least structurally. Satire needs a thesis to make its antithesis work; otherwise, you have a situation like that of readers before Defoe's *Shortest Way with Dissenters*, both sides of whose controversy thought they were being pilloried, there being no apparent way to tell the author's position. Literature of the nonsatirical sort typically does not function via a stated or embodied thesis; essays, on the other hand, function via *embodied* truth, typically in the speaker-essayist. With his "speaker" an object of the satire, Swift was forced, as in "A Modest Proposal," to represent his own views through the medium of a positive force, positive thematically, that is. Don Pedro functions as an alternative, the details of which are not spelled out but embodied in a generalized response to human being.

In the event, there may be very little that is more vexing to the human spirit—and less comforting, diverting, and purely entertaining—than a representation lacking positive force. Answers are not spelled out,

no dogma or doctrine provided. In the case of *Gulliver's Travels*, Don Pedro de Mendez, Portuguese sea captain and rescuer of a stranded pilgrim, is a sort of interpreter, to think of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, but also a male version of Dante's Francesca; Don Pedro inhabits a territory marked by ever-present but productive tension between opposite powers and attractions. The middle way, said Eliot, is of all ways the most difficult.

Vexing, then, *Gulliver's Travels* certainly is, despite its susceptibility to mass appeal. That the protagonist, who is also the narrator, is no hero vexes. We should expect him to learn from his several voyages into "remote nations of the world," but what he learns is either technical stuff or confirmation of his very worst inclinations and proclivities; the ending merely hardens the character (in more than one sense) we see in the opening. There is no growth or expansion or deepening of understanding, such as we might expect coming to *Gulliver's Travels* with Homer's *Odyssey* in mind. No leader, Gulliver is ever a follower, a coward, a sycophant, and a fool. Even after all his experiences, during which his sufferings suffer in comparison with his adaptability and ever-present enchantments and dangerous enthusiasm, Lemuel Gulliver—*splendide mendax*—shows next to no sympathy, even for his own family. Surely it vexes, too, that we, gentle readers, cannot—are unable to—sympathize with him in turn.

As already noted in passing, an important parallel exists between the pattern and process that Homer establishes and Oriental understanding. By the latter, I refer to the Hindu notion in the Upanishads cited by Eliot at the end of *The Waste Land*: *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, *Damyata* (give, sympathize, control). Certainly all three injunctions figure as major instruction in *The Odyssey*, in both the dramatic representation and Odysseus's own mini-lectures to the suitors. They are dependent, says Homer, on the recognition and acknowledgment of change, of the possibility, even the likelihood, of a reversal of fortune, thus a capacity—not merely to "envision the stranger's heart," Cynthia Ozick's idea of the critical Hebraic understanding—to *participate* with all humankind in the human condition, which means that each life is finite, ending in the same inevitable, unavoidable fact of death.⁸³ *That* we precisely avoid and would deny it in any way possible and in every way possible.

Overcoming of recklessness, often represented as pretension to self-sufficiency, precedes satisfactory and effective action. There is, evidently, no direct, unmediated path. Eclipse of recklessness depends on control, manifest in Greek and Hindu alike as *self*-control, and control comes about with and from sympathy with others, their plight, and

thus one's own shared plight. Sympathy itself may be impossible, or at least unlikely in the degree, absent forceful, palpable encounter with the fact, the reality, of death and nothingness.

Only with recognition and acceptance of death *as a part of life* comes the capacity to give, and giving depends on sympathy. Thus, as Eliot suggests, and the Upanishads before him, as well as Homer, giving, sympathizing, and controlling are bound and wound together, perhaps inseparable from one another—a trinity. This pattern persists and, of course, varies in texture and particulars. Eliot did not agree with Homer *in toto*, differing most significantly on the matter of “purgation”: as a Christian he came, as we shall document in due course, to understand the necessity instead of *purification*, just as he understood the insufficiency of *self*-control.⁸⁴

CHAPTER 2



THE PATTERN REFINED

FOUR QUARTETS AND THE WAY OF INCARNATION

ARRIVING (AT LAST)

Four Quartets consists of four distinct but related parts, each published separately over a number of years: “Burnt Norton,” which initially appeared in 1936 in Eliot’s *Collected Poems*; “East Coker,” which first appeared in the Easter supplement to *The New English Weekly* in 1940 and was published later that year as a small book by Faber and Faber, the firm for which Eliot worked; “The Dry Salvages,” which first appeared in *The New English Weekly* the following year and was published in book form later that year by Faber and Faber; and “Little Gidding,” first published in late 1942 by Faber and Faber. The four were collected and published together as *Four Quartets* by Harcourt, Brace on May 11, 1943 (the first British edition, from Faber and Faber, appeared in the fall of the following year). On the original dust jacket appear these words acknowledging the separate publication of the poems and adding, “The author, however, has always intended them to be published as one volume, and to be judged as a single work.”¹

Each of the four poems consists of five parts, with considerable parallelism among the four. Each of the four is also named for a specific and special place: in turn, a manor house in Gloucestershire; a small village in Somersetshire, where Old Possum’s ancestor Sir Thomas Elyot, author of *The Boke named the Governour*, was reputedly born and where the poet is buried; “a small group of rocks, with a beacon, off the N.E. coast of Cape Ann, Massachusetts,” Eliot tells us;² and the site of an important Anglican religious community founded by

Nicholas Ferrar in 1625, the chapel desecrated in the 1640s. *Four Quartets* also treats the four elements in order: air, earth, water, and fire.

Four Quartets is difficult to read and understand, embodying its author's claim many years before that modern literature "*must*" be difficult because "our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity," and so "the poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning."³ Some passages seem deliberately and consciously to resist the reader. The poem *looks*, however, less difficult than Eliot's other major poems: "Prufrock," *The Waste Land*, "The Hollow Men," and *Ash Wednesday*, for gone are fragments, replaced by complete sentences, gone too cryptic references and allusions. Even though *Four Quartets* "looks" but for end-stopped lines like prose discourse, which it often sounds like as well, the sentences themselves, charged with meaning, present considerable religious and philosophical difficulty. The subject is, after all, time.

Critical commentary on *Four Quartets* is voluminous. Early studies by Helen Gardner, Elizabeth Drew, and Hugh Kenner remain among the most helpful.⁴ Later, more recondite articles and essays often seem to fail the true test of criticism, calling attention to their own cleverness rather than hastening the reader's informed return to the poem. Furthermore, recent studies appear to assume a valid reading of the poem, but precisely *that* is propaedeutic to studies of "ideology," biographical application and insight, and identification of often abstruse philosophical and theological import.

As to reading the poem, the fact is, Eliot's call for "difficult" poetry stands alongside and in tension with the embrace at the end of *Four Quartets* of "complete simplicity" whose cost is everything. You might wonder, then, whether the seemingly formless form of Eliot's last major poem bears responsibility for the reader's difficulty at least as much as the ideas and feelings that constitute its foundation. Throughout his career, Eliot also wrestled with the necessity, as stated in *Ash Wednesday*, of "restoring / With a new verse the ancient rhyme."⁵ The "new verse" of *Four Quartets* smacks of "the poetry of statement" sometimes associated with the English Augustan poets John Dryden and Alexander Pope, the former a poet, critic, and playwright on whom Eliot, to more or greater degree, may have modeled his career.

Confronting *Four Quartets* for the first time, you might read and reread and then read the poem again and again. The temptation is always, it seems, to worry about a section, a passage, even a single

verse or a lone word until you feel more or less confident in your understanding of it; that is, our reading strategy is often implicitly progressive, linear, and piecemeal. Eliot thwarts this effort, no doubt intentionally. Words move in time, he insists, refusing to stay still and thus greatly complicating the task of understanding. In a very real way, Eliot teaches in and through the poem how to read it—reading this poem becoming, then, an analogue of the attempt to understand “the world.”

Eliot thus answers Keats’s insistent question regarding the Grecian urn, surpassing the Romantic understanding: time is *not* the enemy. The pattern can be read, although the effort is considerable and demanding. We typically get it only half right, failing to grasp, for instance, that “that which is only living / Can only die.” Paradox abounds, deriving from Incarnation, the paradigmatic instance of which is the greatest paradox of all: God becoming (fully) man—grasping that He is one *or* the other may be easy enough. In a sense, what more need be said?

Readers nowadays profess, and evince, difficulty in understanding Incarnation. When asked to define “the Incarnation,” they often respond, “You mean reincarnation?” The idea is actually, of course, startlingly simple, although unexpected and iconoclastic. Readers often cannot believe or seem to accept that something so important could be so simple, and as a result of their disbelief they make it difficult—just as we all too often reduce that which is difficult, simplifying so as to enable our grasp. If the matter is utterly easy, we obstruct belief and forestall acceptance because it does not require our effort to bring it to (our) terms.

Eliot’s “pageant play” *The Rock*, published in 1934, the year before “Burnt Norton,” the first of *Four Quartets*, may prove helpful:

Then came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in and of time,
 A moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call history; tran-
 secting, bisecting the world of time, a moment in time but not like a
 moment of time,
 A moment in time but time was made through that moment: for
 without the meaning there is no time, and that moment of time gave
 the meaning.
 Then it seemed as if men must proceed from light to light, in the light
 of the Word.

That way proves enormously difficult and trying: “always struggling, always reaffirming, always resuming their march on the way that was lit by the light; / Often halting, loitering, straying, delaying, returning, yet following no other way.”⁶

But still, because neither words nor we can be still, responsible reading is hard though not impossible. For all his insistence on being difficult, Eliot wants to be read and to be read well. Toward that end, he tries to help his reader in *Four Quartets*. In the poem, he asks more than once whether he should repeat, and he also acknowledges that “that” was but one way of saying it. Eliot works hard to make his poem—in his words, describing the critical encounter with the “familiar compound ghost” in “Little Gidding”—“Too strange . . . for misunderstanding.” Both that strangeness and that reader assistance occur in repeated and resonant words and phrases: for instance, the repetition, resonance, and relation of “intersection” in the line following that just quoted (“intersection” pointing, that is, to Incarnation as the “impossible union” of time and timelessness); of the account of words in the fifth section of “Little Gidding” with that in the fifth section of “Burnt Norton”; and, pivotally, the description of writing there in “Little Gidding” with that of dancing in “East Coker.” You are invited—and you can ill decline the offer—to relate these verses to those earlier in the account of Elizabethan rustics around an inviting bonfire (doubleness, perhaps paradox, then). Relation, that is, association, “conjunction,” “concorde,” “matrimonie”—sacrament.

Difficulty is a theme that Eliot exploits in *Four Quartets*. His is, after all, no “*easy God*” (to quote Dryden in *Religio Laici* or *A Laymans Faith*),⁷ or latitudinarian, but strict, demanding—and difficult Himself. It is, of course, so easy for the reader to fool herself into thinking she has grasped the meaning, purpose, and significance of a text. Herbert N. Schneidau once described Yahweh as “an agent of disillusionment,”⁸ and Eliot’s Christian God is not very different. Following suit, the poet would have to work hard to ensure that we not be allowed too easily or readily to appropriate his text.

But—and here enters the supreme difficulty—difficulty itself butts up against the repeated appeal to simplicity. The result is tension—and a middle way, which Eliot once described as the most difficult of all ways to follow. In the middle in which we find ourselves, in a “dark wood,” in fact, little is more menacing than the light of fancy, our own created light, that which we fashion according to our own benighted light. And the riskiest enchantment follows, including that of (false) understanding.

I suspect, then, that we return, willy-nilly, to hints and guesses somewhat chastened perhaps, wizened probably, a little wiser maybe, just a bit more receptive and responsive. With Incarnation as pattern in our minds, we reconsider structure—that is, the way the poem moves from first word to last. Incarnation names that movement, which means that you can, in effect, enter the poem at any moment.

The poem never takes you—or allows you to roam—far from Incarnation. Eliot's thought moves toward the culmination or, rather, the concluding verses that say it all, doubly or thrice repeating, since he has already said it both directly and indirectly: "And all shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well" when the fire and the rose become one—not coterminous, but one.

Fire has already been established as the purifying agent that is precisely *half* the truth. It is thus essential, and it is unexpected—"Little Gidding" is all about the destruction of our great and fondest expectations. Nothing is more unexpected than the shocking truth of the fourth, lyrical section. All along, of course, *Four Quartets* has emphasized both the necessity of difficulty and the nature of any truly progressive movement. *The Waste Land* had, long before, represented "death by water," exposing the human quest for water as at least problematic and quite possibly wrongheaded—hope is so often hope for the wrong thing, warns "East Coker." The same poem, in its lyrical, fourth section has insisted that "Our only health is the disease," representing "the absolute paternal care" as that which "prevents us everywhere." Paradox thus abounds, existing as perhaps the only thing we *can* expect in *Four Quartets*.

Fire alone is but half the truth, for fire *is also* the rose. Everywhere in Eliot, or so it seems, the rose functions as a potent symbol, a virtual cornucopia of feelings and meanings: it is sweetness itself, and beauty, and delicacy, elegance and art not of human making, available to perception and understanding in the oft-mentioned rose garden, which "Burnt Norton" introduced in relation to time and the way toward its conquest—the same paradoxical *way* that defines fire's ultimate valuation. Eliot thus declares the essential point that time is the means—the way—in, through, and by means of which time is conquered. And only through fire is fire quenched. The pattern apparent in the world and available to human understanding is paradoxical, incarnational: love devises the torment.

Four Quartets thus addresses the Romantic conception of time as merely destructive: time gives us moments of glory (Wordsworth's Intimations Ode, Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci") and takes them, always, away, leaving us wan and forlorn. No, says Eliot, while

also exposing evolutionary notions of time as equally tenuous and dangerous.

I have always found difficult Krishna's message in the third section of "The Dry Salvages." He concludes, "Fare forward." The poet then repeats the injunction, apparently accepting and embracing it. Crucial is overcoming the nearly irresistible temptation to look back with regret; of perhaps equal importance is forgoing the lure of the future, of looking to the future *with expectation*. The idea of "an equal mind" is certainly appealing, and it no doubt comes close at least to Eliot's own point. But as *Ash Wednesday* insists, quoting Arnaut Daniel, whom Eliot's friend Pound revered, "Be mindful." Distinction is necessary, and equality is not called for so much as understanding, which exercises caution about any easy appropriation of ideas, including Buddhist-ascetic ones and their almost immediate appeal, perhaps owing to their exotic and alien nature and texture.

As always, Eliot insists on the difficulty posed by understanding. Fare forward, yes, but that may mean the necessity to continue on. Nothing is ever easy in and for Eliot. Moreover, intellectual comprehension and apperception are one thing; Eliot knows that more is involved, more required of us: it is not enough to see—action is also necessary, the act of faring forward. As he says in the key passage in *Four Quartets*, that that leads to the annunciation of Incarnation, which is resonant with themes we are just now considering: apprehension of the intersection of timelessness with time, that "attended" moment is as difficult as it is rare. Understanding—with all the difficulty that it entails—is but part of the story, perhaps not even half at that. More follows, or should, involving prayer, thought, and action. The way is indeed difficult, and the middle way is of all ways the most difficult.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF ARRIVAL

The way Eliot begins *Four Quartets* bears considerable significance. I mean the two epigraphs from Heraclitus, which he first used for "Burnt Norton": the more familiar declares that "the way" up and "the way" down are one and the same, while the first represents the age-old difference between private and public, the individual and tradition, and (in terms I borrow from Jonathan Swift) the spider and the bee.⁹ Both quotations from Heraclitus have to do with *way*, a notion central to *Ash Wednesday* as well as *Four Quartets*.

Both poems are self-reflexive and metapoetic, commenting directly on what *Ash Wednesday* urgently advises: “*Sovegna vos*” (“Be mindful”). Because temptations, enchantments, misrepresentations, and the notorious “slipperiness” of words themselves exist and proliferate, the speaker at the end of that poem prays, “Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood.” Differences between truth and error often seem minor and easily mistakable, and so the speaker in *Four Quartets* acknowledges, after an introductory verse paragraph rendered in stylized fashion, that he has just written in unsatisfactory manner, in “worn-out” fashion, that leaves us still with the slipperiness and instability of words and the “intolerable wrestle” with their meanings.

In “The Dry Salvages,” the speaker introduces another voice, who sometimes wonders if it is possible to say “the same thing” in more than one “way.” The reader’s awareness is enforced that this poem is, in part, about words and their acquisition of meaning, about a reader’s reception of words and meanings, about “being mindful” and not seduced or lulled into falsehoods. Shortly after this first mention of Krishna, the poet avers, “And the way up is the way down.” But the reader must question whether this is so—so much depends on the tiny word “is” that you have to wonder what the meaning of “is” is. “East Coker” brings the matter of “way” into full light, while reiterating the quest for precision of expression, with the oft-felt necessity of reiterating the question whether different words on occasion can say “the same thing.”

Ash Wednesday insists on precision, requiring it of the reader and making it thematically and rhetorically central via the difference between the opening verse of the first poem and that of the sixth and last: “Because I do not hope to turn” becomes “Although I do not hope to turn.” The word “turn” itself, whose significance Eliot took from Bishop Andrewes¹⁰ and that he made palpable via the seemingly endless pages you must turn in the first editions in order finally to reach the poem, catches the critical meanings: on Ash Wednesday, of course, the Christian *turns* from sin, in penitence, toward Lent and purification and (then) Easter.

From “Gerontion” (1920) on, Word is Christ is understanding. Through the Word, you (may) come to know God, just as through words, you (may) come to know the Word. We can begin to appreciate the essential role played by the (fifth) sections on words in *Four Quartets*.

“Little Gidding” stresses “way” from the beginning, opening with the other-dimensional matter of “Midwinter spring,” which is spring although not in “time’s covenant.” This last poem of *Four Quartets*

proceeds to a highly charged scene, the “chapel perilous” (*The Waste Land*) redefined: it is the “sacred” place where King Charles I once prayed, which was not long thereafter laid waste by Cromwell’s Roundheads, and now serves as a figure of the unexpected (“rhymes” sound of the birth in the lowly stable in Bethlehem). Emphasis falls on “way,” the point having to do with “place” as more than geographical and spatial, as in fact, in another “covenant” or dimension, where meaning intersects with it, as “may” precisely does with “May.” In the same way, the speaker of “East Coker” clearly and firmly establishes his own spiritual situation or “condition,” where he is, where he would be coming from: in darkness, lacking a firm “foothold,” approaching an abyss, and all the while menaced by enchantments and alluring lights. Eliot echoes—or “rhymes,” to use again the word made effective in *Ash Wednesday*—this description with the account in “East Coker” of being “in the middle way.” Part of the problem, as “Burnt Norton” has elucidated, is the refusal, or inability, of words to “stay in place,” to “stay still.” The issue thus revolves about pattern, the “detail” of which is “movement.”

The world’s abuse of words—and neglect of the Word—acts precisely as a prelude to the poems’ clearest and most direct statement concerning the pattern, identified as Incarnation (minus *the*) and figured in relation to the matter of reading, thus linking up with such earlier figures as Madame Sosostriis in *The Waste Land*. This is arguably the most important *statement* of his understanding that Eliot ever rendered. The passage begins with the usual universal recourse, particularly in times of “distress,” to various forms of divination. Eliot follows with remarkably clear verses on the pattern, indicated above, whose “detail,” “Burnt Norton” has said, is “movement.” The centrality of “way” here is not to be overlooked or minimized. In *Four Quartets*, Eliot incarnates the “way” of Incarnation by offering words and verses that are “attended”; that is, passages “intersect” with one another, meaning never lying “unattended” in one place. (Of course, reading is itself the intersection of text and reader, criticism the act of turning reception into response.)¹¹

As (perhaps strangely) difficult as the notion of Incarnation is to grasp, often missed is the fact that it is—also—a way. The Incarnation reveals that the “way” to God is in, through, and by means of Christ Jesus, there being no direct path to Him: we know Him, insofar as we do at all, thanks to the advent of his Son. Incarnation thus appears as a *pattern*—and in keeping with the “impossible union” that defines Incarnation, “pattern” consorts with “way,” idea and motion, spirit and body, if you will. Consider the important verse in

“East Coker” that declares that only in, through, and by means of time is time conquered because, we understand thanks to “The Dry Salvages,” timelessness intersects with time in the Incarnation, itself the paradigmatic instance of Incarnation, everywhere and at all times apparent. Incarnation, we might further say, shows the way, being the way, which is God’s becoming man in the person of Christ Jesus himself, thus the Way.

“Most of us” may never reach the ultimate understanding, and yet *Four Quartets* is hardly without hope or possibility or opportunity. T. S. Eliot, Magister, scrupulously, clearly, forcefully opens a way. “Burnt Norton” introduces it, returning us to Heraclitus and the notion adumbrated in its epigraph, this early point in the poem serving to catch and even to summarize some of the themes born of the reader’s intersection with it: descent is necessary, into darkness, “deprivation / And destitution,” indeed “Desiccation of the world of sense, / Evacuation of the world of fancy, / Inoperancy of the world of spirit.” This way involves movement, but there is another, and it “Is the same,” except there it is not movement but “abstention” therefrom. Meanwhile, the “world” moves—what the speaker in *Ash Wednesday* would at first avoid—and one way out of the flux is precisely to avoid movement. But the way being advocated by Eliot accepts—surrenders to—movement.

The third section of “Little Gidding” “rhymes” with the above passage, clarifies, and completes the “message.” The “way” is again the matter, indeed, the heart of the matter. Three conditions exist; they are similar, yet “differ completely”: “attachment to self and to things and to persons and, growing between them, indifference.” Another possibility is open, however: “liberation—not less of love but expanding / Of love beyond desire,” which is freedom from the past and the future. To illustrate, Eliot adds that thus “love of a country / Begins as attachment to our own field of action / And comes to find that action of little importance.” The passage gives the lie to representations of Eliot as an ascetic, who hated the world and sought escape from the messiness of being fully and fallibly human. Expansion of love beyond desire does not mean transcendence, but instead purification.

In the verse I have frequently quoted from “The Dry Salvages,” “The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation,” the repeated word “half” may mean “partly,” or it may be literal and precise. I think Eliot intended at least the latter: we get one-half the truth that is Incarnation, grasping either immanence or transcendence but not readily their “impossible union.” In a somewhat similar way,

in *Ash Wednesday*, we may read the repeated words “Teach me to care and not to care” quite differently. The temptation is to suppose that Eliot means a kind of transcendence of the opposites, a crypto-Hegelian synthesis perhaps. But given Incarnation as precisely the pattern of “impossible union,” he seeks to learn how to do both and at the same time. In other words, the aim is to achieve that condition of oneness—not coterminousness—apparent in the concluding figure of *Four Quartets*.

Of greater complexity, and difficulty, is the third verse paragraph of the opening poem of *Ash Wednesday*—called “Perch’io Non Spero”—verses often, if not usually, interpreted without irony and absent the supposition of an unreliable speaker: “Because I know that time is always time / And place is always and only place / And what is actual is actual only for one time / And only for one place.” The previous pages should have made clear that a straightforward reading of anything in Eliot is fraught with problems. For one thing, “a lifetime burning in every moment” reinforces the repeated idea that every moment, every place, is intersected with the timeless and the universal; thus this representation of time and place is not valid. That it is not alerts the reader that the voice audible in the poem is not to be equated with Eliot; indeed, the speaker renounces “the blessed face” who, in the course of the poem, becomes the necessary mediator for us all. When, moreover, the speaker announces that he rejoices, “having to construct something / Upon which to rejoice,” he reveals his major problem: help comes, he supposes, spiderlike, (only) from within himself.

The last of the six poems of *Ash Wednesday*—“La Sua Volontade”—presents and represents related yet different problems in reading. The specific verses I refer to are often cited for their unique beauty; and indeed, in a poem stark (though not sterile), they stand out in their sensuousness—they are about just that, in fact. The frequent, familiar interpretation, which sees Eliot as ascetic and otherworldly, condemns the verses as another distraction and potential “enchantment” that must be resisted and somehow transcended, and thus overcome:

And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices
 In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices
 And the weak spirit quickens to rebel
 For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell
 Quickens to recover
 The cry of quail and the whirling plover
 And the blind eye creates

The empty forms between the ivory gates
And smell renews the salt savour of the sandy earth.

Are these things—physical, sensuous, natural—to be rejected, their immediate attractions undesired by a self that has transcended desire and need of them?

Approaching an answer, I have suggested that the first poem of *Ash Wednesday* dramatizes a mistaken and false commitment to the ascetic and otherworldly, one indebted to and built upon human will and control. With just such commitment, the physical and sensuous attractions of the sixth poem *would* be rejected out of hand. But Eliot is constructing a far subtler—and truer—poem, based in an incarnational understanding. In and of themselves alone—“unattended”—the flowers, the smells, the sounds, the sights *are* temptations. They are not, that is to say, to be taken as ends in themselves, but rather as the means in and through which the knight vagrant or questing pilgrim proceeds. Another way of putting it: they are a medium, as well as a mediator. The heart “stiffens and rejoices” upon encountering such attractions, and the “spirit,” always “weak,” “quickens to rebel” upon encountering them, forgetting that they are *both* important in and of themselves *and* at the same time instruments and means of ascendancy. This whole analysis further complicates, therefore, the notion that the way down is the way up.

Incarnation *means* the embodying of idea. Word (or *logos*) and person come together, flesh and spirit no longer separated, although still distinguishable. The idea of tension defines the relation that exists between the supposed opposites. It is a powerful idea, an epochal revelation, that compels intellectual assent as it draws out maximal feeling. Everything—*everything*—appears anew, experience and meaning joined.

And yet the question remains of Eliot’s anti-Pauline assertion that “the spirit killeth, but the letter giveth life.”¹² In *opposing* letter and spirit, Eliot appears outside the pattern revealed in Jesus Christ, still locked in the half-truth that he, rightly, suggests prevails apart from Incarnation. I acknowledge the difficulty in breaking out of oppositional thinking. Many have tried and nearly all have failed, especially, says Eliot, since the “dissociation of sensibility” with the separation of thought and feeling, in the later seventeenth century. Instinctively, as it were, we resort to familiar, oppositional (and not merely differential or relational) thinking. F. H. Bradley, the subject of Eliot’s Harvard dissertation in philosophy (written but never defended, though

ultimately published), worked on the problem, and most recently, and notoriously, Jacques Derrida has sought to *deconstruct* prevailing and constitutive dualisms. It would seem understandable and even forgivable, then, if Eliot “backslid.”

It may, however, be otherwise. Suppose we ask the question, assuming for the moment the necessity of choice between the body or letter and spirit, which is worse—that is, the more dangerous when emphasized at the expense of the other, elevated above it, and made virtual master to the slave other. Here Eliot’s answer is clear, if controversial. The letter alone does relatively little harm, although admittedly strict and confining. The spirit is more insidious, unconfined, peregrine, and latitudinarian. In “East Coker,” Eliot describes “the absolute paternal care” as “*prevent[ing]* us everywhere” (italics added). The spirit, though, unattached and free, knows no control and heeds none. Once it is acknowledged, it roams widely and far, having no bounds. The letter, on the other hand, is always subject to outside resistance and control.¹³

The Church of England, it is important to understand, subsumed “rituals of private confession and prayer within the public service of the church,” thus complicating the opposition between inner and outer that functions as an analogue of letter and spirit. Eliot’s mentor, Lancelot Andrewes, for one argued, as Ramie Targoff has recently written in *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England*, that “words alone are insufficient in the service of God”: “Solomon prayed upon his knees; Daniel fell down upon his knees; so did St. Peter, so Paul; and not only men upon earth but the glorious spirits in heaven cast themselves and their crowns down before Him . . . He that having prayed sit[ting] still without adding his endeavour, shall not receive the thing he prays for, for he must not only *orare* but *laborare*.”¹⁴ Himself the author of the popular, posthumously published *Preces Privatae*, Andrewes seeks an effective manifestation or *embodiment* of faith. Donald Davie goes so far as to say bluntly, “what matters is the physical act of worship, not the mental act of belief or assent.”¹⁵

The debate continued into the seventeenth century as divines struggled with internal and external modes and expressions of devotion. In time, they modulated from claiming a correspondence between modes of devotion to postulating “belief in the power of external gestures and habits to stimulate internal change.”¹⁶ Thus the Norwich divine Foulke Robards, for one, argued in his 1639 tract *Gods Holy House and Service* that “correspondency, and sympathy [exist] between the soul and the body”; he went on to ask, “And do

we not perceive plainly that when we betake our selves to our knees for prayer, the soul is humbled within us, by this very gesture?"¹⁷ Sir Thomas Browne wrote similarly in his "layman's faith" *Religio Medici* (1642): "At my devotion I love to use the civility of my knee, my hat, and hand, with all those outward and sensible motions which may express or promote my invisible devotion."¹⁸ For him, as for John Bulwer, author of a 1644 encyclopedia of gestures, *Chirologia*, as Ramie Targoff notes, "the invisibility of the heart is less a benefit, a means of assuring, as Augustine imagines, that only God will have access to one's thoughts—than a fault in need of compensation."¹⁹ Accounts from lay and clergy alike also "emphasize the contagious power of watching a convincing act of prayer,"²⁰ which might be characterized as performance. In short, the early modern Anglican Church insisted on "the ways in which premeditated prayers could penetrate the inner self, shape personal voice, and inscribe the printed words on the page upon the innermost parts of the spirit,"²¹ a position that the Puritan John Milton could not accept and indeed reprobated. The power and, more, the primacy of the letter is thus built into the very foundations of Anglicanism and pointedly contrasts with sectarians' fierce embrace of the spirit, which gives rise to such "enthusiasm" as led to regicide, the closing of the theaters, and the short-lived theocracy that scarred England for decades to come.

Eliot famously takes his bearings from his past, in "East Coker" for instance, returning to his "beginnings" and citing his ancestor Sir Thomas Elyot. Most of his critical writing centers on the Elizabethans, the Jacobean receiving the next most attention. Cataclysmic is how he viewed the "dissociation of sensibility" previously mentioned, and so he seeks in earlier, *post-Reformation* writers an understanding adequate to intellect and emotion united. *That* he finds even more in Lancelot Andrewes than in Donne. Eliot's preference lies with the medieval leaning rather than the modern, hence his estimation of Dante; but he never forgets that he cannot return to that past, nor does he wish to. Thus he does not seek to overturn modernism or any political scheme or institution. As he says in his essay on F. H. Bradley, "we fight rather to keep something alive than in the expectation that anything will triumph,"²² a sentiment whose nobility arises from its humility. Eliot seeks not to institute anything new or different, aware, as Swift shows in *A Tale of a Tub*, of the incalculable danger and damage when fancy or enthusiasm "gets astride on the reason."²³

Eliot echoes Dryden, among others, when he writes in "Catholicism and International Order" that "There must always be a middle way, though sometimes a devious way when natural obstacles have to

be circumvented; and this middle way will, I think, be found to be the way of orthodoxy; a way of mediation." He adds that it is "never, in those matters which permanently matter, a way of compromise."²⁴ In his essay on Hobbes's nemesis, John Bramhall, in *For Lancelot Andrewes*, Eliot expatiates on the idea of the "middle way," in effect offering an apologia for what the spirit is not. Bramhall's thinking, he writes, "is a perfect example of the pursuit of the *via media*, and the *via media* is of all ways the most difficult to follow. It requires discipline and self-control, it requires both imagination and hold on reality. In a period of debility like our own, few men have the energy to follow the middle way in government; for lazy or tired minds there is only extremity or apathy: dictatorship or communism, with enthusiasm or with indifference."²⁵ No more forceful account may exist of the "middle way," its necessity and its difficulty—nor of Eliot's own *poetic* foci. It should be placed alongside these sentences in "Catholicism and International Order": "It is obvious that the second half of the Summary of the Law is a delusion and a cheat if you erase the first half; but how will you prove that to the enthusiast and the system-builder? It is something which we know to be true, by what may indeed be called worldly wisdom: for true worldly wisdom leads up to, and is fulfilled in, and is incomplete without, *other-worldly* wisdom."²⁶ The structure operating in these last phrases is that of Incarnation, and that means the way to spirit is in, through, and by means of the letter, without which the spirit killeth.

Returning, for a moment to Heraclitus, and his "way": rather than a simple identity between the way up and the way down, the way up is *in, through, and by means of* the way down. What matters is thus the "way" of Incarnation, which revealed, once and for all, that no direct access to God is possible, that the "way" to God lies in, through, and by means of (that middle figure of the Trinity) Christ Jesus, the "impossible union" of the Divine and the human. With good reason, it appears now, Eliot shifted, in a passage in *Four Quartets*, from suggesting "a way" to the necessity of "the way" to proceed "In order to possess what you do not possess" and "In order to arrive at what you are not."

ON THE WAY, AGAIN—STILL

Love proceeds from being through understanding. But man, who, as Alexander Pope says, learns to love from part to the whole, reversing God's way, must somehow lose his self-assertiveness—the cause of our fall, according to Buddhism—before he can love. Our love must

thus come to imitate, reflect, and second God's: caring and not caring, at the same time, which capacity derives from understanding that "the fire and the rose are one," understanding that emerges with the expansion of love beyond desire.

The way begins with the literal—the flesh, the senses, and (thus) affirmation—and you proceed outward, "far[ing] forward." To reverse the way is to "mock ourselves with falsehood," as *Ash Wednesday* puts it, the speaker there adopting the way of asceticism, denial, and self-control, at least initially. It is also to choose the way of the spirit, and *that* way, according to Eliot, lies death. The path, from affirmation outward and upward, is, to be sure, fraught with the trials, temptations, tribulations, and difficulties rightly associated with "the negative way," itself susceptible to gross misunderstanding and, for a host of reasons, likely to attract modern (and postmodern) readers. *Way* is, simply, critical. It matters which way you choose to proceed.

I know of no passage in *Four Quartets*, or anywhere else, more relevant and pertinent or clearer on the point than a passage in the opening of the third section of "Little Gidding." Eliot makes clear that the love he labors to define is to be clearly and carefully distinguished from both detachment and indifference; the former probably marked a stage in his own pilgrimage, the second a character of the waste land as he represented it in 1922. At the same time, the love he offers as genuine and valid differs too from "attachment." What, then, is left? Not some kind of (easy) transcendence—Incarnation militates against it.

Indifference Eliot represents as death, whereas both attachment and detachment he not unproblematically associates with life. We are therefore back to "caring and not caring," both at the same time. As essays typically do—Dryden's *Religio Laici* or *A Laymans Faith*, to take a notable example—*Four Quartets* emphasizes what love is not, allowing what it *is* to emerge, quietly, unobtrusively, absent assertiveness and absent declaration.

The path or journey toward love, Eliot repeats, "Begins as attachment" to the local and the immediate, then proceeds, moving outward—that is, *expanding*, as Pope said of love—proceeding in, through, and by means of self-love to social. We come to find, says Eliot, that our beginning "attachment to our own field of action" gets purified—not *purged*—as we "come . . . to find that action of little importance / Though never indifferent."

This crucial passage clarifies an issue and may serve to correct a frequent serious error in critical analysis and interpretation. Paul Murray commits it, and so does Vincent Miller when the latter writes, for

instance, that “time exists as an essential and unending *purgation*” (italics added).²⁷ Miller gets so much right that I am leery of differing with him. But in fact, the key and familiar idea of “purgation” appears nowhere in the passage I have referred to nor elsewhere in *Four Quartets* for that matter.

Eliot is actually quite clear: the way consists in expansion of love. This means, as does the notion of being redeemed from fire by (means of) fire, *purification*, the dross of desire being refined; and “purification” implies, further, the meaning of Incarnation that I have described. Whereas “purgation” would entail the voiding of desire, its elimination and expulsion, not so unlike (forms of) asceticism already rejected in both *Ash Wednesday* and elsewhere in *Four Quartets*, “purification” quite differently implies the very notion of incarnational structure by which a (sinful) state is not eliminated or abolished but begun from, the necessary beginning being with and from the concrete, the specific, the physical, the human, and the (thus) affirmed: a rock, indeed. “Burnt Norton” makes the point, positing the necessity of darkness “to purify the soul / Emptying the sensual with deprivation / Cleansing affection from the temporal.”

At some point, the question must also arise whether all this is orthodox or not. I am neither prepared nor qualified to offer a definitive answer. I do, though, wish to emphasize that, though he has been called a churchman, Eliot was a layman, and as I tried to show in *Literary Paths to Religious Understanding*, the idea of a “layman’s faith” has currency;²⁸ it is also a historical fact of some significance, resulting in a set of attitudes and perspectives that put it at odds, willy-nilly, with the clergy and thus the Church. When, indeed, Eliot writes in “East Coker” of “the dying nurse,” we are hard-pressed to see his words as referring in the allegory to anything other than the Church. Moreover, Eliot’s critical reference to “Incarnation” points, as I have argued here, to a pattern inherent in “the nature of things” *depuis la fondation du monde* (to cite the title of an apposite work by René Girard).²⁹ Whereas, in other words, his friend Ezra Pound, a “pagan immanentist” (whether or not, as Carroll F. Terrell would have it, “the greatest religious poet” of all),³⁰ insisted, as other laymen more cautiously have, on the necessary *im-part-iality* of “true” religious understanding—“Slave to no Sect” is how Alexander Pope put it.³¹ Eliot was able to enfold this idea of universalism back inside Christianity, a rather remarkable, perhaps even unique, achievement. It all needs further thought and elaboration, of course. But for now, suffice it to say that Eliot overcame an obstacle to Christianity for many laymen, certainly including Pound, by understanding *the* Incarnation as

the paradigmatic instance of a pattern and structure everywhere and at all times present and available.

That the critic is a medium through whom the text speaks points to a purifying of his desire too; without the prior purification, the text could not speak, the critic not letting be, but instead asserting and imposing. Understood rightly, criticism represents the expanding of (the critic's) love (of the text) beyond desire. For such a critic (as Eliot), the text is not an object, nor is his commentary on it an expression of personality. We need, said Eliot in *The Sacred Wood* in 1920, "to see literature all round, to detach it from ourselves, to reach a state of pure contemplation."³² The point is structurally the same as that later and oft repeated in *Four Quartets*; Eliot was thus already intuiting, however inchoate his understanding at that point, what he emblazons in his greatest work, "the expanding / Of love beyond desire." Marking such "rhymes" elucidates the positive relation between Eliot's early thinking and his later, between the pre-Christian, as it were, and the Christian, allowing us to consider that the former stands in a relation to the latter like that of the Old Testament to the New. A bridging of differences, even of apparent opposites, reveals itself, emerging into disclosedness and embodied in the writer whose end surely resides in his beginning. Knowing that beginning, perhaps especially if for the first time, we better understand the present.³³

CHAPTER 3



ASH WEDNESDAY: SIX POEMS

FACING THE TRUTH,
ACCEPTING THE SILENCE

Eliot had a habit—a way—of putting things together: poet and philosopher, businessman and artist, British and American, Anglo and Catholic, poem and essay. Famously, he decried a “dissociation of sensibility”—a separation of thought and feeling—that he observed around the middle of the seventeenth century and that, he said, persisted well into his century (at least).¹ His own work, in verse and prose alike, was often assembled, cobbled together seamlessly, or so it appears, from parts published separately, including his first collection of essays, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920), itself a whole much greater than the sum of its parts, which include the well-known “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” where the seams are even acknowledged, although they appear hardly to matter; *Four Quartets*, whose publication history alone spreads from 1935 to 1943 and whose being he perhaps could not imagine when he wrote “Burnt Norton,” closing the extended *Poems 1909–1935*; and *Ash Wednesday: Six Poems*. This last began with the appearance in late 1927 of “Salutation,” now the second of *Ash Wednesday*, with a reference to Dante’s *Vita Nuova* (with which Eliot would end his *Dante* [1929]), “where the poet is greeted by the Lady ‘with a salutation of such virtue that I thought then to see the world of blessedness’”; it continued, or resumed, with the spring 1928 publication of the first poem as “Perch ‘io Non Spero,” the title a reference to his friend Pound’s mentor Guido Cavalcanti; and this work led to the publication in autumn 1929 of the now-third poem as “Som de L’escalina,”

which are the words “addressed to Dante as he climbs the third part of the stairway on the Mount of Purgatory, at the top of which is the Garden of Eden.”² Eliot subsequently sent Leonard Woolf a poem consisting of five parts, eventually rounding the poem into a whole with its publication as we know it, in six poems, in April 1930.

All claims to the contrary notwithstanding, Eliot, who had been baptized into the Church of England in 1927 and who described himself the following year as “anglo-catholic in religion,”³ did not separate body and spirit, world and the unworldly, nor did he seek for a life merely aesthetic or ascetic. Eliot well knew, in fact, the temptations of such a tensionless existence, and he never denied their pull; they were always present, lurking, looming, amounting, he suggested, to an almost-Derridean desire of identity, a Protestant quest of impossible, sinless purity: “as when we indulge in alcohol as an anodyne.”⁴ Hugh Kenner has said it well, writing of “Eliot’s most elusive poem” in his groundbreaking 1959 book:

“Teach us to care and not to care.” The tension is good . . . Without specifying what evades specification, it is permissible for commentary to suggest that the opposite pull of the senses and the devotional spirit—of God’s creation and God—is to be maintained as a fruitful and essential equivocalness, not “solved” by relegating one half of the being to the earth and the other half to heaven, nor yet, as in the Buddhist Fire Sermon [of *The Waste Land*], by becoming “weary of the knowledge of the visible” and so “empty of desire.” A temptation to deny the senses must be resisted.⁵

While I might resist that notion of “equivocalness” as not quite right, and wonder about Kenner’s uncharacteristic hesitancy earlier in the same sentence, I cannot but conclude that this analysis, a part of a whole that is consistently insightful, rests still among the best yet done on *Ash Wednesday*. The essay’s penultimate sentence says it all, or nearly all, the language as precise yet suggestive and charged as perhaps critical prose is capable of: “The function of the journey detailed in *Ash-Wednesday* is to arrive at a knowledge of the modes and possibilities of temporal redemption sufficient to prevent our being deluded by a counterfeit of the negative way.”⁶

Vincent Miller has also written well on these matters. (Confession: A former Santa Barbara colleague of Kenner, Miller was my teacher at Wofford College in the early to mid-1960s, the man who almost single-handedly taught me how to read.) In “Eliot’s Submission to Time,” originally published in the *Sewanee Review* in 1976, Miller

wrote, in obvious agreement with Kenner while opening up another perspective: "When he wrote *Ash-Wednesday* Eliot probably knew little more about the Christianity he had accepted than the fact that he had accepted it, and that he would seek escape from the tension it implied in neither attachment nor indifference, in neither hope nor despair. *Ash-Wednesday* was as a result a ritual and a prayer: 'Teach us to care and not to care / Teach us to sit still.'"⁷ The opening sentence is off-track for Eliot shows deep knowledge, if not full understanding, of Christianity at least by the 1910s (his biographer Lyndall Gordon thinks 1914, in fact, not 1927, "the turning-point in [his] life,"⁸ for then he began his serious consideration of Christianity). In any case, Miller recovers, in the second half of the sentence just quoted and goes on in his essay to such contextualized elucidation as the following: "Eliot, disliking time as much as Plato but having become a Christian, found himself like Augustine forced to try to understand this world's importance despite his desire to escape its seeming meaninglessness. The platonic pull is no doubt present in Eliot as in Augustine, but in both men it is—as both of them say—at war with what they see as the meaning of the Incarnation ('the hint half guessed, the gift half understood'), and so a temptation to be resisted."⁹ Time, Miller goes on to say, comes to exist for Eliot "as an essential and unending purgation,"¹⁰ but "purgation" is a pagan idea, "purification" Eliot's—a distinction of which forever to be mindful. No one can successfully resist all critical pitfalls (and pratfalls), part-iality being the best state here below of all but the saints, whose number includes no critics.

As a journey (of sorts), *Ash Wednesday* participates in the literary tradition of "journeys toward understanding," the paradigmatic instance of which is Homer's *Odyssey*, which represents the hero's adventures upon trying to get back home (after twenty long years, following the Trojan War). Odysseus is hindered by problems within himself as well as without. In fact, he must undergo some essential *purgation* of willfulness, recklessness, pride, and lack of self-control before he is able to return and reclaim wife and home. The principal venue, or agent, of this purgation is, as we have seen, his mandated voyage to the kingdom of the dead, where he encounters the same Tiresias that Eliot says is "the most important personage" in *The Waste Land*.¹¹ Over the course of several encounters with the dead, Odysseus begins to show compassion, to understand in fact. Healed but always susceptible to error, the hero displays the note on which *The Waste Land*, problematically, winds to a close: he learns to *give*, *sympathize*, *control*. *Ash Wednesday* is not so elaborate, of course, nor

does it follow the Homeric pattern in detail; it does, however, offer a refinement of the Homeric *nekuia*.

Approaching *Ash Wednesday: Six Poems* in the first edition—the signed limited of April 24, 1930, the first ordinary five days later, or the first American ordinary of September 26, or even the second edition of 1933—you have initially a physical experience of the book, for you have to turn page after page of titles, half-titles, dedication (to his wife), and blanks finally to reach the first poem. Your first experience of *Ash Wednesday* is, therefore, anything but spiritual. The poem, it turns out, is about the pull of the spiritual and that of the physical, which the material object has replicated, embodying.

The poet himself, engaged in whatever “journey” the poem maps, resists a plethora of temptations, themselves modeled on Jesus’s forty days and nights in the desert, which were in turn a model for the period of Lent, which begins with Ash Wednesday, the day after Mardi Gras, itself the feast before the famine during which period the believer *turns*, in penance, and seeks to avoid the lurking, looming temptations abounding. “Turn,” it turns out, is not only what the reader of the first edition must keep doing in order to reach the poem, but it is also one of the key terms in *Ash Wednesday*, which Eliot evidently borrowed from his mentor, the great Anglican divine Lancelot Andrewes, who preached more than once before the court of James I on that very notion in his Ash Wednesday sermons. Eliot, in fact, opens with three lines, two of which proclaim that the speaker does not “hope to turn,” and between them one that says merely he does not “hope.”¹² You cannot fail to notice that “hope” occurs between “turns,” and you further notice, turning through the poem, that the third poem represents that Dantesque staircase that the distinguished religious writer Karen Armstrong recently used to model her own spiritual journey as consisting of at least three “turnings,”¹³ on which the poem’s speaker himself “turns” while observing other “turnings.” The sixth and final poem opens with a return to the first but with a significant difference: “Although” takes the place of “Because.”

Perhaps the only solid ground for the reader, upon the first few readings of *Ash Wednesday*, is the obvious necessity for distinguishing. It is a point that Eliot reinforces in the fourth poem, at a crucial stage: “Be mindful.” The reader might be well advised to stop turning at precisely this point and to consider what the poet is doing with that phrase, which, in English, inevitably “rhymes” with the well-known and important Buddhist insistence on mindfulness: a hardly ordinary allusion therefore, but one that, in bringing together two disparate “cultural” traditions points to the fact of attending. Looking back on

Ash Wednesday from the vantage point of *Four Quartets*, which relates Incarnation and “attended” moments, we see that the meaning of “Be mindful” for the poem derives from the way that the Dantesque “attends” the Buddhist, and vice versa: one is not alone, only a “half” that bears the other half within itself. (This reading is itself made possible by *Four Quartets* “attending” *Ash Wednesday*. Attending the poem, as in this book, with the perspective of literature and Incarnation, further enriches the meaning and significance.)

“PERCH ‘IO NON SPERO”: TURNING AWAY

A relation thus opens up with “Perch ‘io Non Spero,” the first poem of *Ash Wednesday*, whose original title derives from Guido Cavalcanti. The speaker here says he knows that neither a time nor a place can be intersected with another; with this supposed fact, he adds, he rejoices: because he evidently has to rejoice upon something, and *that* he will “construct.” He says further that he renounces the “blessed face” as well as the “voice.” Although variously and badly misread, these lines can hardly represent Eliot’s present understanding. Full of renunciation, they also point to individual *construction*, reflective of (Romantic) desperation. The renunciations themselves are at once pathetic and tragic, or nearly so, as the remainder of *Ash Wednesday* makes patently clear, for they are of that “blessed face” that promises to offer necessary mediation and that “voice” that, in its very silence, speaks loudly.

Renunciation has begun, of course, with the opening of “Perch ‘io Non Spero”: because he does not “hope to turn again,” no longer hoping, the poem’s speaker represents himself as reminiscent of those “empty” and largely pathetic figures of Eliot’s earlier poem, “The Hollow Men” (1925), his last published major work before conversion, with just a hint present, I think, of “Gerontion” (1920): he no longer strives. The tone and mood continue into the second verse paragraph, structurally similar although the main clause of the sentence does not come until the decisive third paragraph, with the declaration, already quoted above, of desperate construction and sadly mistaken renunciation of both “the blessed face” and “the voice”: because he does not now hope, well aware of the limits under which he (no longer) strives and unable to derive sustenance from the flowering trees and the flowing springs, believing there is “nothing” and because, finally, there is no “attended moment” with its “intersection of the timeless / With time” (“The Dry Salvages”), he simply accepts or at least says he does, rejoicing that matters are the way they are. In this negativity, the speaker both notes and misses the meaning

and significance of that barest hint of the power, even if “infirm,” of “the positive hour,” aware of but not understanding—that is, seeing but not seeing in, through, and by means of. Another eruption from outside his consciousness occurs in the following, the fourth, verse paragraph, in which the speaker begins to “pray to God” for mercy. He seems really, though, “indulg[ing] in some anodyne” bearing the promise of relief from difficulty and the tension of existence: he thus prays to forget those things about which he thinks too much. So he reveals—proclaims, actually—his further renunciation, blaming, for sure, that he does not “hope to turn again.” *Therefore*: he prays—hoping!—that God will not judge us too harshly. A pull toward God has been recorded.

It is, however, relatively weak, at this point, seemingly powerless before the hope that has been given away, “transcended,” the speaker might well suppose. He is not so unlike the resigned J. Alfred Prufrock. Here, though, it is precisely the human “will” that is on display, even, I dare say, as the poem concludes, asking twice for prayer for us both now and “at the hour of our death.” Death is, in one sense at least, barely distinguishable from “now.”

“SALUTATION”: SEPARATION AND “IMPOSSIBLE UNION”

The second of the six poems comprising *Ash Wednesday*, the first of them published; as “Salutation,” figures physical death, not the ascetic renunciation of the first poem. This may be the speaker’s imagining of his own death. In any case, “Salutation” begins enigmatically, with its reference to “Lady,” never specifically identified because she is no identity, being both clearly related to Mary and distinct from her. In the thematically pregnant second of three verse paragraphs, she becomes “Lady of silences,” whose paradoxical nature unveils Eliot’s incarnational message, the passage itself strikingly different poetically from all the other lines in *Ash Wednesday*: she incarnates “impossible union” (“The Dry Salvages”), being, for example, “calm” and “distressed,” both “torn” and at the same time “most whole.” She may be “exhausted,” but she is also “life-giving.” Perhaps most important, she is “Speech” and “Word,” the former without “word,” the latter “of no speech.”

Very different verses precede these describing the “Lady of silences,” although they address “Lady.” However it comes about, God asks whether the bones “shall live.” What is said to have been in them responds, “chirping,” offering a grammatical structure that

“rhymes” with that reiterated in “Perch ‘io Non Spero”: *because* of “the Lady’s” goodness and loveliness and *because* she honors Mary, they brightly shine.

The speaker, who has addressed “Lady” and recorded both God’s speech and his own bones’, represents himself as “here dissembled.” Perhaps *because* he has been dismembered, literally taken apart, he finds himself in strange presences, indeed. His ensuing remarks are positive, even hopeful, as they point a turn toward physical reality, anticipating embrace of it. That “*which recovers*” so much of his body (*italics added*) is not exactly clear, although it appears to have something to do with the physical world and its beauty. At this point, perhaps blessedly, the bones chirp of the “Lady of silences,” *declaring* “impossible union” that has heretofore been only *described*.

Eliot ends the second poem of *Ash Wednesday* with the bones under that “juniper-tree” singing. Scattered, and glad about it, the bones thus embrace the very separation that I have said Eliot (everywhere) opposes. Nothing much matters, neither unity nor division. From insightful, the bones have thus turned into something “mock[ing] ourselves with falsehood.”

“SOM DE L’ESCALINA”: TURNING, TURNING, TURNING

The third poem, featuring the twisting and turning of the stairs and of those figures on it, is evidently meant to show the speaker, having gone through a kind of visit to the kingdom of the dead, on the path, like Dante before him, “upward.” The path itself, a spiral staircase, itself turns, requiring that the speaker follow suit, no matter his earlier declarations—he shows no regret nor recognition of difference. The “same shape” observed in violent turns—twisting—with the devil is not identified, or specified, but the devil, pointedly, has a “deceitful” face that is of “hope and of despair.” “Face,” of course, functions variously in the poem, and this time stands in contrast with the paradoxical “Lady of silences”: no paradox here, that is, but of key opposites in abject difference—not “tension”—a fact accentuated with the repetition of the preposition “of.” Instead of faces now, the speaker reports horror—a sort of horror born of the union of “Gerontion” and “The Hollow Men.”

On the third stair’s first turning suddenly appears significant difference, the result of looking out upon a world light and vibrant, fecund and alluring. Clearly imagined—this is “maytime”—the scene features a “flute” that exists alongside another; hair that inevitably recalls

Prufrock and his near obsession; and a mention of “strength beyond hope and despair” that “rhymes” with the earlier mention in this third poem of that “deceitful face” that is of both “hope and of despair.” This time around, Eliot does not repeat the preposition before both “hope” and “despair.” In so doing, he points, I think, toward transcendence, but is it of the same sort as marks the “Lady’s” paradoxical nature, her “impossible union” of just such opposites?

The poem has not yet ended. Remaining are the repeated lines “Lord, I am not worthy.” The prayer seems, in the beginning, promising, a newfound recognition of incapacity alongside humility, but it immediately moves to end with a request not only that the Lord “speak” but that he speak “the word only.” It is a request verging on demand.

WALKING BETWEEN

The white dust jacket of the first ordinary edition of *Ash Wednesday*, printed in green, black, and red and marking a design created by Edward Bawden, establishes a certain relation with another text—perhaps Old Possum’s way of alerting his readers to *attend* to his translation of St.-J. Perse’s *Anabasis* in a dual-language edition. (The same design, but on a different color, marks the dust jacket of Faber and Faber’s *For Lancelot Andrewes*, perhaps signaling the relation between these essays and *Ash Wednesday*, Eliot’s “conversion poem” and his “conversion” essays.) Both his new poem(s) and his new translation came out from the publishing company with which he worked, the translation appearing on May 22, 1930, three weeks after *Ash Wednesday* was published by his firm. The dust jacket is exactly the same in colors and design. Eliot wanted the readers of *Ash Wednesday*, I believe, to know his translation of Perse’s poem. But you do not need the dust jacket to reach this conclusion.

As “elusive” as his own poem is, *Anabasis* is much more difficult. Eliot, in fact, wrote an important—indeed major, though brief—preface, which begins with expressed doubt about the need of such a piece while acknowledging the work’s difficulty: “I am by no means convinced that a poem like *Anabasis* requires a preface at all. It is better to read such a poem six times, and dispense with a preface. But when a poem is presented in the form of a translation, people who have never heard of it are naturally inclined to demand some testimonial. So I give my testimonial hereunder.”

“For myself,” Eliot goes on, “there was no need for a preface”; he knew that the poem carries no reference to Xenophon or the

journey of the Ten Thousand, that it has “no particular reference to Asia *Minor*, and that no map of the migrations could be drawn up.”¹⁴ Perse means by his title that “the poem is a series of images of migration, of conquest of vast spaces in Asiatic wastes, of destruction and foundation of cities and civilizations of any races or epochs of the ancient East.”¹⁵

Borrowing from a French commentator on Perse’s poem, Lucien Fabre, Eliot proceeds to “two notions which may be of use to the English reader.” It is these, I suggest, that Eliot wants his reader to bring to attend upon the reading of *Ash Wednesday: Six Poems*. The first of these notions, as he represents it, clearly applies to his so-called conversion poem; it is that “any obscurity of the poem, on first readings, is due to the suppression of ‘links in the chain’, of explanatory and connecting matter, and not to incoherence, or to the love of cryptogram. The justification of such abbreviation of method is that the sequence of images coincides and concentrates into one intense impression of barbaric civilization. The reader has to allow the images to fall into his memory successively without questioning the reasonableness of each at the moment; so that, at the end, a total effect is produced.” Eliot proceeds to another finely analytical paragraph, his following second sentence becoming a virtual staple of subsequent commentary on poetry, one in which the critic is very much present and plainly visible, as well as patently engaged in “*Gen’rous Converse*” (Alexander Pope):

Such selection of a sequence of images and ideas has nothing chaotic about it. There is a logic of the imagination as well as a logic of concepts. People who do not appreciate poetry always find it difficult to distinguish between order and chaos in the arrangement of images; and even those who are capable of appreciating poetry cannot depend upon first impressions. I was not convinced of Mr Perse’s imaginative order until I had read the poem five or six times. And if, as I suggest, such an arrangement of imagery requires just as much “fundamental brain-work” as the arrangement of an argument, it is to be expected that the reader of a poem should take at least as much trouble as a barrister reading an important decision on a complicated case.¹⁶

From the next paragraphs in the preface to *Anabasis*, the reader of *Ash Wednesday* emerges with a richer appreciation of the obviously important statement in the fourth poem concerning the “restoring” of “the ancient rhyme” with “a new verse,” an apt description of what Eliot has been doing in verse since “Prufrock.” His “rhyme” clearly

itself “rhymes” with that notion of “a logic of the imagination,” and his following remarks relate, in similar fashion, to “new verse.” Eliot’s translation of Perse’s poem *appears* as prose, as Perse wrote it in French, but Eliot insists it is poetry: “Its sequences, its logic of imagery, are those of poetry and not of prose; and in consequence—at least the two matters are very closely allied—the *declamation*, the system of stresses and pauses, which is partially exhibited by the punctuation and spacing, is that of poetry and not of prose.”¹⁷

Eliot moves then to the second “notion” he has borrowed from Lucien Fabre: “a tentative synopsis of the movement of the poem,”¹⁸ offering guidance for a first reading, which can be forgotten when the reader no longer needs it. It amounts to a putting-in-other-words that “movement,” which is not thematic, of the poem’s ten divisions (e.g., 4. “Foundation of the city”; 7. “Decision to fare forth”; 10. “Acclamation, festivities, repose. Yet the urge towards another departure, this time with the mariner”). Eliot immediately adds, “And I believe that this is as much as I need to say about Perse’s *Anabasis*.” He does say more, however: “I believe this is a piece of writing of the same importance as the later work of Mr James Joyce, as valuable as *Anna Livia Plurabelle* [later incorporated into *Finnegans Wake*]. And this is a high estimate indeed.”¹⁹

As if at once unable to let go, realizing that there is always more to be said, thus (mildly) contradicting himself, and (to my mind) “rhyming” with the page-turning exacted of *Ash Wednesday*’s readers in the first editions, Eliot proceeds to another paragraph, which is his last. “I have two words to add,” he says, “one about the author, the other about the translation.”²⁰ About the latter, he acknowledges Perse’s collaboration, calling him the “half-translator” in fact. Inaccuracies he accepts all blame for, attributing them to “my own willfulness, and not to my ignorance, which the author has corrected.” Eliot ends by saying that Perse knows the territory of his poem, possessed of “a sensitive and intimate knowledge of the English language, as well as a mastery of his own.”²¹ Eliot’s prior point, the first of his “two words,” establishes the crucial importance of this knowledge of the land written about: “The author of this poem is, even in the most practical sense, an authority on the Far East; he has lived there, as well as in the tropics.”²² Eliot knows the territory mapped in *Ash Wednesday*, having lived, “even in the most practical sense,” in the worlds that tempt as well as that “land” where “We have our inheritance.”

As to meaning, I will not—indeed, cannot—travel far in *Anabasis*. Specific parallels, or “rhymes,” with *Ash Wednesday*, besides, are not the point. Still, I point to a certain compatibility: as when we read

that “the streams are in their beds like the cries of women and this world has more beauty / than a ram’s skin painted red!”²³ I find more connection with the following paragraph, with another declamation of the world’s beauty along with malingering doubt and the ever-real possibility of menacing dream: “Ha! more generous the story of the frondage of our walls, and the water more pure than in any dream, thanks be given it for being no dream! My soul is full of deceit like the agile strong sea under the vocation of eloquence! The strong smells encompass me. And doubt is cast on the reality of things. But if a man shall cherish his sorrow—let him be brought to light! And I will say, Let him be slain, otherwise there will be an uprising.”²⁴

A HARD TURN

Something happens in *Ash Wednesday* between the third and the fourth poems, although we may not be privileged with explanation or understanding. The tone is different and so is the mode. We recall that only the first three poems of *Ash Wednesday* were individually published, and over a period of several months.

The focus has now shifted to the “Lady of silences,” represented as “third,” that is, as mediator. Eliot even emphasizes betweenness in introducing her here, revealed in her basic paradoxical nature. Her being as “walking between” rhymes with the “suppression of ‘links in the chain’, of explanatory and connecting matter” in *Anabasis*; she is, to oversimplify perhaps, difficult, elusive, to be grasped if at all via “a logic of the imagination,” rather than “a logic of concepts”: rhyming with Mary, yet not her, not part of some feminine trinity then.

Because of the Lady’s “goodness” and “beauty,” the speaker’s bones had managed to sing. In her strength exists the capacity for refreshment and renewal: she promises to save. The immediately following verses emphasize “the Lady’s difference from, and responsiveness to, lurking, looming temptations such as have menaced earlier in *Ash Wednesday* and, of course, continue. In this case, mindfulness works in an affirmative direction. “The Lady,” accordingly, however related to those “years” that “walk between,” evidently participates in putting away, eliminating, or transforming “the fiddles and the flutes” and engaging in acts of restoration. Betweenness thus bears critical importance.

Eliot now describes “the Lady” as “The silent sister,” she is “Between the yews” (which plants themselves traditionally represent both mortality and immortality), her “flute is breathless,” and she “signed” although she uttered “no word.” The meaning here is

not elusive, for “the Lady” has, from the first, been said to be “of silences,” whereas the poem’s speaker has sought expression of the word. In part, Eliot suggests now that *silence speaks*—and *things*, in like manner, mediate, serving as (another) intermediary, *incarnating*. Such “things” are thus and at once ends and means—although we, given to *half* understanding, grasp them if at all as either one or the other but not as both and at once; we either use (and abuse), or we at least verge on deifying. We may, at this point, just catch a glimpse of what Eliot means when he returns, in the sixth poem, to the perhaps-hasty wish in the first poem to learn “to care and not to care.”

By means of “the Lady,” who goes “in Mary’s colour,” her walking “between” and assisting, “things” flourish. The call is for redemption of time. “The Lady” does not speak, but the bird sings, evidently urging the poem’s speaker to act, the song itself now serving as mediation, patterned on “the Lady”: the word may be unspoken and unheard, but the Word speaks through various mediations—including the poet if he understands.

THE WORD WITHIN THE WORLD

Accordingly, the penultimate poem of *Ash Wednesday* opens by treating word and Word. The first verse paragraph *can* be seen as mere gibberish or a pedantic display of verbal agility amounting to next to nothing. So to see it is, though, to separate *res et verba*.

Although—even if—the word be lost, be unheard, “Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard, / The Word without word, the Word within / The world and for the world.” There is *stillness*, in spite of all, what Pound referred to as “the unwobbling pivot” and that Eliot better understands as the pattern that gives meaning to movement (both of which are thus necessary). But just as important, absent the word there is *still* the Word, which bears incarnational form. And it is not outside, or transcendent of, the world, but, rather “within / The world and for the world.”

In at least one respect, the speaker may not have changed much; earlier, he sought the spoken word, and now he still seeks the word although he plaintively asks where it shall “be found” and “Resound.” His worry is well founded, for here there is not enough silence. What follows takes a new turn, or twist, turning still the issue, but with the help of Eliot’s preface to *Anabasis* we have an enriched understanding of the poetry itself as functioning in a register where twists and turns serve artistic purpose. The passage hardly represents “restored” new verse, made as it is of the bland and the trite, with pedestrian

internal and slant rhymes and banal diction, all productive of just such cacophony as plagues “the world.” Not enough silence!—“mainland” rhymes with “rain land,” “voice” with both “rejoice” and “noise,” and one line says, bathetically, “Both in the day time and in the night time.” From Eliot’s writing in his edition of *Anabasis*, we are mindful that it would be wrong to seek too-easy or merely rational coherence. How to explain the (different) voice heard in this verse paragraph? You can’t, at least not according to “the logic of concepts.” The structure—that is, the movement—of *Ash Wednesday: Six Poems* is imaginative, the “connection” inexplicable by reason or logic alone—separated, that is, from the imaginative.

The next paragraph reinforces the same question: how does the (abrupt) turn to “the Lady,” now represented as “the veiled sister,” “connect” to the preceding described difficulty in finding the word? The answer is, she incarnates the Word, functioning as—and instead of—word in this noisy world. Will she pray for us, who “walk in darkness,” even opposing her, caught and “torn” “*between*” (italics added). Here, the internal rhyme functions positively as betweenness asserts itself once more. This is our middle condition, caught and torn between, for example, word and Word.

The end of the fifth poem is very powerful, without self-concern, certainly “caring.” Attention is squarely on mediation. The speaker expresses concern, wondering whether the “veiled sister” will pray for all those who need her. This prayer bears the smell of authenticity, feeling “valid.”

TURNING TOWARD THE WORLD

The speaker now says “Although” rather than “Because,” still hoping “not to turn again.” The difference makes all the difference, emphasis shifting from turning to hoping. The opening words here—similarity and difference in play and requiring mindfulness—do not suggest, as is so often supposed, a turn from “the world” and temptation and toward a transcendent world of purity and heavenly bliss.

The situation, or condition, of human being—not necessarily to be identified with Martin Heidegger’s *Dasein*—has been focused, leading from the fifth poem to this the last. “Man” occupies a middle state, and is therefore subject to—indeed characterized by and as—tension, Eliot turning back to gesture again at “The Hollow Men” and their “dreamcrossed” situation and condition, in this place “where the dreams cross / The dreamcrossed twilight between birth and dying,” which he then transforms into “between dying and birth.”

He has not, of course, completed the description. For we inhabit a “world” *lost*: that is, we are, like our world, separated from God, born as fallen creatures. As *Ash Wednesday* makes clear, we still ask, insistent even in unbelief, ever needy, ever imploring, waiting impatiently for *attendance*, where is God now? The poem also insists that He is not in the not-turning (yet also, of course, precisely there [too]). We at least find Him, if we do, with necessary intercession, there, in the turning and in our turning. Turning is “Behovely” (“Little Gidding”), but unlike sin, to which Eliot applies the medieval term in *Four Quartets*, turning is also productive; without it, after all, the redemptive work of Ash Wednesday and Lent could not occur, would not be possible. The way up is, after all, in, through, and by means of the way down and, says *Four Quartets* also, “Only through time time is conquered” (“Burnt Norton”).²⁵ This being so, the enigmatic declamations in the first poem of *Ash Wednesday* now stand revealed as “mock[ing] us with falsehood.”

Ash Wednesday moves, in fact, toward close with a return to, and renewal of, the earlier understanding that although we are “lost” in a “lost” world, that world and our very lostness represent the ground of our redemption, our “inheritance.” The Fall is not fortunate, but it is, at least, not the end of the story, our story. There is (also) Incarnation. And Incarnation means that “the world,” while “lost,” is nevertheless “intersected” by the Word, time by timelessness, flesh by spirit, man by God. Key—and it cannot be emphasized enough—is *full* truth, such that the “half” that is transcendence and the “half” that is immanence meet in and as “impossible union”: each moment is “attended,” in other words.

There is, then, the alluring tableau that Eliot paints (and that I cited near the end of the second section of the previous chapter). It is not, I submit, to be dismissed, ignored, or (merely) transcended; nor is the speaker—or you or I—to be seduced by its representation into supposing that it is all there is. The physical by itself is incomplete, as is the (perhaps equal lure of) the spiritual. You cannot get directly to the latter—hence “The Lady of silences”—nor should you be satisfied to remain with the *unattended* physical, ordinary, immediate. What Eliot thus opens up is *a way*. The opening prayer is, of course, different in texture and tone, much more affirmative, than those earlier in *Ash Wednesday*. It precedes, after all, rather than comes as possible afterthought, the opening words by the penitent in the sacrament of confession: “Bless me father.” Images of quickening, recovery, and renewal dominate the scene; if “the blind eye” creates out of its own (diseased) self, the senses come to the rescue. The “lost” is indeed

pulled in opposite directions at once, but even so, its rejoicing cannot but be taken as affirmative and positive, as well as potentially productive—if the “lost heart” accepts “the world” as instrumental and “attended.” “Lady of silences”—the “blessed sister”—it turns out, is always already present, ready to pray, able to point the way, which she does in and of and by means of her basic (paradoxical and incarnational) nature and being. No dismemberment here, no individual “construction” of something “upon which to rejoice,” no simple abstention or turning away from “the world.”

What remains but to turn—to return really—to the humanly incarnation of mediation, who indeed points the way (and Way)? It is Mary, and she is represented by her capacity for renewal and of life-givingness: as “spirit of the fountain” and “of the Garden.” The prayer is not to be led into falsehood, but to “sit still” and at one and the same time to care *and* “not to care.” There is peace, the rocks notwithstanding, a situation far different from that at the end of *The Waste Land*. *Ash Wednesday: Six Poems* then ends with the speaker’s prayer that his “cry come unto thee,” in the Roman mass the response to the priest’s words “Hear my prayer, O Lord”: an end, in other words, beginning with “And,” that is responsive to intercession, the priest “praying,” the believer “crying.” Prayer thus links you; it also *associates* you. Rather than, moreover, a cry that “the word speak” or be spoken, the speaker speaks, responsive to the priest before him.

In the sixth poem, difference thus prevails, and the acceptance of tension, the logic of imagination (rather than of concepts), and the turn beyond simple identity. Such difference is incarnate in the repetition, as we have just read, of the lines in the first poem, here repeated exactly concerning caring *and* not caring and also sitting still. Reference to “rocks” immediately follows, providing the context that roots the speaker, making his prayer different from a generalized, disembodied, and etherealized plea. That the last line before the response to the priest’s prayer is the request—the hope—not to be separated surely carries special significance. The very possibility of nonseparation implies that of separation itself. Not to be separated is, moreover, difference from and other than union or identity; that is, it is not simply the negative of which those other concepts represent the positive. Nonseparation affirms difference, which in allowing it goes beyond. It is, then, made of such paradoxes as mark “the Lady,” pointing to Incarnation and the Trinity.

When reading *Ash Wednesday: Six Poems* is attended by close familiarity with Eliot’s other writing, notably including *Four Quartets*, the prayer “not to be separated” becomes all the richer, charged with

meaning. I hear the opening invitation of “Prufrock” (“Let us go then, you and I”), the revelation of a historical “dissociation of sensibility,” and those many other combinings, sometimes “impossible unions,” that mark Eliot’s life and work. To be separated surely refers to that from God, but it just as surely means from that pattern that is incarnational, which paradigmatically goes beyond “half” guesses and “half” understanding and embraces the utter necessity of mediation.

CHAPTER 4



MAGISTER, MAGUS, AND “THE SHADOW”

JOURNEY OF THE MAGI AND “THE HOLLOW MEN”

No sight to comfort them, nor a word for which they any whit the wiser; nothing worth their travel . . . Well, they will take Him as they find Him, and all this notwithstanding, worship Him for all that.

—Lancelot Andrewes, *Nativity Sermon preached before James I, Christmas Day, 1622*

It is now time to rest. Fate has deprived me of the joy of being present at the birth of him the star announced; I can at least be present at his death . . . and birth and death are not so different, after all.

—R. B. Cunninghame Graham, “*The Fourth Magus*”

JOURNEY OF THE MAGI, ASH WEDNESDAY, AND THE DIFFICULTY OF UNDERSTANDING

One of his so-called Ariel poems, *Journey of the Magi*, published in 1927, the year of his formal embrace of “anglo-catholicism,” constitutes Eliot’s *literal* representation of the “journey toward understanding.” In following the star to the birthplace of Christ Jesus, so as to worship God’s Incarnation, “the wise men” travel to Understanding, the Second Person of the Trinity. There they experience, or at least sense, a passing-strange confrontation with death (represented as enigmatically linked with birth). As Magi, moreover, these “masters,” these “teachers,” are *Magister*; they *know*. And the short poem in which they appear may be said to be a hinge between Eliot’s own

pre-Christian and Christian points of view, for here he offers a poem in which the speaker and the other Magi differ from and stand in conflict with him. Eliot the Magister may appear in the Magi, who may be said to represent the way of “knowing” that he has refined.

From the beginning, the Magus who speaks tells of the difficulty of the journey. The opening verses are, in fact, a quotation adapted from the 1622 Nativity sermon before the king preached by Lancelot Andrewes, on whom Eliot was then writing and whose “brand” of Anglicanism played such a determining role in his thinking: the “coming” of the God-man is recalled in the Magus’s first plaintive words about their “cold coming” that was their long journey at the very “worst time.”¹ Exactly how a quotation, for that is what the first five verses are, here works poetically is difficult to see: why, for instance, is the Magus quoting someone? Whatever the answer to *our* difficulty in reading, *he* continues the note through the long first verse paragraph (of three). Is, then, the quotation the words of these inner voices—an answer that comes, if it does, only in time, the time that runs from the opening of the poem through this temporary stop?

What follows—the shorter second verse paragraph—shifts in texture to description of the “temperate valley,” thence to “a tavern,” where—the reader is surprised—there was “no information.” Thus the Magi continue on. *We* get “no information”—only that the place is “satisfactory.” Perhaps the Magus explains the dearth of (essential) details, opening the final verse paragraph, in saying that he remembers it was a long time ago. Now he shifts back to himself, the focus of the opening paragraph, his reaction, his difficulties. And yet he says that he would do it again but immediately wonders what they were “led all that way for.” Was it “Birth or Death”—the *ultimate* question, and he urges us to “set [it] down.”

The Magus—the master, the teacher—does not know the answer. He ends the poem, then, with synoptic words, which immediately follow his looming question: there *was* “a Birth”; of that they “had evidence and no doubt.” He says he has seen something similar before. This “Birth,” though, was different and meant agony for them, “like Death, our death.” Back home, they were “no longer at ease” in the situation and conditions in which they left, in, he says, “the old dispensation.” As a consequence, the Magus admits he would be glad of “another death.” We notice straightaway the contrast between obviously desired “ease” and the difficulties the Magi have experienced on their journey, difficulties now revealed as incarnate in “this Birth” that was so hard, bitter, and agonizing *for them*: so much difficulty was

there that the Magus resorts, resigned apparently, to a comparison with "Death, our death."

Journey of the Magi begins to look like a poem about knowing rather than understanding. The Magus physically arrives at Understanding, perhaps even gifted with touching its embodiment, but he comes away without understanding. He does, however, appear now to *know* something about the relation of birth and death, something possibly more akin to "information," being based in "evidence," than to understanding.

The "birth" the Magi have come so far to observe—or, rather, to see the result of—means, they apparently learn, "death"—that is, death of old ways, death of "ease." It constitutes a way that is demanding and difficult and points toward a relation of death and birth hitherto undreamt of and here represented as both challenge and fear, but no more, to the limited understanding on display.

The problem of knowing and not knowing is exacerbated by the difficulty in expression, with language, that is. *Journey of the Magi* does not explore the issue, it is true, but it is, at the very least, implicit in the Magus's difficulty in treating the matter of birth and death, which he pointedly distinguishes from "Birth" and "Death." That difficulty perhaps has something to do as well with his opting for a quotation to open his remarks, representing a certain need for support.

Eliot was, of course, always interested in the problem of knowing. It surfaces as early as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," for the speaker there has come to know and now struggles with the burden of that knowledge: what to do with and about it? And above all, how to communicate his vision, his understanding, what he now knows as a result of his journey through "certain half-deserted streets, / The muttering retreats / Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels / And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells."² In Eliot's writing may be traced a journey from the voice of the Magister to that of the *humble Christian*. He once prided himself in knowing but has come, by the time of *Four Quartets*, to understand differently: for example, "what you do not know is the only thing you know."

At least partly responsible for the difference in point of view of the speaker of *Four Quartets* is his experience with the "familiar compound ghost" on the bombed-out streets of London in the early dawn ("Little Gidding"). A Tiresian figure, thus an embodiment of "impossible union" like Incarnation itself, the ghost speaks with a burning tongue capable, apparently, of purifying.³ No "fructifying" nor the promise of anything approaching it in the ghost's representation of "the gifts reserved for age." Moreover, says the ghost, evidently

bent on bringing the poet to his knees in contrition, penitence, and humility, there is, for instance, “the conscious impotence of rage” at human actions and capabilities. Last, and most humbling, are lacerating words regarding the pain of recognizing what you have done, of finally realizing your motives, and of grasping at last that what you thought virtue was something quite different.

Alone again, the poet observes, simply and definitively: “Sin is Behovely.” In other words, no one of us is exempt, we are all guilty, and in that we are all alike. The verse paragraph is, in fact, given to this theme, as the speaker now thinks of the past and its men and women—in short, the dead, newly recognized and appreciated, approaching even the about-to-be advocated expansion of “love beyond desire.” Newfound sympathy appears, along with the newly recognized need of reconciliation and forgiveness. There is no need to revive old “factions”; after all, all are now “folded in a single party.” Whole matters, part subordinated to it. And so the poet concludes that “All manner of thing shall be well / By the *purification* of the motive / In the ground of our beseeching” (*italics added*). No “purgation,” then, but purification, the expansion of love.

The same pattern, the same structure, that marks the poet’s expanding understanding appears in the final segment of “Little Gidding,” thus the ending of *Four Quartets*. Here Eliot returns to the issue of writing and of words, of the difficulty in “saying it” and getting it right in language that is everywhere problematic. Eliot ends “Burnt Norton” with an uncompromising description that also functions as an allegory of the human condition: only the “form,” the “pattern,” allows words to reach “the stillness.” In other words, Eliot’s own, a few verses later in “Burnt Norton”: movement constitutes the pattern’s detail.

At the end of “Little Gidding,” in returning to words, their movement, and the necessity of pattern, Eliot’s words rhyme with those he has used in representing the human condition under the sign of Elizabeth: rustics dancing, the pattern appearing as meaningful coupling, producing such “intersection” as marks the relation of timelessness with time, God with man—Incarnation, in other words, the point delivered in “ancient words,” or at least orthography, thus calling attention, strange enough perhaps for understanding. These dancers leap and cavort, a striking contrast with the rhyming figures of *The Waste Land*, their deaths “fructifying”: “Nourishing the corn,” they *keep time*, respectful of the “living” seasons. Of such, the Magi know nothing.

As the close of *Four Quartets* brilliantly reaffirms, Eliot has indeed become Magister by surrendering desire, the effort clothed now in Christian humility. There is even something of the Magus about him, about his understanding of words and the human condition. Of course, the Magus of Eliot's Ariel poem simply "returned to" his place, "no longer at ease," to be sure, but clearly unable to make a beginning from an end reached: "I should be glad of another death," he concludes. Eliot concludes, in *Four Quartets*, returning first to words, words that, as he speaks them, "intersect" with lives at last brought together, in "concorde" at "this intersection time" and burning with meaning: "The complete consort dancing together." In words that rhyme with, as they recall, *Journey of the Magi*, Eliot adds, "We are born with the dead."

ELIOT'S GOD

The deity that Anglo-Catholic Eliot worshipped represents great difference from the "latitudinarian" tendencies of modern thinking, which Eliot's mentor John Dryden lamented in both his apologia for the Church of England, *Religio Laici or A Laymans Faith* (1682), and his defense of his new church, that of Rome, *The Hind and the Panther*, five years later. "*Thy easie God*," Dryden had written in his Anglican defense, "instructs Thee to *rebell*."⁴ Eliot's God, quite differently, "prevents us everywhere," making matters difficult and trying.

Dryden made reading the site where forces of modernity contend with ancient, self-assertion with surrender of personality and self. He understood—and the recent Cromwellian Interregnum had reinforced the idea—that the Protestant Reformation had created, along with "the priesthood of all believers," "the priesthood of all *readers*." Dryden's *Religio Laici* is at once a testament to the breaking of the shackles that had prevented lay access to scripture and a cautionary tale, for, as he saw it, "This good [i.e., the Reformation] had full as bad a Consequence."⁵ The world had already been "turned upside down," and the repercussions were being felt—had already been experienced in the beheading of King Charles I and the (brief) institution of a quasi-democratic government in England. Playing a huge role in these efforts were clergy and others with "the itching to *expound*";⁶ as a result, said Dryden, "*Texts* were explain'd by *Fasting*, and by *Prayer*. / This was the Fruit the *private Spirit* brought; / Occasion'd by *great Zeal*, and *little Thought*."⁷ His own position—at once the responsible layman's and that of the established Church, which as poet laureate he was charged with defending—was the historical *via*

media between Romish authoritarianism and (extreme) Protestant individualism. In the event he “looked up” to God, believing that the text “*speaks it Self*, and what it does contain, / In all things *needfull* to be *known*, is *plain*.”

The position is tenuous, and within the space of a few years—during which time the Roman Catholic James II ascended the throne—Dryden evidently could no longer abide the tension involved in the “middle way.” He then converted to the Church of Rome, which he subsequently defended in a much different kind of poem, *The Hind and the Panther*. In that allegory, which represents both continuity and change in Dryden’s thinking, the ascendant party within the Church of England, the so-called Latitudinarians, come in for his most sustained and central criticism (for a difference, see “The Character of a Good Parson,” Dryden’s “translation” of Chaucer, evidently featuring the nonjuring high churchman, Bishop Thomas Ken).⁸ The following passage uses sexual imagery to reveal this contamination of Christian doctrine, represented as improvement over a past considered “dull”:

The World was fall’n into an easier way,
 This Age knew better, than to Fast and Pray.
 Good Sense in Sacred Worship would appear
 So to begin, as they might end the year.
 Such feats in former times had wrought the falls
 Of crowing *Chanticleers* in Cloyster’d Walls.
 Expell’d for this, and for their Lands they fled,
 And Sister *Partlet* with her hooded head
 Was hooted hence, because she would not pray a-bed.
 The way to win the restive World to God,
 Was to lay by the Disciplining Rod,
 Unnatural Fasts, and Foreign Forms of Pray’r;
 Religion frights us with a meen severe.
 ’Tis Prudence to reform her into Ease,
 And put Her in undress to make Her pleas:
 A lively Faith will bear aloft the Mind,
 And leave the Luggage of Good Works behind.
 Such Doctrines in the *Pigeon*-house were taught,
 You need not ask how wondrously they wrought;
 But sure the common cry was all for these
 Whose Life, and Precept both encourag’d Ease.⁹

Fearing something like Latitudinarianism in his own time, Eliot made the texts he created, particularly the poetic kind, difficult, for

he sought to prevent ease of appropriation and the misunderstanding likely upon less than scrupulously responsible reading. Thus he offered an allegorical representation about the efforts and direction of the Church, represented in "East Coker" as "dying." The lyrical fourth section opens with a depiction of Christ as "The wounded surgeon" practicing "sharp compassion" and then moves to one of the Church herself, "Whose constant care is not to please / But to remind of our, and Adam's curse." The way toward restoration is the incarnational, as the following verses from later in this section make abundantly clear: "If to be warmed, then I must freeze / And quake in frigid purgatorial fires."

"SUFFER US NOT TO MOCK OURSELVES WITH FALSEHOOD"

From beginning to end, Eliot's so-called "conversion poem" spotlights not disillusionment but the very real possibility that we "mock ourselves with falsehood." This is likely due not just to the prevalence of "enchantments" but, more important, also to the difficulty of the way that is true. Thus Eliot prays, "Teach us to care and not to care"—which is itself highly susceptible to misunderstanding as a request for some sort of (Hegelian) transcendence of the apparent opposites.¹⁰

As we have seen, the first of the six poems of *Ash Wednesday* introduces the critical terms "hope" and "turn" ("Because I do not hope to turn"), which we return to, but with a significant difference, in the sixth and last ("Although I do not hope to turn"). In addition, the third verse paragraph represents a false perspective on time as it dramatizes the wrong way to deal with the near despair plaguing the poem's speaker. Eliot does not make it easy for his reader, who evidently must come with an understanding of Incarnation and who, in any case, will find it difficult to read these lines thanks in part to the absence of punctuation.

The other poems in *Ash Wednesday* raise questions, reveal difficulties and dangers. These exist for the represented figure *in* the poem and for the reader. We have read in the preceding chapter. Suffice it to say here that questions persist, marking the fifth, penultimate poem. The question here involves whether "the veiled sister" will pray for us, "torn" as we are "on the horn." The "way" itself is difficult, the possibility real that describing it will be taken for mere gibberish. It might even be that we "mock ourselves with falsehood." The philosophic-poetic play of language, really quite precise, stands in stark contrast with language perhaps reminiscent of gibberish. Even here, though,

amid the pathetic rhymes, light shines in the darkness—but still no restoration of “ancient rhymes” in “a new verse.”

The sixth and final poem of *Ash Wednesday* by no means resolves (all) the enigmas. For one thing, *turning* now appears inevitable, but the speaker no longer seems (so) deluded by “hope.” He also, at the very least, recognizes the ineluctable in-betweenness of human existence. He may not want to “wish these things,” but physical attractions manifest themselves, and they (now) seem embraceable. Possibly the best we can do is not “to mock ourselves with falsehood” as we seek to learn “to care and not to care.” A doubleness thus pertains, and so the speaker’s penultimate line is “Suffer me not to be separated.”

Eliot’s God is a Magister of the both-and, which He also instances and embodies. Thanks to the Incarnation, all of life is redeemed, all time, every moment, radiant with meaning. Given that, one might suppose that God would be readily appeased, that His way would be pacific and latitudinarian, but nothing could be further from the truth. Both-and is not exactly inclusive, but complicated, challenging. It is more imaginative and poetic than rational. The poet Thomas Stearns Eliot, Anglo-Catholic, prevents us everywhere from the easy mistake that the “way” is *either* transcendent *or* immanent; the “way” is incarnational, and Eliot is at considerable pains in “The Dry Salvages” to disabuse us of any notion about the easiness of understanding.

Nothing is easy in *Four Quartets*—for either the poet or his reader. Movement—or *turning*—is unavoidable; it is, in and of itself moreover, not a bad thing. The difficulty and the necessity come in finding pattern. Because of the problems posed by words, the poet keeps trying to get it down right, and so frequently resorts to asking his reader whether he need say it again. The situation of the poet vis-à-vis “words and meanings” mirrors exactly his situation “in life.” We are, like him, in a “dark”—perhaps “sacred”—wood, lacking “secure foothold” and assailed with falsehoods. We would, of course, like what we are so often promised, and that is—if you will but accept the way—a “secure foothold.” Eliot’s God offers none.

What He provides, instead of comfort, as the answer to our prayers is endless “purification of the motive / In the ground of our beseeching.” And “any action,” writes Eliot in “Little Gidding” immediately after positing words’ mutual dependency, represents and entails great difficulty and danger. The difficulty lies not merely in the implementation, but perhaps even more in the understanding.

Even as he laments the “weakness of the changing body,” Eliot appreciates that it protects us from “heaven” and “damnation” alike,

for our "flesh" can endure neither. Suffering is, though, ubiquitous and unavoidable, and Eliot never masks or minimizes it. No end appears to "the voiceless wailing" or to "the withering" of flowers or to pain. Before insisting that the "wisdom of humility," which he calls "endless," is our only hope for wisdom, Eliot deconstructs the expectation that age will bring insight. Likely "the quiet-voiced elders" had deceived themselves and us—any serenity probably owing to averting of the eyes. Rather than the wisdom of old men, then, Eliot emphasizes "their folly," as well as their fear, including that of fear and frenzy alike, as well as their fear of "possession," both that by another person or persons and that by God. The poet himself by no means escapes censure, his own incapacities fully revealed by the "familiar compound ghost." Even hope is suspect, a will-o'-the-wisp engendered by desire and ego and fear.

There is no "development": that is "a partial fallacy" deriving apparently from "superficial notions of evolution," which becomes a means of "disowning the past." We have experience but miss its meaning. Meaning and experience are issues that began to occupy Eliot as early as "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and "The Metaphysical Poets." Any happiness is in the process of being (re)defined as the expansion of love "beyond desire." "The agony abides," and so, writes Eliot, we thought that time was the destroyer, but it is really the preserver.

In the lyrical fourth section, "Little Gidding" gives perhaps the fullest representation of God as Eliot startlingly and daringly rhymes the Holy Spirit with the "dark dove" that is the Nazi airplane dropping its bombs upon the wearied and desecrated streets of London. "The only hope," it is now said definitively, is to choose by which fire we will be consumed. Just as through time time is conquered, so through fire is the fire of desire—powerfully dramatized in *The Waste Land*—conquered. The God "who prevents us everywhere" is also He of "absolute paternal care"—and "Love." Thus ends *Four Quartets*.

The beginning poem, "Burnt Norton," rests upon the same foundation. At the end of the second section, Eliot makes his first stab at explaining the necessarily incarnational way by which time is "conquered": it is never transcended. Eliot goes on to explore the way it is "here," in the process establishing that purification—rather than purgation—is the necessary means by which one may arrive at an understanding of love as fire and as creator of the torment that "prevents us everywhere." The ascetic way of early in *Ash Wednesday* is not "the way," for movement is necessary, dance reflective of pattern in,

through, and precisely by means of movement. "Attachment," affirms "Little Gidding," may be "of little importance" but is "never indifferent." "Attachment" is the beginning, though not the end.

The first paragraph of the fifth and final section of "East Coker" says that "there is only the trying." It would be wrong to describe the tone here as resigned. Neither optimistic nor pessimistic, it feels like earned understanding. What follows, the final verse paragraph of "East Coker," (re)turns to age, and possible wisdom—or, rather, understanding—of what it is all about. As elsewhere, what an individual passage means—certainly its effects—is not available alone; it is striated because "attended" by what precedes and what comes after (including, in this case, "Prufrock"), enriching and extending it while also opening it up and out: at the same time, we have to be both "still and still moving."

THE TURNING OF THE "I" AND THE MEETING OF THE "EYES": "THE HOLLOW MEN"

I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable grayness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary. If such is the form of ultimate wisdom, then life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be. I was within a hair's-breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say. That is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say . . . True, he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible.

—Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

"The Hollow Men" appeared in 1925 in Eliot's *Poems 1909–1925*. It is one of his most enigmatic works. More than one commentator has nearly despaired facing it, acknowledging its difficulty and his or her incapacity before it. It is not as if the critic averts his eyes—to take up the image so important to the poem—but whether the poem fails to give us the eyes to see with, those needed to comprehend this

deceptively challenging work. In fact though, I shall be arguing that with *Four Quartets* in our rearview mirror, we may begin to see "The Hollow Men" with at least some clarity.

The poem has not fared well in the hands of commentators either early or late. Commentary has too often been dominated by an attention to what Eliot himself called "the logic of concepts," and too little given to "the logic of imagination."¹¹ Too often, critics move quickly from Eliot's words to speculations concerning his state of mind, even the condition of his soul, the poem being written just two years before his formal embrace of Christianity (Barry Spurr does not treat the poem, affording it only passing reference, in his recent study of the poet's developing Anglo-Catholicism¹²). In *Words Alone: T. S. Eliot*, Denis Donoghue mentions it only three times, in fact, in passing.¹³ In 1998, Lyndall Gordon offered some quirky biographical suggestions, and the "readings" are often at least equally quirky, with hit-or-miss shots at analysis rather than a sustained, thorough consideration that attends to the progress of the poem—that is, the way the poet gets from first word to last.¹⁴

One commentator, prefacing his identification of Eliot's major "sources or ideas of reference" for "The Hollow Men" (the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, Julius Caesar's assassination in Shakespeare's play of that name, *The Divine Comedy*, and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*), calls the poem "extraordinarily difficult." The language and imagery are, he says, "disarmingly simple," and "no problems of historical reference or translation" stand in the reader's way, and yet "it is highly allusive, allusive almost to the point of obscurity."¹⁵ Even Hugh Kenner evinces troubles with this poem, his relatively brief discussion ending in general and impressionistic albeit suggestive terms: "Social, moral, historical, and poetic vacuity are revolved before us in this remarkable poem which, in fewer words than *The Waste Land* has lines, articulates, one is convinced, everything remaining that *The Waste Land* for one reason or another omitted to say, and by rhythmic means enacts the failure of rhythm; and in inactivity protracts, for just as many lines as are required for full articulation, a poetic action."¹⁶ Dame Helen Gardner comes to the poem with typical astuteness, but she does not attempt a sustained reading in her rather brief analysis.¹⁷

Although once and for a long while I supposed a reader might do well to begin with the poem's third numbered section, I now believe it wiser to start at the beginning. The verses are indeed simple, in appearance at least, and short, tight, and—with pun intended—deceptively light on explosive charge. If nothing else, *Four Quartets* has taught us to attend to the *words*, *Asb Wednesday* to "Be mindful."

"The Hollow Men" does, obviously, "rhyme" with *The Waste Land*, perhaps especially in the third section, which represents the dead land, but anticipations of *Four Quartets* are also present: Incarnation before "the Incarnation."¹⁸

Individual words, of course, matter here and bear thematic charge: "hollow," "stuffed," and their difference from the later "empty"; the relation itself between "hollow" and the quite different "stuffed"; the repetition of "between" in the quasi-Jungian section near poem's end; but none, surely, more important than "eyes." Rather than turn to them now, however, I want to start with the poem's opening word, "We," which modulates into "I" at the beginning of the second section. The second section begins, in fact, with "Eyes" that the speaker dares not meet. We have to do, in "The Hollow Men," not only with "eyes" but also with the "I"—and, a necessary third, the relation *between* them. "Meeting" matters, too; the "I" *meeting* "eyes"—as in the words "Eyes I . . ." Recall the critical second section of "Little Gidding," in which the "I" of that poem encounters the Tiresian figure ("What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance," wrote Eliot in the added notes, of *The Waste Land* [italics original]).¹⁹ "I met one walking," said Eliot in "Little Gidding": "The eyes of a familiar compound ghost." Questions proliferate, for that imposing, importuning figure is a paradox "both intimate and unidentifiable." Consequently, the speaker "assumed a double part and cried / And heard another's voice cry: 'What! are *you* here?'" The immediate response is enigmatic if not elusive: "Although we were not. I was still the same, / Knowing myself yet being someone other." Eliot is thus repeating in his later poem the matter confronted in "The Hollow Men," and in both poems there appears a repetition of the matter that opens "Prufrock": "Let us go, then, you and I." The "I" is split—but not separated—a critical part looking, with sightful eyes, upon "an-other." Two eyes and two "I's": "impossible union."

The opening verses of "The Hollow Men" repeat the desiccation of *The Waste Land*. Indeed, such dryness as marks particularly the earlier poem's fifth and final section reappears in this "cactus land." Although the "dried voices" here are "quiet and meaningless," they at least lack the pathetic whining of that earlier, repeated crying for "water." Intersections mark this opening set of three verse paragraphs. Already set up by the epigraph—the offering of "a penny" for "old" Guy Fawkes—the Elizabethan period or, to be precise, the Jacobean, intersects with the present via this reference to the abortive attempt to blow up Parliament in 1605. Also here, we encounter "eyes" for the first time, along with the first mention of one of the four—not *three*,

as often stated—"kingdoms" figuring in the poem: "Direct eyes" are here linked to "death's other Kingdom."

Between these two verse paragraphs come two verses that function as mediation: "Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralyzed force, gesture without motion." The diction here is different, as are tone and voice. This appears to be the same voice that later on sounds the Jungian note regarding "the Shadow" that comes "between" (Eliot, though, confirmed, says George Williamson, that the "Shadow" derives from Ernest Dowson's poem "non sum quails eram bonae sub regno Cynarae"²⁰). These early lines, coming between, represent assessment and judgment, as well as interpretation: *from outside* and with an understanding necessary but lacking that "we" stand in need of form, colour, force, and motion.

The second section of "The Hollow Men" lacks a mediating verse paragraph, although it ends with a third consisting of but two lines that introduce "the twilight kingdom," perhaps a transition between the earlier-noted "death's other kingdom" and the one that appears here, opening the second section, a likely reference to death in life, precisely the existence of hollow and stuffed men, one that lacks the capitalization of that first-mentioned reference to death itself: the "Eyes" that the speaker does not dare meet in the "dream kingdom" (that is death) "do not appear." These "eyes" do not appear to the "I," although in that kingdom they *are*, existing and having being, just as do "voices," Eliot's way of breaking even these short and abrupt lines bearing thematic charge. Moreover, the "eyes" may—can only?—be described as incarnations, for they take the form of—occurring in, as, and by means of—sunlight, a tree swinging, and, paradoxically, as voices.

Where the "eyes" are, the "I" does not want to be. He would, in fact, appear as something other, disguising himself, thus avoiding precisely what is needed, which is clear-sighted self-recognition. He would, indeed, if he could, resemble rather that "fading star" in its distance, and *be* a kind of scarecrow, which, hollow and stuffed, is what he is. Thus his chosen disguise would but reveal himself, ironically, paradoxically. His evidently ultimate avoidance would be of the ultimate or "final" meeting.

Whatever the aforementioned "fading star" is, it recurs in the third verse paragraph, which focuses on the land's deadness. Here is a dead hand, in the act of "supplication." The dead know what the dead in life know not of; in other words, as "Little Gidding" puts it, the dead "can tell you, being dead," for their language "is tongued with fire

beyond” that of the living. In still other words, the dead—like the “familiar compound ghost”—are sightful, *seeing*, that is, self-critically.

The fourth section of “The Hollow Men” consists of three verse paragraphs (the third had only two, anomalously). It begins in nonsense fashion, declaring the absence of eyes. “Here” is, in fact, represented as a “valley of dying stars,” a valley also “hollow,” an epitome of “our lost kingdoms.” Light is very nearly gone, extinguished, in this twentieth-century recall of Alexander Pope’s *The Dunciad* (1743).

Possibility remains, however, “In this last of meeting places,” where “meeting” of the “eyes” and “I” is critical. “Eyes” and “star” now meet and are joined by that Rose that figures so importantly in *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*. The “I” is “sightless” without the “eyes” that are *other*. You—we—are lacking sight *unless* we have those eyes to see with, eyes that peer knowingly, critically, into you. They come from outside you—at least outside that part of you that puts on a public face, having prepared, says Prufrock, “a face to meet the faces that you meet.” And indeed “The Hollow Men” does echo “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” where Eliot also writes, “I have known the eyes already, known them all— / The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase.” These Prufrock feared, finally unable to step over that threshold of which Joseph Conrad writes. In “The Hollow Men,” the situation may be structurally similar, and the speaker reminiscent of Prufrock himself, neither of them a “prophet,” perhaps at best “an attendant lord,” but at least in the later poem there is a sense, however poorly understood, of another “dimension.”

With the fifth and final section of “The Hollow Men,” we encounter hardly another dimension, but certainly a different voice or rather voices. That Eliot intends his readers to recognize and distinguish the voices is attested by the italicization of the first and last verse paragraphs. From childhood the lines may be, but they are, in any case, from outside the self: voices heard. Moreover, what Eliot writes, in the preface to his translation of St.-J. Perse’s *Anabasis*, bears on “The Hollow Men.” In that important, albeit brief, discussion, Eliot addresses the matter of Perse’s difficulty: “any obscurity of the poem, on first readings, is due to the suppression of ‘links in the chain’, of explanatory and connecting matter, and not to incoherence, or to the love of cryptogram. The justification of such abbreviation of method is that the sequence of images coincides and concentrates into one intense impression of barbaric civilization. The reader has to allow the images to fall into his memory successively without questioning

the reasonableness of each at the moment; so that, at the end, a total effect is produced."²¹

There *is* no "logic of concepts" particularly in or among the six verse paragraphs of the final section of "The Hollow Men." After the first of these, which I just quoted, with its childlikeness, come three in the strikingly contrasting philosophical voice of interpretation, assessment, and judgment, precisely in the mode that the "I" needs to hear. Each asserts that "the Shadow" falls between first "idea" and "reality" and "motion" and "act"; the second, that it falls between "conception" and "creation" and "emotion" and "response"; the third, that it falls between "desire" and "spasm," "potency" and "existence," and "essence" and "descent." "Descent" appears enigmatic and suggestive, surprisingly coupled with "essence" although the full force falls upon "the Shadow" that comes *between*, preventing completion and fulfillment and apparently obviating potential.

The fifth verse paragraph returns us to the speaker's own voice, with which we must compare and contrast the italicized three lines that appear at the right side of the text, opposite the poetic lines. Those lines of prayer intersect the philosophical and critical verse paragraphs, falling between, like "the Shadow" although very different in nature and texture. The first and third lines are from the Lord's Prayer (the poem's fourth kind of kingdom). Between *them* comes a very different kind of statement, not part of the Lord's Prayer, more a lament, in the prior tone of childish whining: "*Life is very long.*" It might be better if Eliot had not italicized this last, making it appear as voiced by the poem's speaker, who would thus interrupt the Lord's Prayer. But of course the penultimate verse paragraph evidently enacts just that, for it must be the speaker who is able only to begin, getting no further than simple subject followed by "is," "Life" coming between the lines acknowledging "Thine," getting in the last closer to the kingdom via the added "the." That the "between" line is repeated, though not part of the Lord's Prayer, indicates that, rather than complete that prayer, the speaker joins the chorus of voices still in the nursery room or participating in that essential inactivity—a failure to "turn"—that will eventually bring "the world" to a *whimpering end*. Moreover, the right-side intersection includes a whimpering line in the midst of the Lord's Prayer, whose line is merely repeated. Of course, coming between like "the Shadow," the line "Life is" may be understood as (necessary) mediation. Where *will* the Word be heard?

The last words of the poem, italicized, consist of three identical lines, followed by a devastating last, about the world ending "*Not with a bang but a whimper.*" The question then imposes itself insistently: is

it the speaker who so believes, unable to finish the Lord's Prayer, lacking the capacity to move beyond "the Shadow" that comes between and blocks, preventing, we might say, the necessary embodying of idea in reality, failing to respond to emotion, potency dry and dead, and never reaching "existence"? Is it Eliot, or is he dramatizing a situation and a condition much as his friend James Joyce did in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*? Is the poem, in other words, straightforward or ironic? How much did Eliot actually understand by the time he wrote "The Hollow Men" in 1925?

The poem seems well aware of the direction that response needs to take, although the reader must, in part, distinguish among the chorus of voices with which "The Hollow Men" ends, some merely pathetic, others inadequate, and some spot on. Lacking, the poem avers, is *will*, perhaps the problem that Eliot first adumbrated in "Prufrock" eight years before. Darkness must be accepted, not lamented, understood rather than ignored.

There is more, there is always more. When Eliot writes that we are "Sightless, unless / The eyes reappear," he is saying that our sight, or understanding, is a gift from outside us, but the "eyes" that give us "sight" must themselves "reappear," and in this world, as the end of the poem clearly establishes, the "eyes" may not appear. Even the "star" is forever, or so it seems, "fading." Where is there light by which we may see? The poem has suggested earlier, as I noted, that that light now, at least sometimes, takes the form of incarnation in "sunlight," in "a tree swinging," "voices" available "In the winds singing." About *the* Incarnation of the Word in the person of a humble, ordinary man, we may well have trouble finding or hearing, and yet instances of Incarnation are present in ordinary, perhaps unexpected places and ways.

Furthermore, "The Hollow Men" not only alludes to the "Multifoliate rose" that, later, symbolizes the "impossible union" that itself denotes Incarnation and *the* Incarnation, but it also knows, even if it makes only implicit (which is the way that Incarnation took prior to *the* Incarnation) what "the familiar compound ghost" reveals once and for all in "Little Gidding." The self is itself an "impossible union" of inside and outside, "a double part," a "compound," like the "ghost"—or, rather, the self includes that figure: "I was still the same, / Knowing myself yet being someone other." "The Hollow Men" intuitively what "Little Gidding" understands, thanks to the revelation that is the Incarnation. It is as if the earlier poem is like human understanding before God took on human form, *incarnating Incarnation*.

In any case—and for a reader of Eliot, it may not much matter exactly how much the poet then understood; only the poem matters—the pattern called Incarnation structures the nature of the self. The parts should not be “separated,” as Eliot prays in *Ash Wednesday*, but they must also maintain their identity as parts of a whole and precisely meet “In concord at this intersection time.”

What the “familiar compound ghost” reveals in “Little Gidding” is truth that is not seen in “The Hollow Men.” What the speaker of “The Hollow Men” needs to hear would, of course, be particular to him. The effect of the ghost’s revelations on the speaker of “Little Gidding” is in any case remarkable, for before long, after declaring that “Sin is Behovely,” he moves to expression of such concern and understanding as he has never before shown. He then concludes powerfully: “All manner of thing shall be well / By the purification of the motive / In the ground of our beseeching.” Another term for that is “prayer”—“valid” prayer—which the speaker of “The Hollow Men,” whether or not he is to be identified then with the poet Thomas Stearns Eliot, cannot manage to utter, lacking the will to take necessary action, paralyzed by darkness between, which he fails to understand as what it literally is in “The Hollow Men,” necessary mediation.

CHAPTER 5



“LOOKING INTO THE HEART OF LIGHT” AND MEETING THE DEAD

THE WASTE LAND AND THE NECESSITY OF INDIRECTNESS

The Waste Land rhymes with the waste land, representation mirroring the represented, especially in the prominence of “fragments,” which characterize both. “You know only / A heap of broken images,” says the speaker near the poem’s beginning, which, in being titled “Burial of the Dead,” flouts the later understanding of *Four Quartets* that “those who are only living can only die” and suggests that the dead are silenced and forgotten.¹ The speaker addresses “Son of man,” an evident biblical allusion that works to call to the reader’s mind, but not his own, the Son of God, who is absent from the wastelanders’ thought. Still, when the speaker asks, “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?” the reader cannot help but wonder if *Eliot*, behind his speaker and ever capable of irony, also has in mind the poem, whose “roots” certainly include, as the poet said in his notes, the vegetation myths brought to light in *The Golden Bough* and in Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*. The subsequent proffer of a glimpse of “fear in a handful of dust” certainly sounds biblical, prompting one commentator to conclude that “dust is the symbolic reminder to man of his bodily mortality, his beginning and end in matter.”² In any case, after mentioning a “moment in a rose garden,” with “the hyacinth girl”—hyacinths symbolize the resurrected god in the fertility rites—the speaker avers that he was not then able to “Speak, and my eyes failed. I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing, / Looking into the heart of life” (not

so different, in its lack of mediation, from “The Hollow Men,” in which the speaker seeks—directly—to look into the light). In fact, the speaker does not “*know nothing*,” averting his eyes, along with the other wastelanders, from the dark and nothingness. Little wonder that he is reduced to the announcement at poem’s end that “These fragments I have shored against my ruins.” His thrice-stated “Shantih” as his last word(s) refers to “the peace that *passeth* understanding.” Whether the poet, some five years before conversion to Christianity and Anglo-Catholicism *understood* is perhaps the overwhelming question for us readers.

One thinks again of the various fragments that both make up *The Waste Land* and function as a central concern of the wastelanders when one of the three girls in “The Fire Sermon” sighs, “‘On Margate Sands.’ / I can connect / Nothing with nothing.” Her direct reference is to the sexual activity on which the other girls are also focused. The reader, though, may be attuned to Eliot’s penchant for “squeezing” words until, as he said of Lancelot Andrewes, they yield “a full juice of meaning” that he or she would never have expected. If he or she recalls Eliot’s friend Pound’s late Canto 116 and the understanding reached that though “I cannot make it cohere / . . . / . . . it coheres all right, / even if my notes do not cohere,” he might wonder whether making “connections” should be the object, particularly if, as Pound suggests, there is a problem of individual will in the face of “coherence” built into the nature of things. (In his notes to the poem, Eliot avoids the term “connect” or “connection,” writing instead of the “collocation” of, for example, the Buddha and Saint Augustine at the end of the third section).³

More likely, the attuned reader may very well zero in on the repeated word “nothing,” noting how nothing much matters to the inhabitants of the waste land and how *nothing* is precisely what they show primary interest in and commitment to. But more: might Eliot’s point, but not the speaker’s, be that he or she can connect Nothing, or nothingness, with nothing? (“Nothing” is once capitalized, after all, thanks to the line break.) He would thus be said to lack a capacity prominent throughout *The Waste Land*, whose inhabitants cannot, or often refuse, to face the nothingness of their existence.

Difficulty resides in the fact that, unlike in the later *Four Quartets*, here Eliot renders no commentary, reflection, or assessment. There is observation and there is dramatization, but there is neither immediate “connection” drawn nor analysis offered. The “mythical method” that, in 1923, Eliot praised in his friend Joyce’s great work *Ulysses* (also published in 1922) allows for the poet’s own point of view to

emerge precisely through the "collocation" or intersection of widely different times and places.⁴ *That* comes, though, from outside the poem and is dependent on a reader capable of bringing another work, time, or context to bear. Still, the successful, responsible reader must mirror the wastelanders if the latter could—though none appears able—find meaning in the events described, the acts participated in, and the experiences encountered and undergone. *Finding meaning*: just what the wastelanders do not do, in part because they do not try, concerned with nothing (but unconcerned with nothingness). For them, among whom we count Joyce's semiautobiographical character Stephen Dedalus, the fact is, "*Darkness falls from the sky.*" Joyce, though, knows, and Eliot does as well, that "Brightness falls from the sky."⁵ How to approach such light, if it be found—that is an "overwhelming question."

Surely it matters that Eliot added those notes to his poem, evidently aware that he had to. Inhabitant of the waste land, too, his reader—"hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!"—"can connect / Nothing with nothing." Finding meaning occurs, then, outside the poem and beyond the wastelander reader's capacity. In the introduction to his "Notes on 'The Waste Land,'" Eliot locates meaning "in the poem [in] certain references to vegetation ceremonies," particularly as these have been represented by "work[s] of anthropology," namely those of Sir James George Frazer and Jessie Weston. About the latter, as a matter of fact, Eliot writes that her *From Ritual to Romance* "will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do; and I recommend it (apart from the great interest of the book itself) to any who think such elucidation of the poem worth the trouble." Two years earlier in *The Sacred Wood* Eliot had defined "elucidation" as the function and purpose of critical commentary.⁶

Hints and guesses of the vegetation ceremonies appear at the poem's beginning and continue to function prominently throughout, principally in negative fashion as ironic counterpoint to the wastelanders' preference for winter, cold, and snow: whereas "Winter kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow," April "breed[s] / Lilacs out of the dead land," in the process "stirring / Dull roots with spring rain." Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* intersects with these verses, with its difference from the lament that "April is the cruellest month": "Whan that Aprill with its shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote."⁷ Chaucer's poem is about pilgrims voyaging to Canterbury—the wastelanders go skiing. The vegetation ceremonies link up with fertility rites, which also figure prominently, also via irony,

in *The Waste Land*. Dryness and infertility pockmark the landscape of the waste land.

The relation between these ceremonies, rites, and mystery religions and Christianity is, if not the subject, a question that results from the powerful, influential, and controversial studies by Frazer and Weston, who relied extensively on the former. Whereas Weston focused on the Grail legend, with attendant interest in the Fisher King, the wasteland, the Chapel Perilous, and the Grail itself, Frazer, in his multivolume study, explored the shared elements between the Christian religion and ancient religions; these centered on the worship of a sacred king, his dying and returning, and his marriage to an earth goddess, who herself died at harvest time and revived in the spring. From the point of view of the present book, it is apparent that ancient religions, with their roots in stories of death and rebirth and the marriage of earth and the sacred, represent the structure or pattern—Incarnation—that “the Incarnation” makes explicit while purifying, refining. The latter is by no means diminished or robbed of its uniqueness, but on the contrary, affirmed as essential truth, universal, timeless, catholic—which is the way Eliot understood it. In that sense, he is not so far from Christianity in *The Waste Land* as supposed. I do not think that he then saw Christianity and ancient religions, the subject of proliferating studies in comparative methodology, as either opposed or identical. After all, his own way of reading and understanding was based in comparison, a point that governs *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* in 1920 and that he made explicit when he wrote there, in his own most famous and influential essay, that reading proceeds as “a judgment, a comparison, in which two things are measured by each other.”⁸ Comparative study thus results in neither relativism nor indifference, for “judgment” emerges thanks to the comparison, one appearing in some sense and way better than another. It is Eliot’s essential belief and manner of proceeding.

These many issues and perspectives come together in the critical appearance of the mythological figure Tiresias in the central “Fire Sermon” section of *The Waste Land*. In his notes to the poem, Eliot further elucidated his complex, indirect, and allusive meanings by identifying this figure also critical to *The Odyssey*: “Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a ‘character,’ is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem” [*italics original*].

Eliot is here alluding to, as he represents, his comparative, "mythical method," whereby one time, place, and "character" or "personage" *melts* into—that is, intersects with—a very different other. In parallel fashion, he wrote in "Little Gidding" that the intersection of timelessness is here and now, at and in this moment. In *The Waste Land*, however, it is not (yet) the "timeless moment" that intersects; rather, timelessness appears in the intersection of two widely divergent entities in time. The pattern appears, but the "movement" or parts or partners are different.

Tiresias *sees*, although he is blind. He sympathizes and understands because he has lived as both man and woman. The man-woman sexual situation lies at the heart of *The Waste Land's* attended concern with fertility, infertility, life, and "nothing." That Tiresias is able to "foretell" what will transpire between the indifferent "typist home at teatime" and the "young man carbuncular" burning with the fires of lust at once points to his relation to the various diviners and fortune-tellers spawned in the waste land and alludes to his understanding of reality as constituted by various intersections of times, places, and persons. This is contrary to the speaker's tired belief in the first poem of *Ash Wednesday* that one time cannot intersect with another, nor one place with another.⁹

What Tiresias "sees," far more clearly and responsibly than anyone else in *The Waste Land* including "Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante," stems at least in large part from his both-and nature and capacity. In that, he anticipates the "Lady of silences" in *Ash Wednesday*, who is both the Virgin Mary and someone other, still another paradox. As anticipation, Tiresias is a sort of John the Baptist figure, embodying a pattern that Incarnation names. Jesus the Christ represents fulfillment of that anticipation, that pattern. As "Little Gidding" says, what you seek is but a "shell" of meaning, whose purpose breaks, if at all, only upon fulfillment.

I would be remiss if I failed to attend to the well-known passage in "What the Thunder Said," which Eliot identified with "the journey to Emmaus," an elucidation that commentators have accepted. I have no wish to quarrel with this interpretation, only to add that Eliot is here repeating his pervasive interest in self-division, as in "the Lady's" uniting of the Virgin with someone other, the figure of "the familiar *compound* ghost," and to a degree, even Prufrock:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road

There is always another one walking beside you
 Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
 I do not know whether a man or a woman
 —But who is that on the other side of you?

There is both an anticipation of the “hooded hordes” in the next verses and an echo of those crowds whom “death had undone” crossing London Bridge “Under the brown fog of a winter dawn.” Moreover, there are here the speaking “I” and the distinguished “you,” alongside whom a “third” is observed “walking,” “gliding.” In the Gospel story—Luke 24:13–35—two figures, one of whom is named Cleopas, are “attended” by Jesus, about whom they speak, not knowing that it is he beside them. Eliot combines the two men into one body, distinguishing them only as consciousnesses. It matters, surely, that the “third” “always walks beside you,” never leaving or separate from that part of the self that does not speak, interrogate, or reflect. He, or it, *attends* the perhaps simpler part of the self, always there—as *is* the case thanks to the Incarnation, at which point God entered our human world, forever changing it and never leaving us alone or unattended. Of none of this are the wastelanders aware: they know nothing of Incarnation or *the* Incarnation. Yet possibilities exist for them; hints are evidently not infrequent—although they, to be sure, seem disinclined to offer many guesses.

As we have seen, the speaker in “Burial of the Dead” remains blithely unaware of the implications of “looking into the heart of light,” lacking the capacity and the interest to “measure two things by one another.” The reader, understood to be a wastelander herself or himself, is prone to take the ending of “The Fire Sermon,” with its allusion to Saint Augustine, as a positive hint: “Burning burning burning burning / . . . / burning.” This is purgation, particularly of lust, such as that raging in the “young man carbuncular” earlier in the section. “Burning” takes on added significance, emerging as present alternative to its near-opposite “water,” by which Madame Sosostriis warned to “fear death” and that, in fact, causes the death of Phlebas the Phoenician, itself the sole subject of the short fourth section of *The Waste Land* (that “a current under sea / Picked his bones” anticipates the disembodiment represented in the second poem of *Ash Wednesday*). But purgation is a pagan notion, to be distinguished from the Christian idea of purification and refinement that Eliot represents everywhere in *Four Quartets*. The difference between them lies in the matter of transcendence, for purgation entails elimination, destruction, leaving behind, whereas purification and refinement

connote maintaining while modifying, precisely what Eliot observes in a key passage in "Little Gidding" concerning the expansion of love "beyond desire."

Another hint—another kind of hint—occurs in the borrowing from the Hindu Upanishads at the close of the poem: "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata," that is: give, sympathize, control. But we know that Eliot at least came to believe—likely while studying Oriental philosophy and religion with Irving Babbitt at Harvard in the early 1910s—that *self*-control is an illusory goal, although the matter is complex. In his essay on his former teacher, included in *Essays Ancient and Modern* (1936), Eliot thus wrote of Babbitt's misunderstanding.¹⁰ Misapprehension is but one of the pervasive ruling tyrants of the waste land.

Although typically seen as a positive turn, the speaker's question at the close of *The Waste Land* represents another error: "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (perhaps that it is a question, rather than a declaration, hints at Eliot's warning distance). After all, as Confucius insists, the beginning of governance lies in setting *one's self* in order. But again, the speaker has, or thinks he has, only "fragments" with which to work: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins," he says here but four lines from the end. The last line, as earlier noted, is the thrice-iterated "Shantih," which Eliot identified as "a formal ending to an Upanishad." He adds, "'The Peace which passeth understanding' is our equivalent to this word." To seek understanding rather than to aim or settle for that which "passeth" it is Eliot's later purpose at least. In 1922, in *The Waste Land*, reasons exist for suspecting that even then he was wary of this point of view, too, representing it as yet another misunderstanding by wastelanders.

Opportunities thus lie close at hand, but those the wastelanders *waste*, one after another. They, time and again, waste and lay waste, evident in the representation of the River Thames in "The Fire Sermon." Here, Eliot gives us two accounts, one present day, the other Elizabethan, with marked, comparative differences. Now "The river sweats / Oil and tar," full of barges and "drifting logs," "Past the Isle of Dogs." The juxtaposed scene from the past differs in tone, color, diction, reference, rhythm, and rhyme, as "splendour" differs from "the ugly," the river being wasted, pockmarked now with waste, absent even of persons. But *then* "Elizabeth and Leicester" are seen in "A gilded shell / Red and gold" while can be heard "The peal of bells / White towers."

The most powerful representation of waste occurs earlier in the pub scene at the end of "A Game of Chess," a scene that stands in striking contrast—the ugly with splendor—with the opening account,

opulent in detail, of a woman sitting in a chair “like a burnished throne.” In the pub scene—we know it is that because the dialogue is being interrupted by the familiar call of the bartender at closing time—denial, rejection, elimination, and destruction are literalized, “nothing” rendered palpable by the revelation and indifferent exposition of abortion. The female speaker tells of Lil and her husband Albert, who could not “bear to look at” her because of her bad teeth. The speaker has warned Lil, although she herself appears to have been interested in Albert, an apparent fact for Lil. She, it turns out, is but 31 but looks much older owing to abortion.

I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,
 It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.
 (She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)
 The chemist said it would be all right, but I've never been the same.
 You *are* a proper fool, I said.
 Well, if Albert won't leave you alone, there it is, I said,
 What you get married for if you don't want children.

In the waste land, life is thus not respected, welcome, cultivated, or even wanted. The opening verses of the poem reflect the situation perfectly:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
 Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
 Memory and desire, stirring
 Dull roots with spring rain.
 Winter kept us warm, covering
 Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
 A little life with dried tubers.

As the pub scene well establishes, life is cut short, given no chance to grow, to become healthful, productive, meaningful, but stopped short, nipped before budding. As a result, there is nothing: no “roots that clutch,” no “branches [that can] grow / Out of this stony rubbish.”

In this “stony rubbish,” however, full of rock, with lack of rain to nourish, the wastelanders—paradoxically, it may appear—still crave rain, their thirst nearly palpable. “If there were only water amongst the rock,” they endlessly whine. “If there were the sound of water only,” they reduce themselves to whining at one point. They thus cling to the very life that they deny. There is no contradiction of the manifest and pervasive flight from fertility in this thirst, this hardly heroic quest.

What the wastelanders crave, and are willing to quest for, amounts to nothing more than relief. They do not change (themselves), do not turn. Nor do the wastelanders know enough—connecting "Nothing with nothing"—to "fear death by water." What they really need is fire, not the fire of purgation, but that of purification and refinement, what *Four Quartets* explains and develops.

Infertility, indifference, misapprehension, misunderstanding—these are the sad, pathetic values of the wastelanders, who in effect make these negatives positive because, rather than find themselves adrift and cut off from the sources of meaning, they embrace and cultivate just this lack of meaning, ensuring its continuance and its reign. Their land is wasted, their lives are wasted, and time is wasted.

ELIOT AND THE DEAD: MEETING AT "THIS INTERSECTION TIME"

Death bestrides the world of T. S. Eliot's poems like a Colossus. Pervasive, ubiquitous, it first appears in a major poem in his earliest, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917), functioning more as image than palpable threat. Three years later, in "Gerontion," the title character a sort of older Prufrock, death has taken on physical status and acquired looming presence. In *The Waste Land* (1922), Eliot represents death as "undoing" the "brown hordes" daily crossing London Bridge, who symbolize the "indifferent" lives only partly "lived" in the dead lands of the modern world. "The Hollow Men," published in 1925, may be even bleaker.¹¹ Here, Eliot introduces the notion of death's three kingdoms: that of the literal fact, death in life, and the "twilight kingdom," which he will explore in the major poems he wrote after embracing Anglo-Catholicism and being confirmed in the Church of England in 1927. Indeed, in *Ash Wednesday* (1930), death is hardly less pervasive, perhaps even more a palpable threat, for it has a solidity and a force the poet may recognize for the first time. By the time of *Four Quartets* (1943 but begun at least a decade earlier), Eliot appears to have arrived at an understanding that "We die with the dying" and that "We are born with the dead."¹² The interpretive course of Eliot's focus on death—I do not say "obsession"—instances the "journey toward understanding" that literature in the West since Homer has represented as including an encounter with the dead.

In the first poem of *Four Quartets*, "Burnt Norton" (originally published in 1935), Eliot, perhaps surprisingly, ends with declared links among time (the poems' ostensible subject), words, and death. That "we die with the dying" instances such paradox as marks Eliot's

(Christian) understanding and requires of the reader some little effort to grasp. As he proceeds, Eliot focuses on the slipperiness of words and the very difficulty thus posed for understanding; what he writes here is critical for seeing what precedes and what follows in *Four Quartets*, belying the easy notion that the poet grasped the whole only after completing the poem. Words indeed strain, and Eliot's are highly charged.

In "The Sacred Jungle," a series of essays pointedly inimical to Eliot, the Romanticist Geoffrey Hartman levels serious charges while sadly misreading, a fact all too familiar in commentary on Old Possum. No friend of "via media" institutions, which he contrasts with modes of "Northern enthusiasm," Wordsworth's greatest scholar and most astute reader elevates Thomas Carlyle, Harold Bloom, and Walter Benjamin, among others, at Eliot's expense. In the event, Eliot's "sacred wood" is rendered unrecognizable, and the modernist poet and essayist reduced to a "teatotaling" figure whose "conservatism is a distrust of 'ideas.'" ¹³ Having praised his Yale colleague Harold Bloom for recognizing "the literature of the past [as] an 'unquiet grave,'" Hartman turns on Eliot, for whom, he says, "this return of the dead is limited by a trust in the established religious ritual and an urbane thesis of impersonal integration." Eliot's prose, notably in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," claims Hartman, "buries the dead and orders all things well," and "the corpses that sprout and speak in *The Waste Land* are carefully reduced to voices moving symphonically through a poem that acts as their requiem"; in fact, "the voices, or ghosts, are kept within the locus of the poem, shut up there as in a daemonic wood. In their asylum is our peace." ¹⁴

But as we have seen, death figures prominently in *The Waste Land*, especially as death in life. The famous fifth and last section, "What the Thunder Said," figures a knight errant on a journey toward the Chapel Perilous: not exactly a journey toward understanding, for the poem concludes with the repeated Hindu word *shantih*, which refers to "the peace that *passeth* all understanding" (*italics added*). That the final words are foreign augments the sense conveyed by the line just before: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." The speaker has but fragments, many of them foreign to his language, culture, and understanding, and at least one of the most important of these puts the emphasis on his own *self-sufficiency*: Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata (give, sympathize, control).

In any case, *The Waste Land* stands as a remarkable observation of modern life. Here, winter "kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow." We cherish the lines, find strange solace in them, a mirror

held up to modern mere existing. This is truth, representative of a *via negativa*, our own winter as readers. The poem addresses *me*: "Hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!" There *is* no escaping recognition of our condition. Perhaps we—you and I—no more wish something different, better, than do the alter egos who occasionally slump through these damnable and damning verses.

The knight-errant pilgrim, on his journey through the waste land, fails to understand and so is represented ironically by his more enlightened maker. Or else neither character nor poet understands, and Eliot's own journey toward understanding is incomplete. For readers of *The Waste Land*, the question is perhaps insignificant, the important point being that the solution to modern egoism and desire represented here is inadequate, judged by the standards of the later, complex, tensional—and incarnational—understanding dramatized in *Ash Wednesday* and "essayed" in *Four Quartets*.

If the last words of *The Waste Land* fail to make clear that the answer has not been *embodied* and cannot be for someone whose culture is different from that which they represent—the Hindu "Shantih shantih shantih"—the preceding injunction from the Upanishads to "give, sympathize, control" should raise serious doubt, at the very least. At first glance, the trinity recalls *the* Trinity (and also resonates with Odysseus's understanding finally arrived at, after his visit to the kingdom of the dead and the purgation of his reckless egoism and uncontrolled desire). But of course, "control" sticks out like the proverbial sore thumb. It obviously refers to management both of others and of one's self, an inner check, precisely what Eliot rejects in his important essay on his former Harvard teacher Irving Babbitt, a scholar of Eastern religions (as well as of Romanticism).

The essay appeared in 1928, six years after *The Waste Land* and two before *Ash Wednesday*. In it, Eliot takes Babbitt to task for his insistence on "the human reason, not the revelation of the supernatural," his humanism the individualism that Eliot has been excoriating since at least *The Sacred Wood* in 1920, and for "the enthusiasm for being lifted out of one's merely rational self by some enthusiasm."¹⁵ In this essay, Eliot focuses on Babbitt's "doctrine of self-control," which "sometimes appears as the 'inner check,'"¹⁶ writes Eliot, having the year before described himself as now "anglo-catholic in religion."¹⁷ Eliot embodies the incarnational way of complicating and interimplicating:

And if you distinguish so sharply between "outer" and "inner" checks as Mr. Babbitt does, then there is nothing left for the individual to

check himself by but his own private notions and his judgment, which is pretty precarious. As a matter of fact, when you leave the political field for the theological, the distinction between outer and inner becomes far from clear. Given the most highly organized and temporally powerful, with all the powers of inquisition and punishment imaginable, still the idea of the religion is the *inner* control—the appeal not to a man’s behaviour but to his soul.¹⁸

Eliot is carefully and strategically working through the differences between Protestantism and (Roman) Catholicism, implicitly, rather than *positively*, representing Anglicanism—that is, Anglo-Catholicism—as the desirable and necessary alternative. Then follows this essential, bold statement, important to our understanding of the limited understanding displayed (by character and poet) in *The Waste Land*: “If a religion cannot touch a man’s self, so that in the end he is controlling himself instead of being merely controlled by priests as he might be by policemen, then it has failed in its professed task. I suspect Mr. Babbitt of an instinctive dread of organized religion, a dread that it should cramp and deform the free operations of his own mind. If so, he is surely under a misapprehension.”¹⁹ *The Waste Land* smacks of just the sort of humanism that Eliot attributes to Babbitt. By the time of “The Hollow Men” in 1925, three years later, “Shantih shantih shantih” has been replaced by a fragment (at least) of the Lord’s Prayer, by the time of *Ash-Wednesday* by the prayer that the speaker’s “cry come unto Thee.”

Most important, in any case, in determining the nature of the knight pilgrim’s understanding in *The Waste Land*, is the treatment of “burning” and its relation to water. Characters in the poem are either indifferent or afire with desire—inappropriate and ineffective desire, lust really, rather than love. The third section, “The Fire Sermon,” affords the clearest and most sustained instances of burning desire, and ends with allusions to both St. Augustine and the Buddha. Asceticism is no viable solution; moreover, in *The Waste Land*, Eliot merely offers a “collocation,” whereas later he will distinguish. “The Fire Sermon” concludes, as we have noted, with references to St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. The words are striking, emotionally wrought—and suggest a power outside the self unforeseen in “Damyata” (control). The last word here “burning,” emphatic in its separation and aloneness, while repeating the thrice-repeated first instance of it, a pattern that on the page makes one think of a narrowing and a pinpointing, thus highlighting, is followed immediately by the title of the fourth and penultimate section, “Death by Water.” These resonant verses

anticipate the "Damyata" of "What the Thunder Said" ("The boat responded / Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar") and the bones picked clean in the second poem of *Ash Wednesday*, with their obvious indication of spiritual cleansing.

"Death by Water" echoes Christian understanding of water's potentially saving grace. This note the final section of the poem picks up and advances, with its central focus on thunder, rocks, and no rain: "dry sterile thunder without rain"; "If there were water we should stop and drink / Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think." The speaker worries, repeating, lamenting, near despair, desperate for even the sound of water—burning with desire, that is. Water would, or so is the familiar and expressed expectation, save—as Christians understand via baptism; it can also kill. There is no clear sense, yet, of the *relation* between death and life—water and burning. There is no complication, in other words, no intertwining or interimplication, no "impossible union" of opposites such as *Four Quartets* will understand as the pattern called Incarnation. The speaker here simply wants out, wants escape, wants it easy and uncomplicated, not unlike the pathetic characters of "The Fire Sermon" who, knowing only coupling and not love, take the easy way out.

The last of the five parts, "What the Thunder Said," offers little relief. Here, as a matter of fact, the dryness, desiccation, indifference, and infertility of the "human machine" are reflected in the geographical waste land through which the journeying voice now meanders. This is no place of consolation. We desire ease and no pain, Eliot well knew, unable as humans to face too much truth that is hard, unpleasant, demanding. Eliot understood already that what modern men and women need is not more comfort, but less. The waste land itself perhaps offers just what its inhabitants need, although they mistake it: not rain or water but more thunder, more dryness, and eventual darkness—for, as "Little Gidding" knows, love devises the torment through which you must proceed.

Here, the "voice" has at least undertaken a journey, of which those in "The Burial of the Dead" were not capable, having neither memory nor desire. The language, in its Hemingwayesque leanness, suits the barren landscape. This is journey—more of a modern pilgrimage—and the way is negative, a clearing of debris, a ridding of detritus, a disabusing of false notions. There is no stopping, for if we stopped, we would drink—and think—and misunderstand. Here cessation and rest are not available as options—you *must keep moving*. If there is no hope, at least there is no hope for the wrong thing.

The thunder finally speaks, but it is with foreign words, cryptically, enigmatically, a voice literally from another world. In his own waste land, Prufrock knew nothing of “a moment’s surrender,” or, rather, Hamlet-like he thought too much about it, knew of it only as “The awful daring,” consumed with “prudence,” self-condemned to “our empty rooms.” *The Waste Land* soon ends, after further “fragments . . . shored against my ruins,” with a repetition of the important Hindu words from, as Eliot tells us in an added note, the Upanishads. The poem thus ends in a foreign language. The concepts have their parallels in *The Odyssey*, where the intrepid, once-reckless, now-heeled (and thus healed) voyager pilgrim learns, to use Eliot’s own translation of the three Hindu terms, to *give, sympathize, control*.

The last few verses in *The Waste Land* no doubt play a huge part in determining how you read the entire work. I agree with those readers who regard them as but “fragments” “shored against” the speaking voice’s “ruins.” But even though the last words appear in a foreign tongue, it seems clear that *the poet*—regardless of the poem’s “speaker”—understands quite a lot. I do not say that he is on the road to Christianity, nor would I feel comfortable concluding that he is not. It is altogether likely that the Christian understanding Eliot ultimately reaches, and brilliantly dramatizes in *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*, represents no mere transcendence of this—what to call it?—mythological, universalist understanding. Eliot proceeds, on his own journey to understanding, in, through, and by means of what is palpable in *The Waste Land*. Any transcendence ultimately reached does not entail eclipse of the earlier base. Clearly, by the time of *The Waste Land*, Eliot was aware of the necessity of purgation (if not yet of purification).

Whereas the epic hero of *The Odyssey* is privileged to undergo a process of education into self-control, the speaker of *The Waste Land* is not so fortunate. *He* experiences no descent into the “whirlpool,” no visit to the kingdom of the dead. The only dead he can thus know are those labeled in “The Hollow Men” and *Ash Wednesday* as inhabiting “death’s other kingdom,” the living as dead, such as those in the brown fog streaming daily over London Bridge, their eyes downward cast. *Because* there is no purgation, itself made possible by an encounter with nothingness, Eliot’s speaker cannot reach understanding and so cannot give and sympathize. As I have suggested, “What the Thunder Said” *hints* at nothingness, but it never realizes it. Thus the speaker can ask, obviously recalling *The Odyssey*, among other texts, “Shall I at least set my lands in order?” The words “at least” embody his distance from understanding. He does not grasp that he *must* set

his own lands in order before he can hope, or pretend, to restore "the waste land."

Purgation, in any case, represents something other and more than, something different from, self-control. Purgation of the ego leads, as in Odysseus and Siddhartha too, to the healing that is also a healing. Self-control bears the implication of achievement without purgation. Eliot refers in the prose, rather derisively, to the "inner check" that some, like his former Harvard teacher Irving Babbitt, considered possible and sufficient.

Another story is told by and in "The Hollow Men" (1925), a poem sometimes said to constitute a culmination of *The Waste Land*. The poem may be seen as *between* Eliot's non-Christian and his Christian understanding. Here, the focus is not only on death—from the beginning, with the epigraph from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "*Mistah Kurtz—he dead,*" but the poem also represents "scenes" in hell. Despite its "minimalist" language, "The Hollow Men" is highly allusive and difficult to grasp. Still, in spite of the powerful allusions to Guy Fawkes and his abortive plan to blow up Parliament in 1605, it is clear that lack of action dominates: after all, here, in this dryness, there is "Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralyzed force, gesture without motion." The three kingdoms I have already mentioned do not sufficiently distinguish among relations to death and dying, nor does Eliot succeed—if, indeed, it was his desire—in demarcating a process or stages toward some amelioration of the focused hollowness. Clear enough, though, is the poem's reiterated use of "eyes" to connect with the need of self-scrutiny and self-criticism.

Moreover, Eliot introduces the term "multifoliate rose," which will play such a significant role in both *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*, and sight returns here as a gift from outside the self, the product of that "star," that "rose," that guides and mediates. The word "empty" now appears instead of "hollow," pointing to significant difference. The last two lines, however, can be read in two quite different ways, depending on the relative emphasis given to the adverb. Then, after the refrain concerning "the prickly pear," comes a series of verses in which a preposition looms large; indeed, "between" assumes thematic priority, rhyming with "twilight kingdom" and deconstructing assumptions about and reliance on binarism and the familiar notion of simple and absolute oppositions. The shadow that falls "between" appears as a sort of (Derridean) *trace*.

That Eliot begins the poem with "We" is a fact not to be minimized. Although the "I" does appear, the focus is on the collective rather than the individual. Moreover, "we" know we are hollow; no

revelation is necessary. And both “I” and “we” know that we dare not “meet” other “eyes” than ours (is Old Possum possibly rhyming with Prufrock’s dilemma?). If knowing is not the matter—although seeing is—acting and doing stand together as important. After all, Guy Fawkes *did* little, and we are more likely to end the world with a whimper than with a bang.

One thing seems clear: Eliot himself is on a journey toward—what? There are, of course, the repeated fragments of prayer—surely Eliot intends a contrast *between* this kingdom and death’s various kingdoms figured throughout the poem. To end the world—and the poem—with only a “whimper” at once returns us to Guy Fawkes, reemphasizes the inactivity and nonproductivity of “the hollow men,” and insists on man’s ineffectiveness—in the face of what the Lord’s Prayer says.

The way out of the waste land lies not in escape or denial, but rather in, through, and by means of it; water does not quench desire, but fire redeems desire. The choice is ours, but no “inner check” or “Damyata” will then do. Another way of putting it: the fourth section of “East Coker” allegorizes the human condition. We are here a long way from *The Waste Land* in this understanding of our place as a “hospital” where we may be healed. There is no escaping, either, the fact of the Fall (with which, of course, *Four Quartets* begins), and “Sin is Behovely,” insists “Little Gidding.” Diseased, the will is incapable of providing help; in fact, it makes matters worse. Control is thus beyond our means. Salvation lies, moreover, not in water, which can cause death; rather, our sustaining and restorative food and drink are the *body* of that “wounded surgeon,” who, like Tiresias, understands because he has “foresuffered all.” Incarnation describes the saving pattern: liberation, then, from desire and “expanding of love beyond desire.”

The second section of “Little Gidding” interestingly opens with three stanzas on water and fire. Eliot’s emphasis here resides with ensuing death such as that caused alike by “flood and drouth,” situations paralleling the fourth and fifth sections of *The Waste Land*. The lack of sophistication in rhythm and rhyme creates an effect not quite mocking but nevertheless deflating, exposing “the vanity of human toil.” The denied “sacrifice” clearly recalls the crucifixion as well as our refusal to take the hard path (which Eliot identified as “the middle way”).²⁰ Yet the “foundations” remain, though “marred”; they are “sanctuary and choir,” places of worship and song. Furthermore, it is surely significant that, whereas the poet has allotted a stanza each to the elements air and earth, he combines in the last fire and water.

They *can* have the same effect. Eliot insists, and makes that insistence the point of the last lines of his great poem, that the necessary fire is inseparable from love, wellness from pain, hope from doubt (see also his essay on Pascal).

Control is effective only when, rather than functioning as an "inner check," it emerges in, through, and by means of such loss of possession as Eliot says we old men fear. *You* cannot control, although you may *control*—gifted. Giftedness has no truck with mastery, engaging only with acceptance.

Eliot's climactic treatment of death occurs in his final version of the visit to the kingdom of the dead. Joyce had represented the *nekuia* indirectly, figuratively, his character Stephen Dedalus merely hearing—that is, being subjected to—a "fire sermon" that powerfully details what hell is like and portends for the sinner. In "Little Gidding," somewhat similarly, Eliot does not journey to a place apart, nor does he encounter an array of the dead—for timelessness everywhere intersects with time; yet the scene on the bombed-out streets of London, in the early morning, clearly rhymes with the Homeric paradigm.

The scene stands out, in part, precisely because it is a scene, few of which are realized in *Four Quartets*. Eliot himself served as a fire warden, and the speaker here, in the second section of "Little Gidding," represents the poet, or at least a part of him. Everything is complex. The German planes have done their damage and retreated, and the speaker is out taking account now that light is about to arrive—it is another "twilight" time, *between* one thing and another, and that fact bears a thematic burden. Rhymes with earlier poems are unmistakable: "three districts," echoing "The Hollow Men" and "death's three kingdoms"; the "one walking" like that hooded figure in "What the Thunder Said" in *The Waste Land*; the "impossible union" he (somehow) represents suggested in the description as "loitering and unhurried," itself reminiscent of the depiction of the "Lady of silences" in *Ash Wednesday*.

The scene thus set, ominously and highly charged, Eliot reports the advent of a stranger who partakes of such doubleness as marks the Virgin in *Ash Wednesday* and Tiresias in *The Waste Land*. Like Odysseus in the original visit to the kingdom of the dead, Eliot solicits advice and directions from this stealthy figure, describing the situation in a way that clearly recalls the statement in "East Coker": "And where you are is where you are not." Rhymes continue to sound; whatever the ghost is, he is perhaps most important as a "compound," like Tiresias, an instance of "impossible union." He is also evidently a part of Eliot himself, partly "inside," partly "an-other." Thus Eliot continues with

a enigmatic statement that points to his own now accepting the situation and “playing along,” playing a role, in fact, one that “rhymes” with this “compound” figure: “So I assumed a double part and cried / And heard another’s voice cry: ‘What! are *you* here?’” It is the surprise of the dead finding the living among them: for the moment, then, Eliot is both alive and dead, like and unlike Odysseus. To the ghost’s question, Eliot replies, “assum[ing] a double part” *within* “himself”: “Although we were not. I was still the same, / Knowing myself yet being someone other.” The succeeding verses establish, once and for all, via the rhyming words “intersection time” that *here* timelessness has entered time, this moment “attended” and burning with meaning: at this “intersection” the two were “In concord”—and so they patrolled together.

At last we hear the poet’s voice, soliciting words from the stranger. The response is neither what Eliot expected nor what he wanted. The words of the dead are, indeed, “tongued with fire.” The poet, though, is another matter altogether: while we do not know his moral failings, as we do Odysseus’s, *he* is little short of pathetic, as well as insouciant. Moreover, Eliot emphasizes what he has forgotten rather than what he has not known. It is the ghost who is now magisterial. His words carry little comfort, his later words even less. He is, clearly, a truth teller, pulling no punches. The emphasis falls, perhaps surprisingly, on forgiveness. The ghost here recalls Elpenor, whose body Odysseus had unfeelingly left unburied, but with an equally obvious difference: the ghost remains “himself” while being someone other. He now gets down to business: the poet and words and conduct. Consequences or results do not equate with effort or desire.

The ghost proceeds to detail three gifts, the fruit of a lifetime’s efforts, which we have observed more than once: how much truth can humanity stand? He thus engages in demythologization of a primal sort. If no honors, for example, come from outside, that comeuppance pales in light of the realization of one’s own faults and failures: no one is without sin (“Sin is Behovely,” begins the next section of “Little Gidding”).

The picture—the prediction—is not a mixed bag; rather, it is singularly uncomfortable, promising only pain and suffering (Odysseus was promised by Tiresias that he would get home after all, although after suffering much and losing his men). Now, however, a glimmer, not so much of hope as of some opportunity is held out by the ghost: it is not particularly promising, although it represents the “way”—that of restoration by the “refining fire.” Thus ends the ghost, his final words rhyming with earlier words in *Four Quartets* concerning movement

and pattern, like the representation of the Elizabethan rustics in "East Coker." So, day breaking, the ghost leaves with a valediction, "on the blowing of the horn."

All is clear.

Different from Odysseus, Eliot has his encounter with the dead in the dawning light. The later rhyme of the "dark dove" that is the German bomber with the Holy Spirit is shocking, but it is such darkness that represents opportunity.

Another difference from *The Odyssey* already hinted at: in the course of the visit to the kingdom of the dead, we witness changes in the hero, for he grows into sympathy as he moves from Elpenor to his mother, on to Agamemnon, Achilles, and Aias—there is a *process*. No such changes occur in Eliot, not in the scene with the ghost, at any rate. Did he have "the experience but miss . . . the meaning," which reflection—afterward—might have restored, albeit "In a different form" ("The Dry Salvages")? The situation recalls the "dissociation of sensibility" that Eliot had long before revealed in the essay "The Metaphysical Poets," claiming that in the seventeenth century English poets began to separate thinking and feeling, no longer able to do both at the same time. Here, though, in "Little Gidding" no hint appears of reflection, which Eliot had long before forsworn in favor of observation. Whether or not the poet had the experience of meeting the ghost and hearing his words *and at the same time* grasping the meaning of that experience, we cannot know. We can know, however, that we as readers do so.

But further, "Little Gidding" proceeds to insist, repeating the point, that though "Sin is Behovely," all will turn out well. Focus and emphasis thus (rightly) shift from the poet—the individual—to the whole of creation, which the Incarnation *restored*; and that means that every moment, in every place, for everyone and everything, there is salvation. The fact of the Incarnation ensures it, meaning it, in fact. In other words, Eliot rightly turns from the part that is himself, the unattended individual, to the whole, and so the remainder of *Four Quartets* returns to the necessity of forgiveness. We need to forgive as God forgave (us) and accept that we are "folded in a single party." Accordingly, the poem ends in emphasizing, in writing, analogous wholeness, individual word surrendering to larger entities and calling for mutual support. It may even be that, as Eliot hints more than once, the individual will not, willy-nilly, be restored or purified, but whether he or she is or is not, all is well (a rhyme with Alexander Pope's much-maligned insistence—recall Voltaire in *Candide*—in

An Essay on Man that “Everything that is, is right”).²¹ Community counts, and communion matters.

ANOTHER “IMPOSSIBLE UNION”

And so *Four Quartets* marks the end of the “journey toward understanding,” the beginning of which began many years before. If *The Waste Land* represents the failure to undertake the necessary journey, the later essay poem reveals the journey undertaken and completed. Death is key; it plays a key role as has been suggested, although more, quite a bit more, is now available to observation. We may not adequately understand *The Waste Land* apart from *Four Quartets*, but we cannot understand the latter without knowing the former.

Death is everywhere in *Four Quartets*. Its relation to life is precisely the point. Incarnation reveals the “impossible union” of just such binary oppositions. In this poem and those preceding it, as we have observed, destitution and darkness mark the way *by means of which* the pilgrim may be able to find his or her path “up.” But death—not capitalized, this time—offers opportunity, plays a positive role, representing necessary means, or so it would often seem in Eliot’s poetry. The words of the “familiar compound ghost” bear the capacity to burn through, purify, and refine the poem’s speaker. The dead know; they understand, being dead.

Does Eliot suggest that love—and God—is death? In “East Coker,” he writes of the never-ending “paternal care” as that which “prevents us everywhere,” functioning, therefore, as limit, as limitation. Love—and God—also appears in *Four Quartets* as a sort of supreme self-awareness, criticism, and judgment: in the words of the earlier poem “The Hollow Men” as the “Eyes” that we would avoid, averting our eyes, the eyes we dare not meet that effectively function as necessary means, medium, and mediation.

CHAPTER 6



ARRIVING WHERE WE STARTED TURNING AROUND *THE SACRED WOOD*

Made up largely of previously published essays and reviews, *The Sacred Wood* (1920) is a great book, greater than Eliot's commentators have often supposed. It shows a certain bravado, and Eliot's magisterial voice sometimes grates, appearing in places unearned, but it contains such sound judgments and brims with so much strong good sense that he should be forgiven his indiscretions and lauded for his achievement in both matter and form. That achievement is best recognized when read in relation to *Four Quartets*.

From the understanding arrived at twenty-plus years later, *The Sacred Wood* appears as a kind of John the Baptist to Eliot's Incarnation, a herald or precursor, not unlike the Old Testament and not unlike Homer's *Odyssey*; that is, the pattern already appears, glimpsed darkly, fleetingly perhaps but nevertheless *there*, awaiting developed understanding. Of course, you have to comprehend that pattern in order to glimpse it yourself in its early, incomplete appearances. One thus journeys backward from *Four Quartets* and in so doing comes better to appreciate Eliot's "journey toward understanding."

What we get in Eliot's essays is a particular sensibility and an individuality fired in the crucible of tradition (and perhaps orthodoxy). Eliot was aware early—it is an unwavering and central element of his belief—that the path to individuality, as to any goal, is not direct: in this case, as his most famous essay argues and indeed embodies, you must go by way of—by means of—the "detour" that is tradition. It is at once both a particular and an individual position and a familiar, traditional one. Rather than that anything personal serves the cause of impersonality, the impersonal provides—as form—the way

the personal expresses itself. Matters cannot be so neatly separated as we often imagine; too often we get but *half* the truth.

The voice we thus hear in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “Charles Whibley,” and “The *Pensées* of Pascal,” as in the essays that make up *Dante*, for instance, is T. S. Eliot’s. Seldom does he allow autobiography to enter, however. As to the question of formality, I find that a notoriously subjective term—naturally Eliot appears formal to most of us, but his essays are not in and of themselves formal or sterile. Reason may preside, but logic does not dominate. The matter at hand is, moreover, familiar if literary. If Eliot does not circle his subject or adopt a tentativeness, he is rarely dogmatic. If he appears “to know,” that is because he does. It is we who know so little who find such a tone overbearing and, worst of all, closed-minded. Eliot’s essays, unlike Wordsworth’s, say, in verse and prose alike, are neither lyrical nor reflective, but rather contemplative and based in and as observation—recall that his first book was *Prufrock and Other Observations*.

Eliot closed his first collection of essays with one on Dante, the first of many on that most influential figure. As Eliot insists in his important note to the second, 1928, edition of *The Sacred Wood*, he is concerned with poetry qua poetry and not as something else, such as biography or religion; that book is, he says, a beginning.¹ You start, says Eliot, with poetry as poetry—and then you may move to its relations with matters outside itself. He as critic may not, then, be lost although in the wood. That wood is, however, recognizable as “sacred.” It may also be dark, but if so it is in any case where you are and where you begin, not with some wish or fantasy; sacred wood thus contrasts with fantasy land. It also signals complexity, for example, the convoluted and controversial matter of the relation of poetry and criticism.

Let us linger a bit with “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in which Eliot takes on Wordsworth and his “personal” theory of poetry. What Wordsworth is talking about, in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, sounds, indeed, very much like the essay—and what Eliot attacks and seeks to replace smacks of the same form, for the focus Wordsworth and Coleridge inaugurate is expressive of the personality and emotion of the writer, based in recollection and reflection. Defending his own practice as a poet, just as Wordsworth does, while advancing the cause of a new interpretation of poetry and the poet, Eliot seeks observation instead of reflection, elucidation rather than judgment, opinion, or the expression of the writer’s personality.

As developed in the later essay "The Metaphysical Poets," Eliot's point is that the later seventeenth-century "dissociation of sensibility" produced "reflective" (instead of "intellectual") poets: "The poets revolted against the ratiocinative, the descriptive; they thought and felt by fits, unbalanced; *they reflected*" (italics added).² Although Wordsworth, like Eliot, emphasizes contemplation, the object for him of that act is the poet's own emotion, not an external "thing." In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot sets about defining, the job of historical explanation due later. He writes here that "emotion recollected in tranquillity" is an inexact formula; in fact, says Eliot, Wordsworth thus got it wrong on all counts: "For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquillity." Wordsworth was not the first by any means, but he was perhaps the primary spokesman for and exponent of poetry as reflection. Not at all "the expression of personality," poetry, according to the modernist Eliot, "is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation. These experiences are not 'recollected,' and they finally unite in an atmosphere which is 'tranquil' only in that it is a passive attending upon the event."³ Those readers who complain of Eliot's difficulty as essayist are right. He *is* difficult, and the reason why is his precision.

The essential point in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is Eliot's positing of an "Impersonal theory of poetry," one based not on reflection, but on observation, thus different from Wordsworth's revolutionary definition of poetry as the poet's "emotion recollected in tranquillity." As Eliot puts it, "The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all."⁴ In other words, the poet does not express *his* personality or *his* emotions, although he may well represent a character expressing that character's personality and emotions, J. Alfred Prufrock being a case in point. Always secondary, the critic likewise "must not coerce, and he must not make judgments of worse and better. He must simply elucidate: the reader will form the correct judgment for himself."⁵ The critic, whose form is the essay, like the poet presents rather than reflects, leaving the reader free to share in the observation. The stress must follow, Eliot everywhere insists, on the thing made, the work of art: "For it is not the 'greatness,' the intensity, of the emotions [of the writer], the components, but the intensity of the artistic process,

the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts.”⁶ Calling his points “observations,” Eliot says that what he is “struggling to attack” is “perhaps related to the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul”: “my meaning is, that the poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in particular and unexpected ways.”⁷

Although it is surely right to distinguish Eliot from his friend and sometime publisher Virginia Woolf, it is just as clearly wrong to contrast them severely. Even if Eliot may lack a certain flexibility such as we find in both Woolf’s critical and her familiar essays, there is an abundant, related, and indeed central quality that we must appreciate. Closer than to flexibility is a quality of the writing mind that Eliot shares with “the father of the essay,” Michel de Montaigne, whose skepticism Eliot, of course, writes against, particularly in the important essay on Pascal’s *Pensées*. I refer to the frequently cited honorific “*ondoyant et divers*,” which Montaigne employs in writing of Seneca and Plutarch. The writing, like the mind that produces it, is certainly not inflexible or stiff. It partakes instead of erudition, not pedantry. It assumes both intelligence and knowledge, derived from wide reading. We might call it civilized if that term were not an opprobrium. That is, Eliot’s style displays an agility, rather than an elasticity, of mind, a capacity for movement. It bears some kinship to the wit that Eliot prizes. Less a play of mind than scrupulosity, that particular quality may best be seen both negatively (in opposition to the thorough-going and a refusal to reduce) and positively (as a meticulous insistence on both-and that follows from acute analysis). As a result of such *work*, Eliot appears sure of himself, but that certainty is earned and so is not doctrinaire. An either-or situation is precisely what Eliot opposes.

Appropriately perhaps (or necessarily?), we cannot adequately consider “Tradition and the Individual Talent” without relating it to another essay of Eliot. Any number of relations might be adduced, for this essay is like a wheel with spokes extending out variously, the most resonant of all Eliot’s essays.

Eliot’s essay titled simply “Lancelot Andrewes” constitutes the lead in the 1928 collection *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order*. An exercise in *recovery*, this essay represents precisely the sort of immersion in the object essential for responsible reading, the essay itself built on the foundation of comparison and analysis. Eliot constructs his “elucidation” of Bishop Andrewes by means of comparison with John Donne, the more modern writer, “dangerous only for those

who find in his sermons an indulgence of their [dissociated] sensibility, or for those who, fascinated by ‘personality’ in the Romantic sense of the word—for those who find in ‘personality’ an ultimate value—forget that in the spiritual hierarchy there are places higher than that of Donne.”⁸ The resonances with “Tradition and the Individual Talent” point to further elucidation of the value of observation as different from reflection and its basis in “personality.”

The following passage from “Lancelot Andrewes” makes the point clearly—by means of the embraced observation rather than reflection, Eliot himself immersed in his subject just the way, he says, Bishop Andrewes was. The passage is crucial for understanding Eliot, both his poetry and his prose:

When Andrewes begins his sermon, from beginning to end you are sure that he is wholly in his subject, unaware of anything else, that his emotion grows as he penetrates more deeply into his subject, that he is finally “alone with the Alone,” with the mystery which he is seeking to grasp more and more firmly . . . Andrewes’s emotion is purely contemplative; it is not personal, it is wholly evoked by the object of contemplation, to which it is adequate; his emotions wholly contained in and explained by its object. But with Donne there is always the something else, the “baffling” . . . Donne is a “personality” in a sense in which Andrewes is not: his sermons, one feels, are a “means of self-expression.” He is constantly finding an object which shall be adequate to his feelings; Andrewes is wholly absorbed in the object and therefore responds with the adequate emotion. Andrewes has the *goût pour la vie spirituelle*, which is not native to Donne.

“Andrewes,” Eliot concludes, “is the more mediaeval, because he is the more pure,” and his bond was “with tradition.” Donne, on the other hand, who “is primarily interested in man . . . is much less traditional.”⁹

It is precisely the necessity for and the making of distinctions that stands out in the first section of “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” which treats the dualism there announced. Here, too, is sounded a clarion call for subordination of the individual, for surrender of personality. That argument is manifest in the tone and manner of Eliot’s own presentation, which leads many to mistake the point of it all. Eliot is neither dry nor unfeeling, although his essay reflects none of his personality or his own opinions. It is, then, a very different kind of essay from Michel de Montaigne’s.

Nowhere, perhaps, is Eliot’s undogmatic manner clearer than when he turns to the difficult task of defining tradition, a page or so in. Most

apparent is the work of distinction, here performed in the service of deconstructing a facile but familiar sense of tradition: “if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, ‘tradition’ should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition.”¹⁰ What else might one expect from the author of “Prufrock” and soon *The Waste Land*, work that, in the words of the later *Ash Wednesday* applied to other matters, “restor[es] / With a new verse the ancient rhyme”? In “Tradition and the Individual Talent” Eliot is already about something more complicated than a mere or simple “either/or,” confronting our commitment to thinking in dualisms.

Tradition is a matter of . . . the historical sense[, which] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporary and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.¹¹

It is, of course, in terms of uniting time and the timeless that Eliot offers his critical account of Incarnation in “The Dry Salvages.” The *whole* truth is that “No poet, no artist of any kind, has his complete meaning alone.” He is dependent upon that of which he is, willy-nilly, a part. Moreover, the poet “must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past: I say judged, not amputated, by them; not judged to be as good as or worse or better than, the dead; and certainly not judged by the canons of dead critics. It is a judgment, a comparison, in which two things are measured by each other.”¹² On the main issue of the individual versus tradition, Eliot is quite clear: “the mind of Europe—the mind of [one’s] own country” is, simply, “more important than his own private mind,” to emphasize which, since the Renaissance and the Reformation, through the English civil war, and into and beyond Romanticism, has wreaked havoc, creating unmitigated disasters, one after another, politically, religiously, culturally. Still, no *mere* conservative, no *mere* anything, one thing or another,

Eliot recognizes and accepts change; and the change he welcomes “is a development which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen . . . This development, refinement perhaps, complication certainly, is not, from the point of view of the artist, any improvement.”¹³ The kind of *relation* between dualisms that Eliot endorses is indeed clear; there is *no (simple) transcendence* of the prior and no march of easy progress. Eliot thus “complicates.”

In the second section of the essay, Eliot further elaborates on “this Impersonal theory of poetry,” now considering the relation of the poem to the poet. “By an analogy,” he writes, he has suggested that “the mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature one not precisely in any valuation of ‘personality,’ not being necessarily more interesting, or having ‘more to say,’ but rather by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations.”¹⁴

Eliot is interested, above all, in the emotion that the literary work entails, better, incarnates, emotion not indebted to the poet’s feelings, but rather the result of the internal action of the poem and deriving from what he later defines as an “objective correlative” *in* the work of art: “One error, in fact, of eccentricity in poetry is to seek for new human emotions to express; and in this search for novelty in the wrong place it discovers the perverse. The business of the poet,” instead, “is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all.”¹⁵ Key is the working up into poetry. In the event, tradition and “the ordinary” are not traduced or transcended, but modified, altered if ever so slightly.

As elsewhere, so in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” Eliot works out relations or, rather, the precise nature of the relation that obtains. It is not so much that Eliot “appears” to be discussing only pictures and books and even then only their surfaces and superfluities. Instead, analogy is at work, the relation of the individual to tradition mirroring as it partakes of other relations. In the event, pattern or structure emerges as most important, and Eliot will spend his career honoring that sense of the nature of prevailing and revealing pattern. More than a hint appears here already in 1920—that is, a half dozen years or so before his formal embrace of Christianity in general and Anglo-Catholicism in particular—of Incarnation as that pattern.

The poems culminating in *Four Quartets* most elaborately and fully work out the nature of relation that Incarnation explains. In the prose of the 1930s, in works more traditionally essayistic, Eliot clarifies, if he

does not quite develop, what “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is on the way to knowing. That essay, at the very least, intuited what the lectures published as *After Strange Gods*, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, and *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* notably found a name for.¹⁶

What Eliot has done in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is to inch the essay ever so slightly toward the philosophical and the general, thus countering the individualist, experiential, and personal mode that to him smacked of the values he reprobated in the seventeenth century and saw as characteristic of modernity. To put the matter more baldly: in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot offers a counterstatement and gives a counterturn to the essay. Clearly he recognizes the triumph of individualism as well as of “personality,” and as we have read, he proposes nothing so simple as either rejection or mere return; that would be “thorough-going.” Instead, Eliot considers what to do *from within* this condition, which no amount of wishing or lamenting will change. There is, then, to his way of thinking, to be neither rabid opposition nor unthinking acceptance and resignation. The solution he proposes, if that term be allowed with its connotations of perhaps more definition and finality than Eliot would allow, is to write, say, a poem in the modern manner that (yet) teaches a quite traditional (and ancient) lesson.

And to write an essay that forswears mindless clutching to the past as it declines to acquiesce before all things new: to be both philosophical and familiar, to establish tension at its very heart, to write an essay in which *the individual* finds that the way to his own voice leads through the earned victories of *tradition*. Such an *essay*, as practiced by Eliot, looks and feels different from the way it did in the hands of Thoreau or De Quincey, say. At the same time it looks significantly the way it did in the hands of Dryden and Swift and Pope—and does in Eliot’s time, despite obvious differences, in his friend Virginia Woolf’s capacious instances of the form.

Tradition and the individual are not opposed; immersion in the fires of the former refines the self, allowing the “new creature” then successfully to “alter” tradition. Tradition, though, Eliot insists, in the final, great sentence of his critical essay, needs not the individual to survive. The poet, he writes there, “is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what *is already living*” (italics added). Eliot thus incarnates, we might say, the surrender he describes as necessary in the poet.

As an essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” reflects not Eliot’s “personality.” As essayist, he has succeeded in extinguishing *that*. Yet the essay hardly appears the work of a machine—there is a sense of a *person* here, even if the writing reflects no *personality*. Unlike the characters in *The Waste Land*, the voice we hear—and voice there is, occasionally using the first-person plural and even the second person—does not seem imprisoned in its ego. It is not, that is to say, the private self. No hint appears, either, of insight deriving from a private light or spirit. What *does* appear is, rather than the absorption of the self in something outside and grander, a connection, a relation to others, to tradition. The voice we hear in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” derives its meaning, even its very being, from its relations—it is, fundamentally, mediated by its knowledge of and subordination to tradition.

Sensibility is key to Eliot’s ideas and positions in *The Sacred Wood*, as well as elsewhere. The unity does not result in identity, just as it does not produce absolute difference. Difference is maintained but not allowed to become frozen as, or into, opposition. Instead, such “differences” as George Wyndham’s “literature and his politics and his country life” “are one and the same thing,” *sharing a pattern that is one sensibility*. Wyndham, like the critic who writes about him (and the later critic who comments on that first critic commenting), is “imperfect” because *impure*.

Precisely such impurity marks the very best criticism and accounts for the relation, often mistaken if not also perverted, between criticism and creation. Graham Good suggests that Eliot the critic engages in *creation* when he places “Dante” at the center of *Selected Essays*, and yet at the same time that critic finds such structuring a violation of “the essayistic spirit.”¹⁷ But there is nothing programmatic in Eliot’s critical writing; quite the opposite, in fact, and so he remonstrates against “the dogmatic critic,” who, he says, “lays down a rule . . . and affirms a value.” He therefore “has left his labour incomplete.”¹⁸ Eliot’s position on the relation of criticism and creation is traditional, though nuanced. With characteristic scrupulousness, he insists on distinctions *in the act of* seeking “fusion” and unity: thus “the artist is—each within his own limitations—oftenest to be depended upon as a critic; his criticism will be criticism, and not the satisfaction of a suppressed creative wish—which, in most other persons, is apt to interfere fatally.”¹⁹ At the end of “The Perfect Critic,” which begins with the suggestion that “Coleridge was perhaps the greatest of English critics, and in a sense the last,” Eliot writes of “the torpid superstition

that appreciation is one thing, and ‘intellectual’ criticism something else”: “Appreciation in popular psychology is one faculty, and criticism another, an arid cleverness building theoretical scaffolds upon one’s own perceptions or those of others. On the contrary, the true generalization is not something superposed upon an accumulation of perceptions; the perceptions do not, in a really appreciative mind, accumulate as a mass, but form themselves *as a structure; and criticism is the statement in language of this structure*; it is a development of sensibility” (italics added).²⁰ Eliot does not identify “the perfect critic”; instead, he works hard to show just how difficult, indeed impossible, it is to be such a figure, especially in relation to the issue of criticism and creation. Even the beloved Dryden, poet, dramatist, and critic, does not succeed: although he is “disinterested” and “displays much free intelligence,” even he “is not quite a free mind . . . There is always a tendency to legislate rather than to inquire, to revise accepted laws, even to overturn, but to reconstruct out of the same material. And the free intelligence is that which is wholly devoted to inquiry.”²¹ Coleridge too ultimately falls short. The best critic, then, will evidently have feelings, aroused or provoked by the work of art, not by some ancillary, preexistent force, or be the result of other interests, such as history or philosophy or religion or politics. That person will, in being a critic, not make something creative or quasi-creative; he should, in fact, “frequently be the same person” as the poet. Only the impure man can have the “pure feelings” necessary in the critic. Eliot never suggests that he himself is that person, “the perfect critic.” If Arnold fall short, and Dryden, and Coleridge, what claim can *he* have?

In the following essay, “Imperfect Critics,” Eliot first discusses George Wyndham as a “Romantic Aristocrat.” After considerable praise and much endorsement, Eliot comes to a severe judgment, describing him as “enthusiastic, he was a Romantic.” And more: “We can criticize his writings only as the expression of this peculiar English type, the aristocrat, the Imperialist, the Romantic, riding to hounds across his prose, looking with wonder upon the world as upon a fairyland.”²² Eliot follows with another paragraph on Wyndham, with perhaps even more surprising asseverations, distinctions, and declarations. He begins by repeating that that substantial writer was a Romantic; then he adds, “the only cure for Romanticism is to analyse it. What is permanent and good in Romanticism is curiosity,” which, he says, “recognizes that any life, if accurately and profoundly penetrated, is interesting and always strange. *Romanticism is a short cut to the strangeness without the reality, and it leads its disciples only back upon themselves*” (italics added).²³ These last words represent the

pattern that defines Incarnation, that indirect and impure manner that proceeds always in, through, and by means of necessary mediation or mediator.

“The Perfect Critic” and “Imperfect Critics” *together*—one written as a whole, the other assembled from several reviews—reflect *tension*: that is, one may very well write about and even wish for the perfect critic, but what one will find, *pace* Pope, is only imperfect critics. These latter need, however, to be reminded of their faults, critical temptations, and the narrow path that leads to perfection, however unrealizable here below. At the same time, he who would pontificate about perfection needs the reminder of how easy it is to fail, how difficult that narrow path. Tension is the kind of structure, rather than static “order,” that Eliot’s critical essays embody.

The temptation exists, and it is great, “almost irresistible,” as Eliot writes in the introduction to *The Sacred Wood*, “to any man who is interested in ideas and primarily in literature, to put literature into the corner until he has cleaned up the whole country first.” Eliot *resists*, unlike H. G. Wells and G. K. Chesterton, who attracted far more attention than Arnold because they set about “setting the house in order.”²⁴ Eliot’s friend Pound succumbed to the same temptation. Eliot, though, managed to stay with literature, only later turning to social criticism when the literary work was largely done. The temptation remains: “Not only is the critic tempted outside of criticism. The criticism proper betrays such poverty of ideas and such atrophy of sensibility that men who ought to preserve their critical ability for the improvement of their own creative work are tempted into criticism.”²⁵ It is wearisome business, fraught with temptation as well as peril.

“The Metaphysical Poets,” published in 1923 by the Woolfs in Eliot’s *Homage to John Dryden*, is important for much more—and indeed quite other—than its controversial historical descriptions. More important, clearly, is the pattern or structure that Eliot has in mind, that he is in the process of elucidating (not least for himself). In poignant sentences that come near essay’s end, he acknowledges the need that poets know something, echoing Arnold against Wordsworth and the other Romantics. The modernist is quite careful not to set himself up as paradigm, and so does not register the necessity that the poet be a philosopher (although he no doubt means that it can be a help and even implies that *now* he should be at the very least interested in philosophy). The following sentences carry perhaps even more significance: “It is not a permanent necessity that poets should be interested in philosophy, or in any other subject. We can only say

that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning." What surely matters most here is the concern, noted in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and recurring in *Four Quartets*, to "redeem the time," especially in words that slip, slide, refuse to stay still. Eliot embodies the truth of his presentation. No "monumental" critic, but "normal" and "sane." He appears not so much balanced or, rather, balance does not constitute the issue; there is *mind*, embodied in a person, not a personality, and that mind his reader cannot but conclude, "is perfectly equipped for its work": "it is constantly *amalgamating disparate experience*."²⁶ That capacity, that achievement, it is important to understand, takes an indirect route, avoiding, at the very least, signaling itself, alluding to itself, parading itself, or even instancing itself.

That mind, in other words, *amalgamates* "disparate experience." It thus *shows*, dramatizing, embodying, and incarnating the truth of which it speaks. With Eliot, we sense a sensibility that has gone through the "dissociation of sensibility" and, though it has not transcended it, in the sense of leaving it behind once and for all (for that would be to be thorough-going), it is now able to feel its thought "as immediately as the odour of a rose." In the mind of Eliot the essayist, as of Eliot the poet, "these experiences are always forming new wholes." Moreover, just as tradition exists and persists apart from the aid of the individual, the poet does not form those new wholes. Instead, the experiences themselves are responsible for "always forming new wholes." The individual—the true individual talent—shows no personality but, rather, embodies truth.

Discussing Goethe's *Faust*, specifically, Eliot writes that the title character "embodies a philosophy. A creation of art should not do that," asserts Eliot: the poet "should *replace* the philosophy." Obviously, we have here an extension, perhaps a clarification as well, of the "Impersonal theory," as well as an early apprehension of a central problem for *Four Quartets*: "Goethe has not, that is to say, sacrificed or consecrated his thought to make the drama; the drama is still a means."²⁷ Form would "confine" such a temptation, such a threat. And in fact, preceding these observations, this antithesis is Eliot's thesis; he is approaching the major declaration in the essay on Hamlet, concerning the controversial "objective correlative."

Permanent literature is always a presentation: either a presentation of thought, or a presentation of feeling by a statement of events in human action or objects in the external world. In earlier literature—to avoid the word “classic”—we find both kinds, and sometimes, as in some of the dialogues of Plato, exquisite combinations of both. Aristotle presents thought, stripped to the essential structure, and he is a great *writer*. The *Agamemnon* or *Macbeth* is equally a statement, but of events. They are as much works of the “intellect” as the writings of Aristotle. There are more recent works of art which have the same quality of intellect in common with those of Aeschylus and Shakespeare and Aristotle: *Education Sentimentale* is one of them. Compare it with such a book as *Vanity Fair* and you will see that the labour of the intellect consisted largely in purification, in keeping out a great deal that Thackeray allowed to remain in; in refraining from reflection, in putting into the statement enough to make reflection unnecessary.²⁸

The critic continues, offering yet another comparison for the sake of elucidation: “The case of Plato is still more illuminating. Take the *Theaetetus*. In a few opening words Plato gives a scene, a personality, a feeling, which colour the subsequent discourse but do not interfere with it: the particular setting, and the abstruse theory of knowledge afterwards developed, co-operate without confusion. Could any contemporary author exhibit such control?”²⁹ Eliot thus again writes against Romanticism and its aftermath, albeit in fresh terms.

He also writes here about the (unholy) mixing and confusion of types and genres “in which our age delights.” He rails, then, against the easy confusion of “an emotional stimulus” with art: “as a mixture of thought and of vision provides more stimulus, by suggesting both, both clear thinking and clear statement of particular objects must disappear.”³⁰ He, finally, approaches conclusion with these sentences: “the moment an idea has been transferred from its pure state in order that it may become comprehensible to the inferior intelligence it has lost contact with art. It can remain pure only by being stated simply in the form of a general truth, or by being transmuted, as the attitude of Flaubert toward the small bourgeois is transformed in *Education Sentimentale*. It has there become so identified with the reality that you can no longer say what the idea is.” In other words: “The essential is to get upon the stage this precise statement of life which is at the same time a point of view, a world—a world which the author’s mind has subjected to a complete process of simplification.”³¹

Eliot was moved to write about *Hamlet* by the appearance of two books on Shakespeare that he is ostensibly reviewing (although he says little of those studies, beyond some deserved praise). His conclusion

coincides with the argument of at least one of these: "The upshot of Mr. [J. M.] Robertson's examination is, we believe, irrefragable: that Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, so far as it is Shakespeare's, is a play dealing with the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son, and that Shakespeare was unable to impose this motive successfully upon the 'intractable' material of the old play."³² Eliot spends the remaining three-plus pages of this quite short essay developing this argument, which derives from this basic, theoretical foundation, his point being that Shakespeare saddles Hamlet with emotions too intense for the situation responsible for them: "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked."³³ In Shakespeare's "more successful tragedies," Eliot writes, "you will find this exact equivalence," for example, *Macbeth*. In short, "The artistic 'inevitability' lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion" (recall, here, Eliot's apposite distinction between Donne and Lancelot Andrewes). Hamlet, though, like his author and like Montaigne in Eliot's judgment, is confronted with a problem—his disgust at his mother—and "a feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action."³⁴

Eliot's idea of the "objective correlative" is as controversial as the reading of *Hamlet* based on it. But in fact it makes a great deal of sense, particularly in the context of Christian thought and its central insight, that of Incarnation or *embodied truth*. Christianity has historically linked abstraction and reality, the Apostle John writing of the paradigmatic instance of Incarnation, "And the Word became flesh." I view this as an "objective correlative": "The Word is to us abstract, so Christ became a man. He forged a new connection between God and man by becoming both." In creating communion, he made "another level of representation of ideas through the concrete vehicles of bread and wine."³⁵ The Incarnation thus—as Eliot himself avers in "The Dry Salvages" when he writes that "The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation"—becomes the supreme instance of a pattern or structure that God has "always already" acted upon.

In "The Metaphysical Poets," Eliot not only salvages poets like John Donne but succeeds in elevating them above succeeding poets, including Dryden and Milton as well as the later Romantics and Victorians, whom he quotes to their embarrassment. Donne and his cohorts, like the little known Henry King and Lord Herbert of

Cherbury, draw Eliot's praise for representing a "concrete world where real things suggest the more ethereal ideas."³⁶ Unfortunately—and this is the reason for Eliot's rescue effort—literature after the seventeenth century became "a compilation of feelings and thoughts" in fact divorced from each other. In a sense, Eliot returns in "The Metaphysical Poets" to the matter that chiefly concerned him theoretically in "Hamlet and His Problem" (as well as, structurally, to that of "Tradition and the Individual Talent"). His solution involves locating, describing, and animadverting against the "dissociation of sensibility" that set sometime around mid-seventeenth century. Here is how Eliot puts it two years after describing the "objective correlative"; he has just quoted appallingly bad lines from Tennyson: "The difference is not a simple difference of degree between poets. It is something which had happened to the mind of England between the time of Donne and the time of Tennyson and Browning; it is the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose."³⁷ Having gotten with this last phrase nearly as concrete as possible, Eliot proceeds to a description of amalgamating, of uniting, that pointedly resists and opposes the purifying, the thorough-going that marked the revolution that in the 1640s "turned the world upside down." The lines are some of the most recognizable in all of Eliot, and justly so. They mark the texture of his mind as they suggest the problem that occupied him in prose and verse alike, from *Prufrock* and *The Sacred Wood* through *Four Quartets*. "A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes."³⁸ Eliot's language cannot, of course, but recall *The Waste Land*.

After the seventeenth century, "the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude." With the advent of "the sentimental age," poets, says Eliot, "revolted against the ratiocinative, the descriptive; they thought and felt by fits, unbalanced; they reflected."³⁹ Eliot "roots" us, I have said. Indeed, in "The Metaphysical Poets," he may well go beyond the embrace of "the odour of a rose." Consider the close of the essay's penultimate paragraph, where he returns to Milton and Dryden, the latter of whom he always admired, the former of

whom he came, at least in time, to respect: "It is a pity that English poetry has remained so incomplete. Those who object to the 'artificiality' of Milton or Dryden sometimes tell us to 'look into our hearts and write.' But that is not looking deep enough; Racine or Donne looked into a good deal more than the heart. One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts."⁴⁰ And this from one who, a few sentences earlier, had criticized the modern "triumph with a dazzling disregard of the soul." Although he brings soul and body together, Eliot does not (yet) treat the path to the former that proceeds only in, through, and by means of the latter.

In the essays in *The Sacred Wood* on nondramatic poets—that is, Blake, Swinburne, and Dante—Eliot both intensifies his focus on form and idea and elaborates on their relation. The result is at once a satisfying conclusion to the book and a significant contribution to literary understanding.

Swinburne is a poet barely recognizable today, although a considerable force at the time of Eliot's essay. The critic makes his point unmistakably and succinctly: "When you take to pieces any verse of Swinburne, you find always that the object was not there—only the word,"⁴¹ a situation certainly predicted by the likes of Swift and Pope, who had seen the disastrous consequences of separating *res et verba* (the former, for instance, in the Grand Academy of Lagado, in the third book of *Gulliver's Travels*). "The world of Swinburne," laments Eliot, "does not depend upon some other world which it simulates; it has the necessary completeness and self-sufficiency for justification and permanence." The thesis to this antithesis Eliot immediately states, recalling Swift and Pope: "Language in a healthy state presents the object, is so close to the object that the two are identified." He follows up with this superb analysis, which concludes the essay:

They are identified in the verse of Swinburne solely because the object has ceased to exist, because the meaning is merely the hallucination of meaning, because language, uprooted, has adapted itself to an independent life of atmospheric nourishment. In Swinburne, for example, we see the word "weary" flourishing in this way independent of the particular and actual weariness of flesh or spirit. The bad poet dwells partly in a world of words, and he never can get them to fit. Only a man of genius could dwell so exclusively and consistently among words as Swinburne. His language is not, like the language of bad poetry, dead. It is very much alive, with this singular life of its own. But the language which is more important to us is that which is struggling to digest and

express new objects, new groups of objects, new feelings, new aspects, as, for instance, the prose of Mr. James Joyce or the earlier Conrad.⁴²

This situation—of deracination, of disembodiment—in Swinburne, and exacerbated by him, amounts to nothing less than the erasure of the real, the physical, the literal, the everyday, sacrificed upon the altar of idealism. Transcendence obliterates and abolishes immanence. This is the point toward which *The Sacred Wood* has been hinting and driving. It is hardly a long step to the religious—specifically, the Christian—understanding of the pattern here glimpsed.

The next essay, that on Blake, continues the study from a distinct and fresh though closely related angle: honesty, which, says Eliot finely, “in a world too frightened to be honest, is peculiarly terrifying.”⁴³ This honesty, which Blake’s poetry has, “never exists,” Eliot writes, “without great technical accomplishment,” by which he means, notably, form.⁴⁴ Still, while honest, Blake was also “naked,” and he developed a philosophy of his own as he became both “eccentric . . . and inclined to formlessness” in his drawing and his poetry. As to the poems, particularly of the long sort, it is “not that they are too visionary, too remote from the world. It is that Blake did not see enough, became too much occupied with ideas,”⁴⁵ the ultimate Siren against which the artist must continually wage unrelenting war. What Blake sadly lacked, writes Eliot in conclusion, “was a framework of accepted and traditional ideas which would have prevented him from indulging in a philosophy of his own”—like Swift’s Modern Spider, a victim of enthusiasm—“and concentrated his attention upon the problems of the poet . . . The concentration resulting from a framework of mythology and theology and philosophy is one of the reasons why Dante is a classic.”⁴⁶

With those words, the link is established and the way paved to the next, and last, essay, “Dante.” The essay is Eliot’s first of several on the poet always his master, including the long one published in 1929 as *Dante*. “Dante” was the inevitable choice to conclude *The Sacred Wood*, and not just because of the seminal role the author of *The Divine Comedy* played in Eliot’s life and work. It allows the critic both to bring scattered themes together and to round off the discussion into something of a satisfying whole.

The overriding concern is by now familiar, and it is manifest in an opening quarrel with Paul Valéry. “We must show first in a particular case—our case is Dante—that the philosophy is essential to the structure and that the structure is essential to the poetic beauty of the parts; and we must show that the philosophy is employed in

a different form from that which it takes in admittedly unsuccessful philosophical poems. And if M. Valéry is in error in his complete exorcism of ‘philosophy,’ perhaps the basis of the error is his apparently commendatory interpretation of the effort of the modern poet, namely, that the latter endeavours ‘to produce a *state*.’”⁴⁷ The problem is that which Pope, of course, faced and confronted directly, in *An Essay on Man*, opting to write his philosophy of ethics in rhymed verse both because, so written, the argument would “strike the reader more strongly at first, and . . . [be] more easily retained by him afterwards” and because he found he could express his positions “more *shortly* this way than in prose.”⁴⁸

After briefly considering the early philosophical poets Parmenides and Empedocles—“They were not interested exclusively in philosophy, or religion, or poetry, but in something which was a mixture of all three; hence their reputation as poets is low and as philosophers should be considerably below Heraclitus, Zeno, Anaxagoras, or Democritus”—Eliot turns to Lucretius, whom Dryden had famously translated. “The poem of Lucretius,” Eliot writes, employing his characteristic comparative procedure, “is quite a different matter. For Lucretius was undoubtedly a poet. He endeavours to expound a philosophical system, but with a different motive from Parmenides or Empedocles, for this system is already in existence; he is really endeavouring to find the concrete poetic equivalent for this system—to find its complete equivalent in vision.”⁴⁹ This is what Eliot himself attempts in *Four Quartets*, where the essay emerges as the “poetic equivalent” of the Christian religion. The trouble with Lucretius, Eliot proposes, lies not in his poetic capacity, but instead in the incapacity of the philosophy with which he works: Christianity succeeds admirably, being, we might say, both “*ondoyant et divers*.” At this point, Eliot modulates into general commentary: “Without doubt, the effort of the philosopher proper, the man who is trying to deal with ideas in themselves, and the effort of the poet, who may be trying to *realize* ideas, cannot be carried on at the same time. But this is not to deny that poetry can be in some sense philosophic. The poet can deal with philosophic ideas, not as matter for argument, but as matter for inspection.”⁵⁰ We thus reach the heart of the matter, from which Eliot moves back out to elaboration and clarification: “The original form of philosophy cannot be poetic. But poetry can be penetrated by a philosophic idea, it can deal with this idea when it has reached the point of immediate acceptance, when it has become almost a physical modification. If we divorced poetry and philosophy altogether, we should bring a serious impeachment, not only against Dante, but against most of Dante’s

contemporaries.”⁵¹ Eliot thus avoids the thorough-going as he walks a fine line regarding purity.

Eliot’s effort in this early reading of Dante is “is to find a formula for the correspondence between [the allegory] and the [‘moral education’]” it represents—an “objective correlative” of sorts—“to decide whether the moral value corresponds directly to the allegory.”⁵² That framework, with allegory the “scaffold,” writes Eliot, must be defined “from the result as from the intention. The poem has not only a framework, but a form; and even if the framework be allegorical, the form may be something else. The examination of any episode in the *Comedy* ought to show that not merely the allegorical interpretation or the didactic intention, but the emotional significance itself, cannot be isolated from the rest of the poem.”⁵³ This Eliot proceeds to provide, arguing further that “no emotion is contemplated by Dante purely in and for itself.” If, in fact, “the artistic emotion presented by any episode of the *Comedy* is dependent upon the whole,” then “we may proceed to inquire what the whole scheme is.”⁵⁴ Here Eliot approaches the crucial, telling point.

The usefulness of allegory and astronomy is obvious. A mechanical framework, in a poem of so vast an ambit, was a necessity. As the centre of gravity of emotions is more remote from a single human action, or a system of purely human actions, than in drama or epic, so the framework has to be more artificial and apparently more mechanical. It is not essential that the allegory or the almost unintelligible astronomy should be understood—only that its presence should be justified. The emotional structure within this scaffold is what must be understood—the structure made possible by the scaffold. This structure is an ordered scale of human emotions. Not necessarily, *all* human emotions; and in any case, all the emotions are limited, and also extended in significance by their place in the scheme.⁵⁵

The major argument Eliot pursues is that Dante effected “the most comprehensive, and the most *ordered* presentation of emotions” ever achieved. He then contrasts Dante’s way of dealing with any emotion with Shakespeare’s, his greatest rival in this regard: “Shakespeare takes a character apparently controlled by a single emotion, and analyses the character and the emotion itself. The emotion is split up into constituents—and perhaps destroyed in the process. The mind of Shakespeare was one of the most *critical* that has ever existed. Dante, on the other hand, does not analyse the emotion so much as he exhibits its relation to the other emotions. You cannot, that is, understand

the *Inferno* without the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*.”⁵⁶ This strikes me as a major statement. First of all, Eliot thus connects this last essay in *The Sacred Wood* with the first ones, which treat the relation of creation and criticism. Further, he distinguishes, centrally and crucially, *analysis* from *relation*: two things, or three, are measured by each other, rather than analyzed. “Not all succeed as did Dante in expressing the complete scale from negative to positive,” Eliot then writes. “The negative is the most importunate.”⁵⁷ *Through* the *Inferno* and then the *Purgatorio* to the *Paradiso*—and only by means of that path, the path of indirection.

In places, Eliot acknowledges, Dante gives “passages of pure exposition of philosophy.” But, Eliot hastens to write, “We are not here studying the philosophy, we *see* it, as part of the ordered world. The aim of the poet is to state a vision, and no vision of life can be complete which does not include the articulate formulation of life which human minds make.”⁵⁸ Christianity succeeds in part because it refuses to narrow or reduce the possibilities, the choices, in life, attending to the horrible as well as the glorious; Dante, accordingly, and now Eliot, recognizes the dependence of the part upon the whole: “It is one of the greatest merits of Dante’s poem that the vision is so nearly complete; it is evidence of this greatness that the significance of any single passage, of any of the passages that are selected as ‘poetry,’ is incomplete unless we ourselves apprehend the whole.”⁵⁹ The story of the *Inferno* is incomplete, just as is, from the other “end,” the *Paradiso*.

Eliot is well aware that “the effort of the philosopher,” that is, “the man who is trying to deal with ideas in themselves, and the effort of the poet, who may be trying to *realize* ideas, cannot be carried on at the same time.” This does not mean, of course, that “poetry cannot be in some sense philosophic.” What it means is what Pope fails to achieve, in spite of all (although Eliot’s favorite Dryden does succeed in *Religio Laici* in doing what Eliot claims to be impossible): “The poet can deal with philosophic ideas, not as matter for argument, but as matter for inspection.”⁶⁰

Eliot’s appeal is to what I call lateral reading. The point leads to a further aspect of part and whole, of the matter of relation, and of the both-and-ness that deconstructs familiar dualisms. Eliot’s words cannot but resonate with his own *essais* in poetry.⁶¹

As he then winds to a conclusion, Eliot reiterates that “we are not here studying the philosophy, we *see* it, as part of the ordered world. The aim of the poet,” he insists, especially against the idea that a poet seeks to create a “state” within the reader, “is to state a vision.” In Dante’s poem, “the significance of any single passage . . .

is incomplete unless we ourselves apprehend the whole.”⁶² The same holds for Eliot’s own *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*.

In his last paragraph, Eliot turns directly—that is, returns—to Paul Valéry’s notion that the modern poet attempts “to produce in us a *state*.” Eliot observes, tartly, “A state in itself, is nothing whatever.” He then offers this set of concluding observations, marking the religious implications everywhere apparent in *The Sacred Wood*: “M. Valéry’s account is quite in harmony with pragmatic doctrine, with the tendencies of such a work as William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*. The mystical experience is supposed to be valuable because it is a pleasant state of unique intensity. But the true mystic is not satisfied merely by feeling, he must pretend at least that he *sees*, and the absorption into the divine is only the necessary, if paradoxical, limit of this contemplation.”⁶³ Now comes the comparison and essential distinction from the poet, an essential statement, and recapitulation of how literature works, of what it is, uniquely, all about. It is a conclusion not merely to “Dante” but also to *The Sacred Wood*:

The poet does not aim to excite—that is not even a test of his success—but to set something down; the state of the reader is merely that reader’s particular mode of perceiving what the poet has caught in words. Dante, more than any other poet, has succeeded in dealing with his philosophy, not as a theory . . . or as his own comment or reflection, but in terms of something *perceived*. When most of our modern poets confine themselves to what they had perceived, they produce for us, usually, only odds and ends of still life and stage properties; but that does not imply so much that the method of Dante is obsolete, as that our vision is perhaps comparatively restricted.⁶⁴

In truth, these are not the last words in the book, although they constitute the final paragraph, for Eliot adds a footnote, which, it turns out, shows the critic here as fallible, imperfect; admitting his mistake in a relatively minor point and offering an immediate correction, in any case, he brings his sometimes pontifical observations and judgments to a close on a note of complicity and humility: “NOTE.—My friend the Abbé Laban has reproached me for attributing to Landor, in this essay, sentiments which are merely the expression of his dramatic figure Petrarch, and which imply rather Landor’s reproof of the limitations of the historical Petrarch’s view of Dante, than the view of Landor himself. The reader should therefore observe this correction of my use of Landor’s honoured name.”⁶⁵ What could be more gra-

cious? And how *dramatic* the confession—to a primal error in reading that the preceding pages in *The Sacred Wood* might have warded off.

Four Quartets stands as one end of a spectrum near the beginning of which lurks *The Sacred Wood*. The issue Eliot discusses in “Dante,” that of poetry’s relation to philosophy, is precisely what the later poem foregrounds. *Four Quartets*, on which Eliot worked so long and assiduously (as Dame Helen Gardner demonstrated), is itself not reflection or comment, but just that “statement” that Eliot sought; what that poem accomplishes is, in part, a nudging of the essay away from reflection toward statement, a renewed effort—a genuine *essai*—to move philosophy toward poetry, to make it poetry, in fact. From this vantage point, we can realize something anew regarding Eliot’s prose essays, including those as early as *The Sacred Wood*, a quarter of a century before his great poem was completed. Those essays have always struck many readers as barely essays if at all, because so impersonal. They are not articles, however, not even close, because they are—somehow—personal, although not autobiographical. Perhaps the personal consists in this, difficult to grasp and to describe: they are “statements” rather than comment or reflection, a supposition that reading them once more confirms. Their declarative force accounts for that sense readers have always had of assurance, even of the doctrinaire. Here, too, in other words, Eliot records what he has *seen*. In Eliot’s essays, prose as well as verse, we have an account not of the mind working, wandering, and wondering, as in, say, Hazlitt and Thoreau, Edward Hoagland and Scott Russell Sanders, but, rather, the result of the mind’s discovery. Still, there is mind, still individuality, still the personal discovery (or recovery) and representation, but it is the mind having already succeeded in reaching its goal. This is the essay as product rather than process, but the writing is not driven, as in the (definite) article, by logic, instead by (the quality of) vision, by the “content,” if you will.

Eliot’s essays, like his poetry, are predicated on “setting it down right.” You get it right through painstaking comparison, two things measured by each other, half-truth not prevailing, binaries and oppositions understood as precisely *part* of a whole that Eliot will not sacrifice. There remains, ineluctably, the need, the necessity, of measurement, of judgment, an *assaying* whereby truth and falsity emerge in and as relation to one another. In this light, criticism and creation appear as parts of one whole in which their relative merits, nature, and obligations must be considered together. In this and other situations and conditions, the mind probes, weighs, tests, judges, and

decides; logic is involved, to be sure, but it does not exactly govern, for the reader critic's *whole* being is called out, including reason, feelings, imagination, and all of his or her experience. The processes of "consecutive reasoning" do not dictate or determine the results, the findings; these are, rather, available to judgment brought to bear on wide experience, judgment inseparable from sensibility and sympathy.

CHAPTER 7



THE BURDEN OF ARRIVAL

“GERONTION,” “THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED
PRUFROCK,” AND “LITTLE GIDDING”

THE ENIGMA OF “LITTLE GIDDING”

Once you have arrived at Incarnation, what do you do with that understanding? It is the enigma of arrival. The essay poem *Four Quartets* represents the poet-philosopher T. S. Eliot’s arrival at understanding. For us here, the “impossible union” that that work celebrates and is has served as our beginning and our end. It is time, now, to ask what to do with the understanding that is arrival (at Incarnation).

Following—succeeding—the climactic declaration in “The Dry Salvages” that “The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation,” “Little Gidding” feels different, almost as if in “another dimension,” a sense perhaps confirmed by opening declarations concerning “Midwinter spring” and “may time” (distinct from “May”), instances alike of “coniunction,” “impossible union,” and paradox, whose epitome is “Incarnation” as represented in the last section of the previous poem.¹ The poetry itself in “Little Gidding” seems grander, often sublime in fact, the poet never more *magisterial*, “*ondoyant et divers*,” venturing out on the desecrated and deserted London streets during the war, encountering there a figure at once Tiresian in composition, and rhyming, in fact, with the voyage to the kingdom of the dead. Enigma abounds, bold statements bruited about “like the metal leaves / Before the urban dawn wind unresisting,” fierce claims made with iron certainty (“The fire and the rose are one”). For all his commanding presence, Eliot here is self-critical, convicting himself as being no different from the rest of us, and acknowledging, however

regretfully, "Sin is Behovely." Writing returns, toward the end, as subject, partaking of and revealing the same pattern that governs life itself. Little wonder that anthologists choose this part of *Four Quartets* when space is wanting for the whole or else they opt for Eliot's best.

"The Dry Salvages" is understanding arrived at. The third poem of *Four Quartets* thus functions as intellectual climax; we *know*, then, at that point. What remains is to "fare forward," and so we move out, from the intellectual and the verbal, whereby right action follows upon right thinking, orthopraxy matching orthodoxy. In other words, those of Father R. M. Benson, founder of the Society of St John the Evangelist at Cowley in Oxford, writing in 1905 in *Followers of the Lamb*: "The use of the intellect is that by knowing the things of God we may attain to the experimental knowledge of God's love. Otherwise our learning is only the staircase leading to the top of a ruined tower . . . It is not enough for us to know what was fixed as the orthodox expression . . . by intellectual study we must gather up the teaching of past ages in the fullness of its scope. We have not to maintain truth, but to live in the truth so that it may maintain us."² *Living in the truth* is the focus of "Little Gidding," now that truth has been reached, revealed.

For Lancelot Andrewes and "the theology of the Incarnation" that characterizes seventeenth-century Anglicanism, the doctrine of *theosis* is its "completion and consequence." Incarnation must be seen in the context of the Trinity, which is its completion. In Andrewes's own words, from a sermon on Pentecost: "Whereby, as before he of ours, so now we of his are made partakers. He clothed with our flesh, and we invested with his Spirit. The great promise of the Old Testament accomplished, that he should partake our human nature; and the great and precious promise of the New, that we should be *consortes divinae naturae*, 'partake his divine nature,' both are this day accomplished."³ In another sermon for Pentecost, Bishop Andrewes himself partakes of the tradition of the Church fathers, in particular the notion of the "progress into God" described by St. Gregory of Nyssa:

Now to be made partakers of the Spirit, is to be made partakers "of the divine nature." That is this day's work. Partakers of the Spirit we are, by receiving grace; which is nothing else but the breath of the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of grace. Grace into the entire substance of the soul, dividing itself into two streams; one goes to the understanding, the gift of faith; the other to the will, the gift of charity, the very bond of perfection.

The tongues, to teach us knowledge; the fire, to kindle our affections. The state of grace is the perfection of this life, to grow still from grace to grace, to profit in it. As to go on still forward is the perfection of a traveler, to draw still nearer and nearer to his journey's end.⁴

Eliot's journey in *Four Quartets* is not complete, then, at the end of "The Dry Salvages." It continues past the encounter with death and nothingness penetrating and "trans-form[ing] man's world and man's life."⁵

What the poet proceeds to recalls that sense of "fellowship" described in the nineteenth century by Thomas Hancock, who emphasizes not God's *one*-ness but *God's* one-ness, in the process rejecting "Divine solitariness . . . Divine egoism," based in the doctrine of the Trinity, thus:

A man is at his highest, he is most perfectly a man, he is most godly, when he is living not as a mere unity, but as the fellow of a unity, as a kinsman in the family, as a citizen in the state, as a catholic in the Church, as a man in the human-kind . . . He who made us is not a cold, hard, lonely, self-amusing Mechanician, caring little what becomes of his experiments. In his being subsists the perfect Fellowship, the perfect Communion of which we have some imperfect shadow in our being, and for whose reproduction in us and our kind we crave with so insatiable a hunger.⁶

This is what Eliot proceeds to give us in "Little Gidding"—Hancock's last two sentences rhyme with particular closeness. Thus Eliot's focus becomes, in A. M. Allchin's words in quite another context, "man in relationship, in communion." In Father Benson's words, once more, "Thy whole life must be a relative life."⁷ "To grow in the orthodox consciousness" is Canon Allchin's conclusion for the inner journey that proceeds in, through, and by means of understanding, "towards an ever-increasing entry into 'the dwelling places of the Three in One.'"⁸

"GERONTION" AND THE WORD WITHIN A WORD: THE VOICE OF JUDEO-CHRISTIAN CIVILIZATION

"Gerontion," which heads Eliot's 1920 volume titled *Poems* (in the United States but mistitled as *Ara Vos Prec* in the true first—that is, British—edition), rests uneasily between giants: *Prufrock and Other*

Observations three years before and *The Waste Land* two years later. That it comes between may bear significance and meaning.

Gerontion, “an old man in a dry month,” sounds somewhat like his obviously younger prototype, and he occupies place that is “wasted,” pastoral but crude and absent civilities. Gerontion—the term means “little old man”—begins with himself, acknowledging his absence at Thermopylae and thus effecting an intersection of the past with his present, post–World War I condition and signaling Eliot’s use of the “mythical method” he would soon extol in Joyce’s *Ulysses* and himself employ magnificently in *The Waste Land*. Gerontion then quickly turns, after noting that his “is a decayed house,” to a specific representation of that situation, as abject and unpromising as anything in *The Waste Land*; he decays, like Europe, as Hugh Kenner has noticed:⁹ “The goat coughs at night in the field overhead; / Rocks, moss, stone-crop, irons, merds. / The woman keeps the kitchen, makes tea, / Sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter.”¹⁰ Gerontion then repeats and adds, “I an old man, / A dull head among windy spaces.” He is, in other words, only “head,” his female companion merely “the woman.” There is, then, a generalness, among other things, about it all.

A logic of imagination, rather than one of concepts, governs “Gerontion.” Thus it is difficult to make the transition to the next verse paragraph, about which more shortly: “Signs are taken for wonders. ‘We would see a sign!’ / The word within a word, unable to speak a word, / Swaddled with darkness. In the juvescence of the year / Came Christ the tiger.” Lancelot Andrewes here meets William Blake, and they consort with Eliot of both *The Waste Land* and *Ash Wednesday*.

The next verse paragraph begins enigmatically, elusively: “In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas, / To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk, / Among whispers.” Eliot is apparently expanding while focusing his general concern on the historical, offering a truncated, oblique, and elliptical account of the Renaissance, which would, of course, soon form the center of his critical attention in *The Sacred Wood*. Elizabeth Drew remarks on this passage and the preceding, writing about the lines I have just quoted:

At one level, they mean that Christ as tiger has superseded the old pagan Fertility rituals and myths of “dismemberment,” giving them new sacramental meaning. But I . . . believ[e] that the break in the verse paragraph here indicates a gap in time, and that “depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas,” besides pointing back to the old

paganism, points forward to the birth of a new paganism, and opposes the Renaissance to the Nativity. The etymological meaning of *depraved* as crooked, distorted or perverse, suggests the sense of a wrong *direction* (always associated in Eliot's mind with the birth of Humanism); while its common usage links it with all the other images in the poem of debased or unnatural propagation. The Renaissance seemed a fresh flowering and illumination of human sense and spirit, bringing, as it were, the stars of the dogwood and the candles of the chestnut into the forests of the night. But it was "flowering judas." The new paganism betrayed the tiger, bringing not communion but division. The clear "word" has lost all its resonance and is only a confusion of "whispers." In the place of a society nourished by the sacrament in which man could partake of the creative source of light and life (the Christ-mass), Gerontion sees four figures typical of his own deprivation of both spiritual and physical vitality.¹¹

The direction of this analysis certainly "rhymes" with what we have seen and know of Eliot's point of view, late and early.

Even if such an allegorical reading feels strange for a poet like Eliot, the next verse paragraph confirms that his mind here is on history. He again begins enigmatically: "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" The question looks toward "Little Gidding" and the speaker's response following the pronouncements of "the familiar compound ghost." Perhaps Gerontion means that knowing what the Renaissance turned out to be poses immense problems: can one "forgive" those who made such a wrong "turn"?

The "history" that Gerontion now speaks of is less the narrative of particular events than the idea of history itself. Three times in the verse paragraph he says, as to himself, "Think now." The first continues, "History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors / And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions, / Guides us by vanities." Then comes a series of sentences and fragments, introduced by "Think now," that features the word "gives" or "giving" six times in as many lines—"give" resonating, and perhaps off contrasting, with the earlier "*forgiveness*":

She gives when our attention is distracted
 And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions
 That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late
 What's not believed in, or is still believed,
 In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon
 Into weak hands, what's thought can be dispensed with
 Till the refusal propagates a fear.

“Give” also resonates with the later representation in *The Waste Land* that follows the Hindu *Datta*, which means, as Eliot noted, “give.” In detail, tone, and texture, these verses offer a palpable contrast to Gerontion (and the ever-prudent Prufrock). The lines I have last quoted from “Gerontion” also anticipate those in “Little Gidding” that declare history may be freedom or it may be “servitude,” which poem proceeds to represent effects of historical events, to reject the notion of “reviv[ing] old factions,” and to embrace forgiveness of those who are, after all, “folded in a single party,” leaving us a symbol “perfected in death.” The final lines of the verse paragraph under consideration in “Gerontion” closely echo such recognition and understanding:

Think

Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices
Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues
Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.
These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree.

The “rhyme” I have noted with *Four Quartets* gives reason to question Kenner’s summary denunciation of Gerontion: “No unbroken thread of volition can be traced through the speaker’s life. This historical nightmare, in which no act has a clear nature and clear consequences, is neither a summary of his experiences, nor of his observation that has caused him to refrain from experience; it is something bearing little reference to either experience or observation, for the speaker has neither experienced nor observed, having insufficient moral presence. He is simply a zone where more or less energetic notions are incorporated, to agitate themselves tirelessly.”¹² Differently, and differentially, I take seriously Gerontion’s last words in the poem: “Tenants of the house, / Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.” His “house,” earlier described as “decayed,” is that brain, the “tenants” of which are the scattered thoughts he has given expression to. Gerontion is more than “a zone” or a site, but he is less than a dramatized character, just as the most important figure in *The Waste Land*, according to Eliot himself, is not a “character” but the “personage” Tiresias. Gerontion suffers as much from being disembodied as from lacking “volition.” He gives the lie, through the poem, that “the word within a word” is “unable to speak a word”: the word within the word that is the poem “Gerontion” issues forth.

If “the word within a word” is able to “speak a word,” it will have to be done differently from in the past. In “the new year” that is

Eliot's time, the poet will be, he said, "*difficult*," that is, "the poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning."¹³

"The tiger," earlier identified with Christ, "springs," says Gerontion, "in the new year." In Blake, the tiger and the lamb represent experience and innocence, respectively. In "Gerontion," innocence no longer being possible, as the preceding verse paragraph has indicated, the Word—note the capital—will speak as one-half of the "impossible union." The Word will not, moreover, appear as lamblike, but instead nearer the representation in *Four Quartets* where God is said to "prevent us everywhere" and "the fire and the rose" are said to be one. Here, too, appears "Think," twice more, in fact.

The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours. Think at last
We have not reached conclusion, when I
Stiffen in a rented house. Think at last
I have not made this show purposelessly
And it is not by any concitation
Of the backward devils.

The last verse refers to diviners, who, in Dante's *Inferno*, were condemned to walk backward because they had presumed to foretell the future. There is *purpose*, Gerontion insists, in this play within a play, a staple of Elizabethan drama, as in "the word within a word," purpose not linked with any movement by those augurers. "Conclusion" will not come for "us," moreover, when "I" have died, stiffening in a house not really my own but "rented." My "thoughts" are, indeed, "dry," then, says Gerontion, unfertilized, uncultivated, but borrowed or rented, not "owned." Indeed, he has earlier said, "I have no ghosts," in his "draughty house": "A dull head among windy spaces," his thoughts subject to the vicissitudes of the winds, and yet he keeps saying, eight times in all, "Think." Among all these *words*—and "thoughts"—a "word" nevertheless speaks, if only obliquely and with difficulty.

Then come important lines in which that word breaks through, echoes and anticipations of the Word. Here, too, history enters, for the lines smack most definitely of the Renaissance or, more particularly, of the slide from the Middle Ages into that "new year" of Renaissance and Reformation. Eliot seems to broach the notion of "dissociation of sensibility" that he would soon adumbrate in "The Metaphysical Poets," where he identifies a separation of thinking and feeling that,

he says, “set in” during the middle of the seventeenth century and continued to his own day.¹⁴

I would meet you upon this honestly.
 I that was near your heart was removed therefrom
 To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.
 I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
 Since what is kept must be adulterated?
 I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:
 How should I use them for your closer contact?

These are not—do not have the feel of—pangs of helplessness or Prufrockian timidity, nor are they the utterances of “hollow men.” They seem “honest,” in fact the acknowledgment of felt loss, delivered in a mode lacking the overt passion whose absence they decry and embody. Thinking remains, while passion is lost—and Gerontion is disembodied.

The lines have everything to do with the senses, all of which are specified and whose relevance and applicability to religious matters were lost when Protestantism separated belief and beauty, faith and art, voiding images in order (supposedly) to save the word, another binarism that spread, separating *res et verba*, thinking and feeling. The word within the image—within beauty—can thus, now, no longer “speak.” The Counter-Reformation exacerbated problems, linking “terror” with “inquisition.” The last verse here is paradoxical: the senses are needed as mediators to bring us into “contact” with the Lord—although we need “use them for *closer* contact.” They represent a means, a stage, in a process—the journey toward understanding of the pilgrim believer—the way of Incarnation.

The wide range of interpretations of “Gerontion” may point to something noteworthy about it. Although some of these treat the theme of sexuality (including Albert Gelpi and Eric Whitman Sigg), others the role of incapacious language (James Longenbach), and still others the “history of human depravity” (Alfred Kazin, for example), most focus on entailed religious issues: Russell Kirk emphasizes the attention given to a life devoid of faith; Peter Sharpe, the life of sin, reflective of Eliot’s own debt to his Puritan forebears; Nasreen Ayaz, the loss of faith and subsequent emotional control; and Marion Montgomery, promisingly, Gerontion’s failure to discover “vital power in the sinful shell of his body.”¹⁵ This diversity of interpretations perhaps suggests the poem’s own failure of clarity and control.

However that may be, I shall propose another turn on the figure in the carpet. A reader can, I am well aware, try too hard to fit everything together in an effort to make sense of the whole, in the process distorting while smoothing out difficulties; squeezing the words is, though, less the problem than forcing them, unnaturally, to support one another. What matters ultimately is only how the sexual and the religious and other images and references work *within* the poem. The interpretive problem thus mirrors a principal thematic concern; "The word within the word" has struggled to get out—that is, to "speak a word" like the words within Eliot's own poem: Incarnation before *the* Incarnation ("Gerontion," of course, focuses on the Word's difficulty even after the Incarnation). The reason is what "Gerontion" is all about, the impotence of the civilization in which "the little old man," Eliot himself, and the "hypocrite lecteur" find themselves: "mes semblables." That impotence is, then, by no means Gerontion's alone.

And yet "Gerontion" remains, and will always be, I believe, enigmatic and elusive. The reason is that Eliot has not completely succeeded. That is to say, he is *too* difficult, *too* cryptic, some of his references, allusions, and statements lacking necessary imaginative or logical relation for the reader to be able to decipher them. In *The Waste Land* and "The Hollow Men," difficulties still abound, but Eliot almost always in these poems so writes that the reader can, with admitted difficulty, time, and effort, feel reasonably comfortable that he can at least approach the heart of the poet's intentions. Not so, more than once or twice, in "Gerontion." (Something similar may apply to *Four Quartets*, although there, I feel, the problem in understanding lies with me.)

That Gerontion speaks as the voice of Judeo-Christian civilization is a dawning realization. From the standpoint of the end of the poem, or rather of the whole, the opening verses offer "hints" and prompt "guesses": "Here I am, an old man in a dry month, / Being read to by a boy." "Month" contrasts with the repeated reference to "year" later, including "a new year." Moreover, the speaker has either lost his eyesight and so is unable to read for himself, or he never learned to read. His rather sophisticated and learned comments later suggest that the latter is probably not the case. But at any rate, he now requires help. That it comes from a mere "boy" is telling, and perhaps recalls the perennial conflict of ancients and moderns, wherein as in Swift's "Battle of the Books," the young moderns, who should be standing

on ancient shoulders, engage in a contentious struggle for primacy of place.

As Gerontion waits, he says, for nourishing “rain,” he observes that his “house” is “decayed,” a familiar description of contemporary civilization. The “owner” of the house is Jewish, and he embodies the decay and squalor that Gerontion notes and evidently laments, being associated with cities linked with finance and trade. The rustic scene that lies alongside this urban scene, the Jewish owner the link between them, is represented by the lustful goat that is himself ill and coughing, a condition probably shared by “the woman” who sneezes, able only to provoke a “feeble sputtering fire” (in Gerontion himself?).¹⁶ Pastor has been drained out of pastoral, urbanity absent in the urban, leaving but “Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds.” In other words, the civilization that is the property of the Judaic tradition has decayed into blatant commercialism and materialism, leaving a place to live that rain alone will do little to nourish or develop. Anticipations here perhaps of Leopold Bloom in Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

The following verse paragraph, consisting of four lines, derives from Lancelot Andrewes, the Jacobean and Caroline divine who so influenced Eliot in his decision to embrace Anglo-Catholicism. Bishop Andrewes is rightly credited with providing imagery and ideas for *Ash Wednesday* and is the titular subject of Eliot’s 1928 collection of essays, but obviously Andrewes’s influence occurred long before 1927 or 1928. The verses here, which I quoted earlier, closely echo, even repeat, Andrewes’s words in a sermon preached before the king on Christmas Day 1618: “Signs are taken for wonders. ‘Master, we would fain see a sign,’ that is a miracle. And in this sense it is a sign to wonder at. Indeed, every word here is a wonder . . . *Verbum infans*, the Word without a word; the eternal Word not able to speak a word; a wonder sure. And . . . swaddled, a wonder too. He that takes the sea ‘and rolls it about with the swaddling bands of darkness’;—He to come thus in clouts, Himself!”¹⁷ Into the world “owned” by the Judaic tradition came the Incarnation, the idea now in the mind of Gerontion. *Verbum infans*: perhaps Eliot is thinking not of *the* Incarnation but of Incarnation, the word unable to “speak” until *the* Incarnation occurred, at which point it became the Word. In any case, Eliot changes Andrewes significantly, for whereas the divine wrote of “the Word without a word,” Eliot writes, in several ways differently, of “the word within a word.” In infancy, in both Andrewes and Eliot, it lies “Swaddled with darkness.”

Eliot then writes, “In the juvenescence of the year / Came Christ the tiger.” The strange-sounding first noun here is the first instance of

the word recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary; the word “juvencence,” dating from 1800, means “the state of being youthful or of growing young.” Thus a word normally applied to a person is, thanks to the Incarnation, also fitting for the natural world, and so Eliot has in mind the renewal that comes with, in, and as spring. That may be Eliot’s intention, but it may also be that he here refers to “the new year” that “Anno Domini” denominates, the new era that began with Christ’s birth. Either way, he came as “the tiger.”

The appearance of “May” in the immediately following verse signals an obvious difference from that “juvencence.” May is “depraved” in the old sense of being crooked, of taking the wrong direction (and direction will later figure prominently). If, as Elizabeth Drew contends,¹⁸ Eliot is describing a “new paganism,” itself a product of the advent of humanism, then the issue is the decay visited upon “the new year” by perversions and corruptions, whereby division replaces unity and catholicity, the sacrament itself divided between eating and drinking (a fact that the line incarnates: “To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk”), which separation is indicative of the binarism that replaces the fundamental notion of Incarnation as “impossible union” of seeming opposites. *Now*, in any case, the Word appears present only “Among whispers,” that is, barely heard at all. In this situation, as the references to Mr. Silvero, Hakagawa, Madame de Tornquist, and Fraulein von Kulp suggest, *the whole world* is given over to misunderstanding of art, to divination, and to the “guilty” closing of the door to possibility: “They are cosmopolitan, rootless and sapless creatures, cut off entirely from the lifeblood of a living tradition”: “Surface texture” only matters, nothing having to do “with a loving heart.”¹⁹

The following lines bear great significance, I think. “Vacant shuttles / Weave the wind” points to absence of substantive content in the vicissitudes of shifting intellectual fashion while “I have no ghosts” points to the absence of the past and of viable tradition in Gerontion’s own “thoughts.” Then—thus—he repeats that he is “An old man in a draughty house / Under a windy knob.” Winds do indeed figure prominently, symbolizing change while proffering no rain.

I tend to follow Elizabeth Drew concerning the succeeding account of “history.” As she puts it in *T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry*, “‘History’ is human experience lived without the framework of a Logos . . . It is man relying on his own desires and ‘whispers,’ believing that he can control his own fate; directed only by arbitrary expediency, inspired only by instinctive action and reaction in the world of temporal fate and change.” About the enigmatic term “forgiveness,” Drew suspects “an extended etymology here,” but she

never clearly explains what that is. She appears on firm ground, in any case, in observing that the “giving” and the “forgiving” take form as “‘depraved,’ crooked ways of knowledge (cunning), the ways of self-deception and self-interest, their methods of propagation and what they propagate.” She adds, “Man craves knowledge (of himself, of truth), but history presents it ‘when our attention is distracted,’ when we are looking in a different direction, or are in a state of conflict, torn in opposing directions.”²⁰ The word within her word(s) is *winds*; indeed, history begins to appear as the random, shifting, and arbitrary direction of the winds woven by “vacant shuttles.” As to such revelation as the Incarnation embodied, Gerontion says that history merely “Gives too late / What’s not believed in, or is still believed, / In memory only, reconsidered passion.” Note that word “passion” here.

As Eliot represents it, history entails differences and weaves them into unintended and unexpected relations and connections: fear and courage, vices and heroism, virtues and crimes. There is no single or clear direction from which it blows or takes us, susceptible, all of us, always, to “windy spaces” and occupants, much like Gerontion himself, of “a draughty house.”

In the “new year”—whatever that is—one thing is certain: “the tiger springs.” But *is* “the tiger” (still) Christ? Or is there another “tiger,” another force of violence and anger? What we know is that “Us he devours,” which certainly sounds unlike what Christ does in the poem and in history. But *history* continues on—with or without the individual, including Gerontion and the rest of “Us.” Apparently, the tradition out of which Gerontion speaks has not “reached conclusion, when I / Stiffen in a rented house.” Purpose has attended his efforts and his tradition’s being, and his “show” owes nothing to the movement or excitement of diviners. There is more to it—honestly.

Evidently the following verse paragraph is addressed to the Logos, even as it takes up again historical developments. Gerontion’s attention at this point turns to his “removal” from nearness to the deity’s “heart” in a truncated reference to the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, the former destructive of the mediation that “beauty” served in approaching God and the latter creative of the terror of the Inquisition. As a result, Gerontion says pointedly, “I have lost my passion”: the Judeo-Christian tradition is now essentially lifeless, its only breath of life in the mind, and even there hardly influential. “Why should I need to keep it / Since what is kept must be adulterated?” he asks. And indeed, passion decays into indulgence, such as earlier in the poem has been delineated. With the loss of passion has come loss

of the five senses, which once were used as a means to approach God, the way of Incarnation.

The penultimate verse paragraph seems anticlimactic, although “wind” returns as a major image and thematic matter. The beginning presents a seeming disenchantment with too much thinking (help me not to think too much, says *Ash Wednesday*).

These with a thousand small deliberations
 Protract the profit of their chilled delirium,
 Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled,
 With pungent sauces, multiply variety
 In a wilderness of mirrors.

The lines literalize the metaphor of reflecting, part of the intellectual apparatus; reflection and “pungent sauces” of “deliberating” take over with the cooling of sense, all this extending “the profit”—such as it is—of the *cold* “delirium” of those “deliberations.” Not an attractive or encouraging portrait this, of dissociated sensibility.

What should you expect? Gerontion implies, “What will the spider do / Suspend its operations, will the weevil / Delay?” Further “decay” thus lies waiting, for neither the spider nor the weevil will, or can, go against its nature. The winds continue to blow, and their force is hard, if not impossible, to oppose and resist:

Gull against the wind, in the windy straits
 Of Belle Isle, or running on the Horn.
 White feathers in the snow, the Gulf claims,
 And an old man driven by the Trades
 To a sleepy corner.

The trade winds blow almost constantly in one direction, and the world bows to the direction of the wind, woven always by “Vacant shuttles.”

Like Prufrock, Gerontion with his dry brain *knows*. Lacking the senses and passion, he thinks himself incapable of “forgiving” and worries less about that when he recalls that Christ came as “the tiger” and “devours” us, those in need of forgiveness *and* those who might forgive as they could. History, certainly, does not forgive, and what it *gives*, which “Gerontion” emphasizes, is a mixture, often opposites together, no clear or single direction taken or apparent. History is, in fact, fickle, deceitful, untrustworthy, unpredictable, less dependable

indeed than the wind, which sometimes, in some places (the trades, for instance), blows unidirectionally.

At the end of the poem, the old man is cornered—by winds blowing in one direction through his house: feeble (evidently), certainly inactive, in a world full of motion and movement. He has lost all passion, which is, paradoxically, loss of pattern. Pattern does not exist in the winds—woven by “Vacant shuttles”—and now not in Gerontion. We get his *thoughts*, products of a brain lacking nourishment in an unnourishing age.

ARRIVING AT THE BEGINNING AND KNOWING IT FOR THE FIRST TIME

T. S. Eliot’s conflicted J. Alfred Prufrock is no Keatsian, or chameleon, character, nor one who lacks a certain identity, however enigmatic.²¹ By his own acknowledgment, he rather resembles Lazarus, come back from the dead with news to tell. Keats had seen beauty and recognized it as truth and truth as beauty. Prufrock has no interest in pouring out a “balm,” or offering sustenance, however fleeting; instead, he contemplates “vexing” the world. In the end, of course, which seems much less than an end, he does neither: he does nothing, in fact, but reflect, consider, berate, and frustrate himself.

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is more than a lament. A dramatic monologue, it allows us inside the speaking voice’s mind, heart, and soul, and we are privileged to a vision at least unfamiliar to the character himself; meanwhile, the poet is invisible. Eliot’s first great poem *is* a love song—a love song from Prufrock to the world. It incarnates the burden of vision.

The issue is the perennial one that Keats so powerfully dramatized. What do you do, once you have *seen*? “This good had full as bad a Consequence,” wrote John Dryden in a very different situation.²² How do you deal with the burden imposed by vision? In Keats’s case, to be sure, the anxiety he struggled with had more to do with recognition of his own talent than with the burden of vision itself. Keats felt intensely the burden of vocation, and I think Prufrock senses something structurally similar, however inchoate his understanding of it.

By now, nearly a hundred years after its publication, we are accustomed to reading the well-recognized opening verses as a dramatization of split personality: Prufrock appears separated from himself, engaged in earnest and debilitating debate with a self on whom he looks first hopefully, then critically. The passage anticipates and rhymes

with that in “Little Gidding” where the poem’s speaker encounters the “familiar compound ghost” and represents himself as self-divided.

Let us go, then, you and I,
 When the evening is spread out against the sky
 Like a patient etherized upon a table;
 Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
 The muttering retreats
 Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
 And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
 Streets that follow like a tedious argument
 Of insidious intent
 To lead you to an overwhelming question . . .
 Oh, do not ask, “What is it?”
 Let us go and make our visit.²³

Passivity reigns here, even to the point of anesthetization, and the speaker feels called upon to act, at least to declare, proclaim. The time needs to be redeemed, a point that recurs in *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*, and he has seen what might then help. There is something sadly, badly wrong with human relationships, and society lacks the capacity, or the will, to address the problem. Passivity is matched only by a failure of speech (“mutterings” only). You can also think too much, engaged in reflection, thence in self-reflection, eventually trapped, imprisoned in the ego, listening for the key that confirms imprisonment. The way out entails another journey.

Difference soon asserts itself, for immediately after Prufrock’s expressed intent to make his “visit,” his journey toward what, he is more and more convinced, would be misunderstanding, we are treated to the contrast between the world that he has decided to enter and that which he has described—the society depicted recalls that exposed by Pound in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, some time later: “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo.” This is, of course, the world split, as the speaker seems to be, from life spent as “restless nights in one-night cheap hotels.” All the refined talk, all the appearance of high culture, rings hollow.

Having evidently decided to “make our visit,” Prufrock, I, and you, he observes—the collection in which the poem appeared in 1917 is called *Prufrock and Other Observations*—and then wonders. Images of passivity accumulate, proliferate: the prevailing fog is *like* a cat that, finally, “Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap, / And seeing that it was a soft October night, / Curled once about the house, and fell

asleep.” As in “The Hollow Men,” to say nothing of “Gerontion,” the pull to inaction, to silence, is great, and the picture of the somnolent cat seductive. It too has made a leap, but then, realizing the attraction and the safety of the circumambient softness, yields to the simulacrum of the death wish.

Observing, if only in his mind, Prufrock appreciates that it is not too late to amend his intention. He is more like Hamlet than Hamlet himself (and there is no “objective correlative” here either). The cat remains with him as solace, as a totem. There will always be time. Time, and “time to murder and create”—a striking, surprising, significant yoking: time gives the opportunity and seems to frustrate acceptance. Recognition entails acceptance of just such doubleness, and complexity, as the opening of the poem has projected. If Prufrock would—could—redeem the time, bringing about a new creation, he would, or so it seems, have first to murder—like Hamlet contemplating revenge upon the usurper Claudius, his uncle, now married to his mother. *Ash Wednesday* prays not to be separated.²⁴

The imagined scene reminds Prufrock once more that “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo”: coming *and* going, doing and saying the same. So reminded, Prufrock persists in his deliberations, which now become particularized via personal details recalled and insistent—the same argument pockmarked by difference:

And indeed there will be time
 To wonder, ‘Do I dare?’ and, ‘Do I dare?’
 Time to turn back and descend the stair,
 With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—
 (They will say: ‘How his hair is growing thin!’)
 My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
 My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—
 (They will say: ‘But how his arms and legs are thin!’)
 Do I dare
 Disturb the universe?
 In a minute there is time
 For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

Prufrock knows the world he would visit, knows its routine, its interests, its deflections, enchantments, mocking falsehoods, its ways of supreme avoidance (“I have measured out my life with coffee spoons”). How could he, in this world, be understood if he should venture to proclaim what he knows, what he has seen? The world to

which, then, he would *return*, he knows well—"I have known them all already, known them all"—and his intimacy with it all is just the point. For he knows, he has seen, what makes all the difference.

The burden of vision is heavy, the risks great, indeed—Prufrock is no wimp, only realistic, clear sighted. Vision is precisely the matter, as the next verses make clear:

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
 The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
 And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
 When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
 Then how should I begin
 To spit out the butt-end of my days and ways?
 And how presume?

The penultimate verse here brilliantly marks the difference that Prufrock would bring, would incarnate in his message. Your point and you, both and the same, will be wrapped up, reduced, intensely scrutinized, talked about endlessly and with the cruelty that strict examination and analysis barely masks. In short, Prufrock will be *read*—his "message" expounded, abused, misused, abstracted, and packaged. Attention will, moreover, as Eliot knew in our still-Romantic existence, focus on the personality of the messenger, on his appearance, his clothes, his demeanor—not the message. The "eyes" will, indeed, do their work.

"Presumption" is another matter, ethical in orientation. What *right* has Prufrock to declaim and proclaim? By what authority? Whence would, could, come Prufrock's "permission"? These are large, burdensome questions. In confronting them, Prufrock is perhaps less pathetic than futile.

Into Prufrock's self-deliberations the message erupts, the knowledge he has, the vision he possesses, this following the poem's decisive break between verse paragraphs: "Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets / And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?" The contrast with the "room," the social graces and appurtenances, the high culture (imitated if not exactly incarnated) could hardly be greater. Prufrock does not expand on his vision, nor dwell upon it. He *would* be the messenger of difference. But the task is enormous—and everything is so peaceful, quiet, self-satisfied: why—and how—disturb?

The burden on the seer is simply overwhelming, and I suggest that those who dismiss Prufrock as pathetic and imbecilic know little

of the enormity of *vocation*. They—we—are beguiled and seduced by the prospect, and the virtual promise, of sex, still another death wish. Circe has never returned, for, as Eliot's friend Pound averred, the gods have never left us. The following lines reflect the strength that Prufrock lacks; still, it would be unfair to downplay his striving, his essaying.

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
 Smoothed by long fingers,
 Asleep . . . tired . . . or it malingers,
 Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.
 Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
 Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
 But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
 Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in
 upon a platter,
 I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;
 I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
 And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat and snicker,
 And in short, I was afraid.

Who among us would not be? Who is not? Who answers the call? Who accepts responsibility, having seen? Who has the strength to prophesy? Prufrock, of course, deceives himself, or maybe merely tries to console himself, when he lies: “and here's no great matter.” It is a great denial. To reckon Prufrock's dilemma as merely relational and sexual is also a denial; it leaves us—“hypocrite lecteurs”—open to the same satire, the same exposure, as Prufrock enacts of this narrow, Phaiacia-like society.

Having decided, not exactly a “hollow man,” Prufrock resorts to the conditional, going on to suggest—to reveal—more about the nature of the vision with which he is burdened. By the end of the important verse paragraph that I next quote, Prufrock introduces the matter of authorial interpretation: suppose, just suppose, that his vision was, like Stephen Dedalus's, little else than a forgery.²⁵ Suppose *he* had misunderstood, gotten it all wrong.

And would it have been worth it, after all,
 After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
 Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
 Would it have been worth while,
 To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
 To have squeezed the universe into a ball

To roll it towards some overwhelming question,
 To say: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
 Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all'—
 If one, settling a pillow by her head,
 Should say: 'That is not what I meant at all.
 That is not it, at all.'

Prufrock's vision of "the lonely men in shirt-sleeves" we have no reason to question, nor he to doubt. Misunderstanding, he now worries, might be of her who said what would have occasioned *part* of his declamation, different from what he might have proclaimed. Of course, this is all a rationalization, an attempt to justify his silence, his inaction, for he has painted a clear and convincing picture of "the room [in which] the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo."

I suspect that the allusion to Lazarus is meant by Eliot to call up memory of both him mentioned in John 11:1–44, the brother of Mary and Martha, and the different figure represented by Luke in 16:19–31. The former is the dead figure brought back to life by Christ; the latter is the beggar who went to heaven, unlike the rich man Dives, who goes to hell. When they died, as B. C. Southam has written, "Dives wanted to warn his five brothers what hell was like, so he asked Abraham if Lazarus could be sent back to tell them. But Abraham refused: 'if they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.'"²⁶ In any case, the idea of a visit to the dead stands intact.

Now Prufrock is bent on self-justification. He even blames language and the inability to translate meaning into expression and communication, the critical issues revisited in "Burnt Norton" and "Little Gidding." Nothing in his world approaches communion. By now, Prufrock *does* appear pathetic, engaged in wringing his possibly manicured hands and beating his perhaps hairless chest, not a little self-pityingly:

And would it have been worth it, after all,
 Would it have been worth while,
 After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
 After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail
 along the floor—
 And this, and so much more?—
 It is impossible to say just what I mean!
 But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
 Would it have been worth while
 If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,

And turning toward the window, should say:
 ‘That is not it at all,
 That is not what I meant, at all.’

Perhaps she, Prufrock imagines, would be interested in him, and if he spoke, prophetically, of what he had seen and knew about hell, any opportunity for response would be lost. Perhaps *she* had uttered something offensive and mean that resonates for Prufrock with those other, different figures he had seen “leaning out of windows”—she, after all, can only turn “toward the window,” whereas “the lonely men,” working-class men, appear almost gasping for air. And Prufrock is clearly very interested in “all,” a word he keeps repeating. Of course, he also exhibits an inordinate attention to and concern with *things*, something he obviously shares with the society depicted and satirized. The satirist is satirized. Part of Prufrock’s problem is that he lacks that love that is represented in “Little Gidding” as being “beyond desire”; he is, after all, “attached,” just as the people in his world appear, if not “indifferent,” “detached.”

Not surprisingly, Prufrock immediately becomes decisive sounding, almost defiant in fact, even as he proceeds to deprecate himself, ridiculing the very idea of prophesying. He is, he thinks, no better than a jester, a veritable Shakespearean fool, an occasion for mockery. Who could, or would, among us take him seriously? Prufrock figures himself as more like Polonius than Hamlet, no more than an “attendant” (later on, Eliot would endorse being as *attendant*). He might, or so he affirms, *do* as a member of a crowd, perhaps one who warms up an audience for the star of the show, but no leader, speaker, or prophetic voice. He would be used, not lead.

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
 Am an attendant lord, one that will do
 To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
 Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
 Deferential, glad to be of use,
 Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
 Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
 At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
 Almost, at times, the Fool.

A devastating critique, this portrait, however just or earned, reaches, touches, implicating almost every reader: Prufrock, *mon frère*, *mon semblable*.

The great irony seems not to be lost even upon the “obtuse” Prufrock: he *is* a fool—not because he has once thought of prophetic speech, but because having seen he chooses to adopt no answerable manner. Thus until the last three verses of the poem, Prufrock *appears* foolish, having failed to appreciate just how there is a time for action, a time for play. He opts for the childish when he should, rather, be responding on the basis of his vision, accepting the burden of responsibility: “I grow old . . . I grow old . . . / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.” In truth, he *grows* pathetic, his questions refused from the “overwhelming” to the petty and pitiful: “Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach? / I shall wear white flannelled trousers, and walk upon the beach. / . . . I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.” And alas, “I do not think that they will sing to me”; indeed, “I have seen them riding seaward on the waves / Combining the white hair of the waves blown back / When the wind blows the water white and black.” Recalling the in-dwellers of *The Waste Land*, Prufrock knows, or at least senses, “death by water.” Thus the final three verses of the poem round off the portrait: “We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown.” Waking would only kill, so the inhabitants of “the waste land” instinctively, perhaps, recognize. The *voice* that J. Alfred Prufrock lacks, that he fails to find, may someday, somehow ring out, waking this diseased society and perhaps Prufrock too. Asleep, we survive—dead in life. Perhaps that voice gains speech in *The Waste Land*, Prufrock’s also potentially the voice Gerontion *would* hear.

What to do, I repeat? What *do* you do with talent, insight, vision, understanding? If it flouts convention, contravenes accepted truth, challenges the orthodox and the established, are you not likely deceived? No different from or better than Johnson’s Astronomer in *Rasselas*? Who are you, after all, a mere individual, to question authority?

Our own is a much more self-assertive age and society than Eliot’s or Prufrock’s. We seldom withhold our opinions, or judgments, however ill formed, ill founded, or inchoate. The cult of self-esteem teaches us that one opinion is just as good as another, fully deserving of respect, no matter how foolish. Still, Prufrocks slump among us, hugging walls, shouldering burdens self-imposed and otherwise. It is not, of course, humility that stops Prufrock short, despite whatever appearances to the contrary. He is modest, to be sure, but his modesty appears more a fault than a virtue, more a failure of nerve than a positive capacity.

"Prufrock" can, of course, be read alone, and usually is, as Eliot's revolutionary first poem, lauded by Pound as the finest poem at that point written by an American. Poundian hyperbole aside, the poem stands as a remarkable achievement, one that only increases when read in context. By "context" I mean Eliot's other poems, especially the later ones and notably *Four Quartets*. Eliot's own journey toward understanding, I suggest, in a sense returns him, in the mid-1940s, to the mid-1910s and "Prufrock."

Throughout this book, I have marked rhymes of one poem with another. These are, I believe, intentional on Eliot's part. The end he has in mind is nothing so simple as establishing both continuity and change. Rather, he wishes to signal—again—an "impossible union." In this case, he was already dealing, in "Prufrock," with matters, feelings, and perceptions that would continue to play a critical role in the later masterpiece. As he put it in "Little Gidding," there is "a husk of meaning" whose purpose emerges, if at all, only when fulfilled. The fulfillment of "Prufrock"—as of "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "Gerontion," *The Waste Land*, and "The Hollow Men," I further surmise—is *Four Quartets*. In other words, the "beginning" bears its fullest, richest fruit in the "end." The two, beginning and end, are thus related in a pattern that only time realizes, and that pattern reveals an intersection of the end with the beginning that mirrors the relation of death and life.

In the final analysis, it seems to me, "Little Gidding" responds to "Prufrock." The issue—to repeat—is vision or, better, understanding. Once you have visited the kingdom of the dead and encountered nothing(ness), including your own, what do you do? Prufrock's is one telling reaction, based in timidity and fear, pointing to the way the world ends—not with a bang but a whimper. Another, perhaps even more telling response is that of the acute observer who becomes a satirist, vexing the world, giving it one lash the more, in anger, bitterness, perhaps righteous indignation and then, ultimately, despair, withdrawal, perhaps either suicide or revolution.

The "familiar compound ghost" in "Little Gidding" speaks tongued with fire as an embodiment of Incarnation: a Tiresian figure, representing "impossible union" of apparent opposites. His message to the poet is acute and unsparing and directed at the efforts to which we perhaps give ourselves to "redeem the time." Lack of fruition—or "fructifying," to use Eliot's word—is hardly the worst that happens. Failure of expectation pales alongside waste and ineffectualness: "the conscious impotence of rage / At human folly, and the laceration / Of

laughter at what ceases to amuse.” Worse yet is revelation or realization of your own complicity, your participation in what you oppose, your contribution to evil.

The ghost does not end with description, offering the following prescription before leaving “with a kind of valediction”: the spirit will wander, “from wrong to wrong,” unless “restored” by the “refining fire.” In other words, find the pattern that gives meaning to movement, desire, and thus time. Here too, however, you risk enchantment, deception, and the lures of falsehood.

Eliot follows with “the answer” to the burden that plagues him or her who understands, Prufrock or the poet, you or me—it is difficult to grasp, far more so to achieve, requiring such discipline, devotion, ardor, and prayer as Eliot has enunciated in “The Dry Salvages,” the work of no less than a saint. Eliot appears here unusually solicitous that his reader “get it,” for the next words in “Little Gidding” are “Sin is Behovely.” The line in question ends with “but” and is followed by the proclamation that all will be well, “all manner of thing.” The speaker clearly believes both points, and so is now given to forgiveness, including of (former) “opponents,” with whom he now feels a certain commonality or equality: difference is no longer sought; more, its absence acquires special prominence. The speaker is thus absorbed in neither the past nor the future. Key is “purification of the motive”—not purgation. Purification comes about in, through, and by means of the particular “ground” in which we act. Eliot has come a long way from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” to *Four Quartets*, a period of twenty or thirty years, depending on whether you count from “Burnt Norton” in 1935 or the publication of all four poems in 1943. Eliot could not have written *Four Quartets* in 1917.

Among the continuities, several of which I have been at pains to suggest throughout this book, is one that I wish to reemphasize as we reach the end of *our* journey here, and that is the matter of voice. Prufrock’s voice is his own, not the poet’s; the voice of *Four Quartets* is not Eliot’s alone, certainly not his unique “personality.” The poet is, rather, the medium through whom understanding speaks, although point of view is not transcended; it is that of the Christian arrived via penitence at humility.

NOTES

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

1. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943). I cite the true First, for the poem was not published in Britain until October 31, 1944.
2. T. S. Eliot, Preface, *For Lancelot Andrewes* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928), ix.
3. See the important book by Hugh Kenner, *Paradox in Chesterton* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1947).
4. T. S. Eliot, "The *Pensées* of Pascal," *Selected Essays*, 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 408.
5. T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," *Homage to John Dryden* (London: Hogarth, 1923), 31.
6. The *magister*, T. S. Eliot, offers, in "East Coker," the second of *Four Quartets*, an important lesson that "rhymes" with one made famous in his essay some twenty years earlier, "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "Do not let me hear / Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly, / Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession, / Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God." Such "expanding / Of love beyond desire" ("Little Gidding") echoes the lesson on surrender of personality in the much-earlier essay, pointing to a positive relation between "stages" of Eliot's own development, a *journey*, in fact, that has too often been interpreted in terms of diametrical opposition and absolute difference: "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* [London: Methuen, 1920], 30). The lesson to be drawn for us here, in any case, concerns the relation of reader and critic to the "calling" text. But such "surrender," "extinction of personality," and the giving-up of oneself to someone or something other than and outside the self may not, after all, require *transcendence* of the self. Rather, in terms of Eliot's Incarnational theology (and, I would say, poetics), the self, or personality, remains, not eliminated, but purified. The difference is enormous, and critical, and apparently notoriously difficult to grasp fully: a crucial distinction that plays out in *Four Quartets* and points toward, among other things, the Christian poet Eliot's difference from (the pagan) Homer.

I note Lyndall Gordon's bold claim that "the turning-point in Eliot's life came not at the time of his baptism in 1927, but in 1914 when he was circling, in moments of agitation, on the edge of conversion" (*T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* [New York: Norton, 1999], 87). I think that 1927 was critical for Eliot, not so much as turning-point but as climax to a journey long underway and a making-formal what had until then remained incomplete; whether it all began in 1914, I cannot say. I am interested, in any case, not in speculation but in the point of view available to close reading of Eliot's verse and prose.

7. Helen Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (London: Cresset, 1949).

CHAPTER 1

1. Georg Lukàcs, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," in *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974), 9.
2. E. B. White, foreword, *Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), vii.
3. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943).
4. T. S. Eliot, *Ash-Wednesday* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930).
5. T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1920), esp. 10.
6. About his various work in this regard, see my *Geoffrey Hartman: Criticism as Answerable Style* (London: Routledge, 1990).
7. On the differences between essays and articles, see, *inter alia*, William H. Gass, "Emerson and the Essay," in *Habitations of the Word* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 9–49.
8. Lukàcs, "Nature," 16.
9. Paul H. Fry, *The Reach of Criticism: Method and Perception in Literary Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 200.
10. T. S. Eliot, "Lancelot Andrewes," in *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928), 24–25.
11. Denis Donoghue, "On 'Burnt Norton,'" in *Words in Time: New Essays on Eliot's "Four Quartets,"* ed. Edward Lobb (London: Athlone, 1993), 19.
12. William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1935); K. G. Hamilton, *John Dryden and the Poetry of Statement* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1969).
13. D. W. Harding, *Experience Into Words: Essays on Poetry* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963), 109.
14. Donoghue, "'Burnt Norton,'" 19. But see Eliot's differentiation between the "logic of concepts" and that of imagination in his preface to his translation of St.-J. Perse's *Anabasis* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930), 8.
15. On this poem, see, for example, my *T. S. Eliot and the Essay: From "The Sacred Wood" to "Four Quartets"* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

16. See John Booty, *Meditating on "Four Quartets"* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1983); Robert Howard, *Dove Descending: A Journey into T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets"* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006); Kenneth Paul Kramer, *Redeeming Time: T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets"* (Lanham, MD: Cowley, 2007); and Michael D. G. Spencer, *Understanding "Four Quartets" as a Religious Poem: How T. S. Eliot Uses Symbols and Rhythms to Plumb Mysterious Meaning* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2008).
17. Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and the Pleasure of Words* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).
18. T. S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature," in *Selected Essays*, 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 388.
19. Ibid.
20. I do not in the least wish to minimize Archbishop Williams's contribution nor to deny the brilliance of his vastly informed reading. Moreover, the reading done is consistently right headed, the critic perhaps more attuned than previous commentators (as well as later ones, with the possible exception of Barry Spurr) to the critically incarnational character of the poem and of Eliot's understanding. Still, the manner of these lectures is formal and stiff, consisting of very long paragraphs better for reading than for listening but, even so, dense and frankly forbidding (an apparently unpublished series of lectures, 1975, the typescript now in my possession).
21. Vincent Miller, "Eliot's Submission to Time," in *A Packet for Vincent Miller*, ed. Donald J. Greiner and John Lane (Spartanburg, SC: Holocene, 2002), 21.
22. T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1940), 56.
23. Miller, "Eliot's Submission to Time," 19.
24. Ibid., 21.
25. T. S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), 68.
26. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 411.
27. Ibid., 277.
28. Ibid., 347.
29. Barry Spurr, *'Anglo-Catholic in Religion': T. S. Eliot and Christianity* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2010).
30. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (New York: Signet, 1937), vii.
31. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, in "Gulliver's Travels" and *Other Writings*, ed. Louis A. Landa (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 15.
32. Homer, *Odyssey*, 11.
33. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 158.
34. Homer, *Odyssey*, 226.
35. Homer, *Odyssey*, 132.

36. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922).
37. *Ibid.*, 124.
38. *Ibid.*, 125.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, 126.
41. *Ibid.*, 127.
42. *Ibid.*, 128.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*, 129.
46. *Ibid.*, 130.
47. *Ibid.*, 132.
48. *Ibid.*, 133.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*, 134.
51. *Ibid.*, 135.
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Ibid.*
54. *Ibid.*, 137.
55. *Ibid.*, 140.
56. *Ibid.*, 141, 143.
57. *Ibid.*, 143.
58. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 493.
59. *Ibid.*, 179.
60. *Ibid.*, 208.
61. *Ibid.*, 224–25.
62. *Ibid.*, 119.
63. *Ibid.*, 225.
64. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, in *Poetry and Prose of Alexander Pope*, ed. Aubrey Williams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), part 2: line 1.
65. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 238.
66. See Alexander Pope, “Mrs. Mary Gulliver’s Lament,” in *The Poems of Alexander Pope: A One-Volume Edition of the Twickenham Text with Selected Annotations*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1963).
67. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 238.
68. *Ibid.*, 233.
69. *Ibid.*, 234.
70. *Ibid.*, 238–39.
71. *Ibid.*, 239.
72. *Ibid.*, 4.
73. *Ibid.*, 6.
74. *Ibid.*, 157.
75. *Ibid.*
76. *Ibid.*, 158.

77. Ibid., 159.
78. Ibid., 231.
79. Ibid., 232.
80. Ibid., 232–33.
81. Ibid., 233.
82. Ibid.
83. See Cynthia Ozick, “Metaphor and Memory,” in *Metaphor and Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 265–83.
84. The “journey toward understanding” that we are tracing in Eliot’s writing in fact differs in significant ways from that represented in *The Odyssey* and its “negative” *Gulliver’s Travels*. Certainly the former is predicated on the notion and the necessity of purgation. The “progress” we find in Eliot—his writing, that is—has nothing whatsoever to do with clearing away or leaving behind. Thus we find him writing in *Four Quartets* of purification and refinement, never of purgation. Rather than the purging of illicit desire, there is “the expansion / Of love beyond desire.” There *is*, however, a clearly definable journey, and in Eliot too the end is understanding, understanding that represents a refinement of the Homeric sort, just as Christianity and “the” Incarnation embody a purification of pre-Christian Incarnation.

CHAPTER 2

1. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943).
2. This is in a note to “The Dry Salvages” in *Four Quartets*.
3. T. S. Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets,” in *Homage to John Dryden* (London: Hogarth, 1923), 31.
4. See Helen Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (London: Cresset, 1949); Elizabeth Drew, *T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry* (New York: Scribner’s, 1949); and Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1959).
5. T. S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930).
6. T. S. Eliot, *The Rock* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 50.
7. John Dryden, *Religio Laici or A Laymans Faith*, in *Poems and Fables*, ed. James Kinsley (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), line 96.
8. Herbert N. Schneidau, *Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975).
9. See Jonathan Swift, “The Battle of the Books,” in *Gulliver’s Travels and Other Writings*, ed. Louis A. Landa (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), see esp. 365–68.
10. See esp. Bishop Andrewes’s sermons for *Ash Wednesday* in 1609 and 1619.
11. I am going to pause here and put “Incarnation” in a certain context in hopes of making this fundamental understanding as clear as possible. In fact, I will take the (appropriately) indirect way of first considering

in some detail what it is *not*. A hard way, this middle way is subtler than may at first appear. My illustrations come, not surprisingly, from imaginative secular writing.

Even the clearly and firmly orthodox have trouble staying “in the turn.” Consider first C. H. Sisson, a major writer, although little known in the United States. A prolific poet and essayist, he was a retired public officer who acted as a stout apologist for the Church of England, a defender of the faith. An old-fashioned Tory in the eighteenth-century sense, Sisson admired Eliot, understandably, as well as those seventeenth-century writers whom Eliot rediscovered and promoted. Sisson’s understanding often appears, like Eliot’s, Caroline; like Dryden, he writes pointedly as a layperson, but invective sometimes gets the better of him.

Consider “Le Roi Soleil” from *Sevenoaks Essays*. When Sisson declares that “the human mind . . . is the same as the human body” (207), he appears more like Heraclitus than he does Eliot. According to traditional understanding, the mind is not the body; rather, it depends upon it, as does spirit, which, *pace* Sisson, *does* exist. When, however, he comes to reverse the hierarchy of inner and outer, Sisson allows the inner to exist. Using the same image of circles to represent the expanding of love from self to God, Alexander Pope represents the traditional, orthodox position, this Erasmian Catholic: “God loves from Whole to Parts; but human soul / Must rise from Individual to the Whole.” (*An Essay on Man*, in *Poetry and Prose of Alexander Pope*, ed. Aubrey Williams [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969], part 4: lines 361–62)

Another instance of the difficulty Incarnation poses to understanding and expression alike is G. K. Chesterton’s wonderful essay “A Piece of Chalk.” He was also a staunch defender of Christianity and of the Roman church in particular, the author of still-popular books on orthodoxy and on St. Thomas Aquinas, among many others. And yet in “A Piece of Chalk” Chesterton appears unable to maintain the necessary balance, to remain in the tension required of incarnational thinking. The problem occurs as Chesterton proceeds to describe himself sitting down to draw, out in nature, with a piece of chalk on the necessary brown paper. “Do not,” he writes, “for heaven’s sake,”

imagine I was going to sketch from Nature. I was going to draw devils and seraphim, and blind old gods that men worshipped before the dawn of right, and saints in robes of angry crimson, and seas of strange green, and all the sacred or monstrous symbols that look so well in bright colours on brown paper. They are much better worth drawing than Nature; also they are much easier to draw. When a cow came slouching by in the field next to me, a mere artist might have drawn it; but I always get wrong in the hind legs of quadrupeds. So I drew the soul of the cow; which I saw there

plainly walking before me in the sunlight; and the soul was all purple and silver, and had seven horns and the mystery that belongs to all the beasts. But though I could not with a crayon get the best out of the landscape, it does not follow that the landscape was not getting the best out of me. And this, I think, is the mistake that people make about the old poets who lived before Wordsworth, and were supposed not to care very much about Nature, because they did not describe it much. (In *The Art of the Personal Essay*, ed. Phillip Lopate [New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1994].)

In order to appreciate what is going on, what is at stake, juxtapose this passage with one in Robert Browning's famous poem "Fra Lippo Lippi," a dramatic monologue. Here, the speaker confronts an artistic (and religious) establishment that would have him paint the way Chesterton seeks to. The friar refuses, escaping from his quarters to join a street party, attracted by the lure of the sensuous and the sensual. Speaking to a sentry who has come upon him, Fra Lippo sounds off, describing his artistic style and manner as representing body and soul, flesh and spirit in their proper "order." He doubts, *pace* his bishop, that you can have body without also having soul. The greater danger, he figures, is believing that you can have—and paint—soul directly, without the mediation of the body. The passage in question begins with the friar's impersonating his superior's claims:

"Your business is not to catch men with show,
With homage to the perishable clay,
But lift them over it, ignore it all,
Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh,
Your business is to paint the souls of men—"

(*The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 6th. ed., ed. M. H. Abrams et al., vol. 2 [New York: Norton, 1993], lines 179–83)

Now follows Fra Lippo's response to this, which appears to be Browning's as well:

Now, is this sense, I ask?
A fine way to paint soul, by painting body
So ill, the eye can't stop there, must go further
And can't fare worse! Thus, yellow does for white
When what you put for yellow's simply black,
And any sort of meaning looks intense
When all beside itself means and looks naught.
Why can't a painter lift each foot in turn,
Left foot and right foot, go a double step,
Make his flesh liker and his soul more like,
Both in their order? Take the prettiest face,

The Prior's niece . . . patron-saint—is it so pretty
 You can't discover if it means hope, fear,
 Sorrow or joy? won't beauty go with these?
 Suppose I've made her eyes all right and blue,
 Can't I take breath and try to add life's flash,
 And then add soul and heighten them threefold?
 Or say there's beauty with no soul at all—
 (I never saw it—put the case the same—)
 If you get simple beauty and naught else,
 You get about the best thing God invents:
 That's somewhat: and you'll find the soul you have missed,
 Within yourself, when you return him thanks. (lines 198–220)

That (middle) path is, indeed, difficult.

To instance the difficulty, along with the mistaken notions of grasping Eliot's understanding, I turn to an insightful book by Leonard Unger, *T. S. Eliot: Moments and Patterns* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966). The focus here is spot on, the author percipient in recognizing that "Burnt Norton" at least "is a kind of essay," although in the same breath he gives pause by describing Eliot's as simply a "spiritual quest" (79). The pause quickly becomes cause for alarm, for Unger believes and argues that *Four Quartets* focuses "the idea of the *transcending* of time" (175, italics added). Indeed, writes Unger, the poem includes "a picture of the barrier to the conquest of time and a means by which this barrier may be overcome" (81). Thus, Eliot is said to be all about "spiritual aims," defined essentially as "the timeless reality which is the beginning and end of all experience" (82). Unger, like many other critics, gets it half right.

Allow me to turn now to a more recent interpretation of the same issues. I refer to *T. S. Eliot and Mysticism: The Secret History of "Four Quartets"* (1991) by the Irish poet, Dominican monk, and sometime lecturer in mystical theology at Dominican Studium, Tallaught, and Angelicum University, Rome. To begin—and I will proceed indirectly—I refer to what Murray calls Eliot's "theology of detachment," which he distinguishes from "indifference." He cites a letter from Eliot to his distinguished friend, the scholar Bonamy Dobrée, written in 1936, which was the year of publication of "Burnt Norton," the first poem in what would become *Four Quartets*. Dobrée "had objected strongly to the quotation from St John of the Cross which Eliot had placed as an epigraph to *Sweeney Agonistes*," his Aristophelian fragment, which appeared in 1932. The epigraph is as follows: "Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings." Murray believes that the poet was heavily influenced by the work of St. John of the Cross and assumes, as may be the case, that the epigraph marks his apposite view.

(Of course, Eliot sometimes chose for introductory purposes words that he opposed, for example, those from Heraclitus that serve as epigraph for “Burnt Norton.”) At any rate, here is Eliot’s response to Dobrée, as quoted by Murray: “The doctrine that in order to arrive at the love of God one must divest oneself of the love of created beings was thus expressed by St John of the Cross, you know: i.e. a man who was writing primarily not for you and me, but for people seriously engaged in pursuing the Way of Contemplation. It is only to be read in relation to that Way.”

Enough to give one pause, for Eliot insists on, not at all unusually, a necessary distinction. He then follows with words that, alone, offer rebuke sufficient to those who believe he was ascetic and, in some fashion, spiritualistic (and so misread *Ash-Wednesday*, for instance): “i.e. merely to kill one’s human affections will get one nowhere, it would be only to become rather more a completely living corpse than most people are. But the doctrine is fundamentally true, I believe.”

Immediately follow statements that appear to confirm Murray’s analysis and to cement the case for a parallel between Eliot and St. John of the Cross: “Or to put your [Dobrée’s] belief in your own way, that only through the love of created beings can we approach the love of God, that I believe to be UNTRUE. Whether we mean by that domestic and friendly affections, or a more comprehensive love of the ‘neighbour’, of humanity in general.”

Note, in the first sentence, that little word “only,” which rhetorically bears great weight: of course we can approach God via other means, and Eliot makes that an important thematic point of “The Hollow Men” and *Ash Wednesday*. (Moreover, what does “the love of God” refer to? Our loving Him, or His way of loving?) In any case, Eliot goes on, concluding with an apparently definitive statement of agreement with the mystic: “I don’t think that ordinary human affections are capable of leading us to the love of God, but rather that the love of God is capable of informing, intensifying and elevating our human affections, which otherwise have little to distinguish them from the ‘natural’ affections of animals. Try looking at it from that end of the glass” (235). Precisely: “ordinary human affections” cannot—unattended—lead us to love of God; they are a means to that love, nevertheless, when they are understood as means rather than ends in themselves.

The issue at stake is not just Incarnation (and Graham Hough does affirm that for Eliot “the fullness of Christian revelation resides in the essential fact of the Incarnation”), but also and more specifically the *way* it works, including the relation of immanence and transcendence and, Murray insists, the notion of “negative” and “affirmative” ways. In order to understand “Eliot’s doctrine of Incarnation,” Murray turns to a book titled *Mysticism* by Evelyn Underhill, which was

published in 1911 and which Eliot read with considerable interest and engagement. Rather abruptly then, Murray offers this comprehensive and defining statement, beginning as follows: "Discussion so far concerning the meaning of Incarnation in *Four Quartets* has centred largely on the question of whether or not Eliot was thinking of 'a specific moment in history' or merely of 'the constant ingress of spiritual reality into time'. But surely Eliot's idea was to include both of these two possible meanings, for they are in no way incompatible" (85).

Indeed, they are not. The first of these is also known, at least among mystics, as "the negative way," the second, "the affirmative way." Pointedly, Murray precedes his definition with the word "merely"; "the affirmative way," he writes, designates "a perpetual Cosmic and personal process. It is an everlasting bringing forth, in the universe and also in the individual ascending soul, of the divine and perfect life." "The affirmative way" is also, Murray points out, related to the doctrine of immanence, and "the negative way" to that of transcendence. Those who adhere to the former, moreover, says Murray,

tend to look upon the Incarnation as an event that has not only made possible but indeed necessitated an affirmative, sacramental vision of reality. For them the task of the mystical poet, and his privilege, is to celebrate the presence of God in the temporal realm, and "to accept and love the manifest surface of the natural world." The timeless realm of Truth is sought not so much *outside* this world as *within* it. And every finite manifestation of beauty that the mystic perceives, through his senses, is regarded as a manifestation of the divine. Thus a true link is forged between "the temporal sensory illumination and the timeless Christian revelation." (86)

Such may the "path" of writers like George Herbert and Gerard Manley Hopkins, contends Murray, but it is not "the path or the way of mysticism pursued by T. S. Eliot." Nor is it Eliot's particular way of understanding the Incarnation. *That* Murray proceeds to define according to Underhill, to "the negative way," and to the doctrine of transcendence, echoes of the exchange between Eliot and his friend Bonamy Dobrée here evident: "The aspect of the Incarnation Eliot gives most attention to is not the descent of the divine plenitude into the depths of human nature (the way of immanence), but rather the slow difficult ascent of human nature upwards into the divine realm (the way of transcendence). 'What poetry must do,' Eliot wrote in an article published shortly after the completion of *Four Quartets*, 'is a kind of humble shadow of the Incarnation *whereby the human is taken up into the divine*'" (ibid.).

To a layperson such as me, at least, this is all rather confusing. As Eliot himself said, the words refuse to stay still, or their meanings do. At first blush, it appears that the desirable, in Murray's terms, is "the negative way," thus transcendence, and indeed it probably remains so throughout, but in the passage last quoted, this notion appears to have exchanged places with its apparent opposite, the way of transcendence being, now, upward, that of immanence downward, although earlier the former was defined by its innerness, the latter by being "outside" and evidently upward.

Murray argues, strangely in my view, that the doctrine of transcendence insists on an almost total separation of the human and the divine, of the temporal and the eternal worlds. God, or the Supreme Being, is thought of as being separated from our world of multiplicity and variety by an immeasurable distance. And thus, the path of the man who is in search of religious perfection, or in search of God, must literally be a *transcendence*; it must be a path of painful self-negation, a journey "inward and upward" through a long series of trials and temptations (79).

But *Four Quartets* works to disabuse us of just this (spiritualist) notion. I would further contend that if Eliot does not do so, as a Christian he should do. This doctrine, furthermore, according to Murray, "teaches the Christian contemplative to shut fast the door of his senses, and to turn all his attention away from the created, external world." I think, rather, that just this *turning*, dramatized in *Ash Wednesday*, is precisely one of the most pernicious temptations. We must, in any case, recall that Eliot is not writing about or for the contemplative, as his letter to Bonamy Dobrée makes clear. Murray rightly believes that "separate stages" occur in the development of Eliot's understanding, manifest in *Four Quartets*: initial awakening leads, he says, to "the advent of interior or spiritual darkness," thence to illumination, when "the Self has at last become detached from 'the things of sense.'" In any case, the senses, and everything earthly and physical, must be *transcended*.

But is this what Eliot says? Is this what Incarnation is? (Perhaps my students are right to be confused—and no doubt alarmed—by the word and the idea!) Differently from Murray, I am contending here that Incarnation—minus *the*—means the way of proceeding in, through, and by means of the senses and the things of this world to the spiritual and the transcendent. *They* are never left behind, never "merely" instrumental, but rather exist, like time and timelessness, body and spirit, man and God, in "impossible union" ("The Dry Salvages"). To separate, as Murray directly says, flouts Incarnation, as it does almost everything Eliot wrote after conversion, being nothing other or more than "the hint *half* guessed, the gift *half* understood."

- Eliot was himself insistent: "Suffer me not to be separated," he wrote, ending *Ash Wednesday*.
12. See Eliot's footnote in "Baudelaire in His Time," in *Essays Ancient and Modern* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), 66n. The note does not appear in the revised *Selected Essays*.
 13. John Dryden confronts this situation head on in *Religio Laici* or *A Laymans Faith*, walking a fine line between the absolutism of the Church of Rome (as he represents it) and the licentiousness of the sects then threatening a return to such chaos as reigned 30-plus years earlier following the beheading of Charles I and the instauration of the Puritan Commonwealth. For Dryden, the Reformation was a "good" that "had full as bad a Consequence," creating the priesthood of all believers, the priesthood of all readers. Then, he says, feeling his thought, in terms that his cousin Jonathan Swift will repeat, particularly in *A Tale of a Tub*:

The *Spirit* gave the *Doctoral Degree*:
 And every member of a *Company*
 Was of *his Trade*, and of the *Bible free*.
 Plain *Truths* enough for needfull *use* they found;
 But men wou'd still be itching to *expound*:
 Each was ambitious of th' obscurest place,
 No measure ta'n from *Knowledge*, all from *GRACE*.
Study and *Pains* were now no more their *Care*;
Texts were explain'd by *Fasting*, and by *Prayer*:
 This was the Fruit the *private Spirit* brought;
 Occasion'd by *great Zeal*, and *little Thought*.
 While Clouds unlearn'd, with rude Devotion warm,
 About the Sacred Viands buz and swarm,
 The *Fly-blown Text* creates a *crawling Brood*;
 And turns to *Maggots* what was meant for *Food*.
A Thousand daily Sects rise up, and dye;
A Thousand more the perish'd Race supply. (lines 406–22)

These lines stand not only as a strong indictment of the "private spirit" but also as an urgent plea for restraint, or check, which, Dryden goes on to say, appears in and as tradition as represented in the Church (a Church founded as a "via media" *between* opposed and opposing positions).

The late critic and poet Donald Davie put these matters in perspective in his autobiography *These the Companions*, in the chapter "Puritans," from which I quote a paragraph from near book's end:

As I write this, in November 1978, the newspapers are carrying stories about a sect called "The People's Temple," and about a mass-suicide of several hundred devotees in a remote part of what

used to be British Guiana. Faced with this and numerous other instances of what the English eighteenth century feared as “enthusiasm,” I cannot be patient with the historical scholarship that annotates “enthusiast” and “enthusiasm” in eighteenth-century texts, in a spirit of urbane antiquarianism, as amusing or intriguing instances of the vagaries of semantic change. If we no longer fear “enthusiasm” as the eighteenth century did, so much the worse for us; and yet the commentators, now as in the last century, invite us to congratulate ourselves on our emancipation from that prejudice. The self-appointed seers and prophets, illumined by Inner Light which credulous thousands can be brought to believe in and trust, are all over the place in the present century. Hitler of course was one of them. And indeed they crop up more often in our political and I’m afraid our artistic life than in religion. But such distinctions are in any case misleading, for the overwhelming of distinctions is an essential part of the strategy and the appeal of all such movements; it is of their nature to be amorphous, and therefore to have, when one comes to look, no real *doctrine* at all. Ours is an age of mish-mash, when no school of poetry can attract attention unless it offers its adherents the fervours and consolations of religion, and the audience-participation of the theatre; when no religious persuasion can afford not to centre itself upon “social work.” It is undoubtedly significant, and might almost have been predicted, that one of Jim Jones’s “hitmen” should have been reared among Quakers; but my Voltairean friends, for whom the eighteenth century is the Age of Enlightenment, surely misjudge when they suppose that dangerous irrationality is peculiar to religious life. Stamp it out there, by abolishing or persecuting or emasculating the churches; and it will only crop up somewhere else—in what will look like politics or art, though it cannot seriously be either. (*These the Companions* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982], 165)

Like Eliot, Davie, long an admirer of Old Possum, converted to the Church of England.

14. Ramie Targoff, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 10.
15. Davie, *These the Companions*, 170.
16. Targoff, *Common Prayer*, 10.
17. Quoted in Targoff, *Common Prayer*, 10.
18. *Ibid.*, 11.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, 13.

22. T. S. Eliot, "Francis Herbert Bradley," in *Essays Ancient and Modern*, 75–76.
23. Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, in "Gulliver's Travels" and *Other Writings*, 331.
24. T. S. Eliot, "Catholicism and International Order," in *Essays Ancient and Modern*, 134–35.
25. T. S. Eliot, "John Bramhall," in *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928), 42.
26. Eliot, "Catholicism," 120.
27. Paul Murray, *T. S. Eliot and Mysticism: The Secret History of "Four Quartets"* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991); Vincent Miller, "Eliot's Submission to Time," in *A Packet for Vincent Miller*, ed. Donald J. Greiner and John Lane (Spartanburg, SC: Holocene, 2002), 19.
28. G. Douglas Atkins, *Literary Paths to Religious Understanding: Essays on Dryden, Pope, Keats, George Eliot, Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and E. B. White* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
29. See, for example, René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).
30. Carroll F. Terrell, *Ideas in Reaction: Byways to the Pound Arcana* (Orono, ME: Northern Lights, 1991), e.g., 147.
31. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, in *Poetry and Prose of Alexander Pope*, ed. Aubrey Williams, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), part 4, line 331.
32. T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1920), 35–36.
33. A pause, for elaboration and further clarification before exiting *Four Quartets*: First, the issue of the coterminous nature of fire and the rose, which may seem to contradict, but does not, my claims regarding Incarnation as "impossible union," which, of course, leaves the couple precisely as couple, as two, not one: only God himself is one.

Second, as will be observed, no strict identity exists between Eliot's preconversion and his later positions, nor between Incarnation and "the" Incarnation. Those "ancients" who lived before Christ did not and could not understand exactly as do those of us born after his advent, who have the advantage of his teaching, his demonstration of the way. Still, the pattern named Incarnation *unites* BC and AD, thus, for example, Old Testament and New. The later does not represent "transcendence," either, of the former, in each case. Rather, the later entails a purifying, a refinement, of understanding, such that the former remains (Christians thus, for example, retain the Old Testament as one-half their Bible). *Four Quartets* at once makes explicit what was earlier intuited and partially understood and, at the same time, represents a purification and a refinement of that. But of course, you are able to perceive that "expansion" only from the perspective of the end reached in *Four Quartets*.

CHAPTER 3

1. T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," in *Homage to John Dryden* (London: Hogarth, 1924), 24–33.
2. Denis Donoghue, *Words Alone: The Poet T. S. Eliot* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 151.
3. T. S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928), ix.
4. T. S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), 68.
5. Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1959), 264.
6. *Ibid.*, 275.
7. Vincent Miller, "Eliot's Submission to Time," in *A Packet for Vincent Miller*, ed. Donald J. Greiner and John Lane (Spartanburg, SC: Holocene, 2002), 17.
8. Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: Norton, 1999), 87.
9. Miller, "Eliot's Submission," 19.
10. *Ibid.*
11. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922).
12. T. S. Eliot, *Ash-Wednesday* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930).
13. Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness* (New York: Knopf, 2004).
14. T. S. Eliot, preface to *Anabasis*, by St.-J. Perse, trans. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1930), 7.
15. *Ibid.*, 7–8.
16. *Ibid.*, 8.
17. *Ibid.*, 9.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, 10.
21. *Ibid.*, 11.
22. *Ibid.*, 10.
23. Eliot, *Anabasis*, 27.
24. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943).

CHAPTER 4

1. T. S. Eliot, *Journey of the Magi* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1927).
2. T. S. Eliot, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (London: Egoist, 1915).
3. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943).
4. John Dryden, *Religio Laici or A Laymans Faith*, in *Poems and Fables*, ed. James Kinsley (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), line 96.
5. *Ibid.*, line 399.

6. Dryden, *Religio Laici or A Laymans Faith*, line 410.
7. Dryden, *Religio Laici or A Laymans Faith*, lines 414–16.
8. On this point, see my book *The Faith of John Dryden: Change and Continuity* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1980).
9. John Dryden, *The Hind and the Panther*, in *Poems and Fables*, part 3, lines 1017–30.
10. T. S. Eliot, *Ash-Wednesday* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930).
11. T. S. Eliot, preface to *Anabasis*, by St.-J. Perse, trans. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1930), 8.
12. Barry Spurr, *'Anglo-Catholic in Religion': T. S. Eliot and Christianity* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2010).
13. Denis Donoghue, *Words Alone: The Poet T. S. Eliot* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).
14. Lyndall Gordon: *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: Norton, 1999); Elizabeth Drew, *T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry* (New York: Scribner's, 1949); George Williamson, *A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot* (New York: Noonday, 1953).
15. B. C. Southam, *A Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot*, 6th ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1994), 202.
16. Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1959), 194.
17. Helen Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (London: Cresset, 1949).
18. T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men," in *Poems 1909–1925* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1925).
19. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922).
20. Williamson, *Reader's Guide*, 161.
21. Eliot, preface to *Anabasis*, 8.

CHAPTER 5

1. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922); *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943).
2. B. C. Southam, *A Reader's Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot*, 6th ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1994), 145.
3. T. S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928), 24; Ezra Pound, Canto 116, *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 816–17.
4. T. S. Eliot, review of James Joyce, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," *The Dial*, n.s. (Fall 1959): 153–58. (Originally published in *The Dial*, November 1923.)
5. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Viking, 1964).
6. T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1920).

7. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson, Robert Pratt, and F. N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), general prologue, lines 1–2.
8. Eliot, *Sacred Wood*, 20.
9. T. S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930).
10. T. S. Eliot, “The Humanism of Irving Babbitt,” in *For Lancelot Andrewes*, 126–43.
11. T. S. Eliot, *Poems 1909–1925* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1925).
12. Eliot, *Four Quartets*.
13. Geoffrey Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 57.
14. *Ibid.*, 55–56.
15. T. S. Eliot, “The Humanism of Irving Babbitt,” 131, 137.
16. *Ibid.*, 134.
17. T. S. Eliot, preface, *For Lancelot Andrewes*, ix.
18. Eliot, “Irving Babbitt,” 135–36.
19. *Ibid.*, 136.
20. T. S. Eliot, “John Bramhall,” in *For Lancelot Andrewes*, 42.
21. What I have been arguing that Eliot thus says in *Four Quartets* itself rhymes with Anglo-Catholicism as Sheila Kaye-Smith describes that position that the poet called his own. She writes in *Anglo-Catholicism* (1925), a book that Barry Spurr has recently posited as important to the development of Eliot’s faith and that I came upon only after drafting this essay:

The distinguishing marks of [Anglo-]Catholicism are two. First—the subordination of the part to the whole, so that the individual cannot exist without the fellowship, and must combine his separate experience with the corporate experience of the fellowship, and consider the fellowship in all his thoughts, words, and works. Second—the use and sanctification of matter by spirit, the inward working through the outward by virtue of the Incarnation of the Son of God; in other words, the Sacramental System. All details of doctrine and practice ultimately resolve themselves under one of these two heads for their cause and justification (Sheila Kaye-Smith, *Anglo-Catholicism* [London: Chapman Hall, 1925], v–vi. See also Barry Spurr, ‘*Anglo-Catholic in Religion*’: *T. S. Eliot and Christianity* [Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2010].)

CHAPTER 6

1. T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1928).
2. T. S. Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets,” in *Homage to John Dryden* (London: Hogarth, 1923), 31.

3. T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1920), 52.
4. *Ibid.*, 48, 52.
5. *Ibid.*, 10.
6. *Ibid.*, 49.
7. *Ibid.*, 50–51.
8. T. S. Eliot, “Lancelot Andrewes,” in *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928), 31–32.
9. *Ibid.*, 29–31.
10. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (1920), 43.
11. *Ibid.*, 43–44.
12. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (1920), 44, 45.
13. *Ibid.*, 46.
14. *Ibid.*, 48.
15. *Ibid.*, 52.
16. Over time Eliot becomes clearer and clearer about the pattern structuring existence and already intuited (at least) in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” a pattern that bears directly on his understanding of and intentions for the essay as form. At the close of the third essay in *The Idea of a Christian Society*, he describes this structure, pointing to the tension that inevitably defines it. That tension is also, I add, essential to the idea of Christianity and is a distinguishing mark between it and all other forms of religion. It matters so much because it lies at the very heart of reality, the nature of which Christianity reveals paradigmatically. Harmony is the goal rather than identity, with difference, and thus tension, kept in play instead of transcendence, duality never overcome.

In *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), 16 years later, Eliot makes the same point in somewhat different terms, the issue here “the theory of religion and culture” (31). Specifically, at the end of the first essay, he writes, even more tellingly I find, clearly indicating that the pattern of which he speaks is Incarnation:

[W]e have to avoid the two alternative errors: that of regarding religion and culture as two separate things between which there is a *relation*, and that of *identifying* religion and culture. I spoke at one point of the culture of a people as an *incarnation* of its religion; and while I am aware of the temerity of employing such an exalted term, I cannot think of any other which would convey so well the intention to avoid *relation* on the one hand and *identification* on the other. (31–32)

Thus Eliot defines Incarnation (I capitalize the term, as he does in *Four Quartets*). Eliot then adds: “The truth, partial truth, or falsity of a religion neither consists in the cultural achievements of the peoples

professing that religion, nor submits to being exactly tested by them. For what a people may be said to believe, as shown by its behaviour, is, as I have said, always a great deal more and a great deal less than its professed faith in its purity" (32).

The third essay here, "Unity and Diversity: The Region," reiterates the central points, Eliot repeating "a recurrent theme of this essay, that a people should be neither too united nor too divided, if its culture is to flourish" (49). To return to the term he used in *After Strange Gods*, to be avoided is the "thorough-going." In *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, Eliot reiterates: "Excess of unity may be due to barbarism and may lead to tyranny; excess of division may be due to decadence and may also lead to tyranny: either excess will prevent further development in culture" (ibid.).

As he proceeds in this third essay, Eliot introduces "a new notion," reminiscent of Pope: "that of the vital importance for a society of *friction* between its parts" (58). He very carefully works out the meaning and significance of this new term, these paragraphs among the most important in the book.

Accustomed as we are to think in figures of speech taken from machinery, we assume that a society, like a machine, should be as well oiled as possible, provided with ball bearings of the best steel. We think of friction as waste of energy. I shall not attempt to substitute any other imagery: perhaps at this point the less we think in analogies the better . . . I now suggest that both class and region, by dividing the inhabitants of a country into two different kinds of groups, lead to a conflict favourable to creativeness and progress. And . . . these are only two of an indefinite number of conflicts and jealousies which should be profitable to society. Indeed, the more the better: so that everyone should be an ally of everyone else in some respects, and an opponent in several others, and no one conflict, envy or fear will dominate. (58–59)

Eliot here recalls Pope but also echoes René Girard, whose notions of "sacred difference" derive in part from Ulysses's famous speech on order and the necessity of distinction in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*.

At this point Eliot turns to the individual and contends that the same pattern of tension, or friction, is healthy and productive, and once again he speaks, albeit indirectly, against any transcendence of one position so as to achieve some putative purity.

As individuals, we find that our development depends upon the people whom we meet in the course of our lives. (These people include the authors whose books we read and characters in works of fiction and history.) The benefit of these meetings is due as much to the differences as to the resemblances; to the conflict, as

well as the sympathy, between persons. Fortunate the man who, at the right moment, meets the right friend; fortunate also the man who at the right moment meets the right enemy. I do not approve the extermination of the enemy: the policy of exterminating or, as is barbarously said, liquidating enemies, is one of the most alarming developments of modern war and peace, from the point of view of those who desire the survival of culture. One needs the enemy. So, within limits, the friction, not only between individuals but between groups, seems to me quite necessary for civilisation. The universality of irritation is the best assurance of peace. A country within which the divisions have gone too far is a danger to itself: a country which is too well united—whether by nature or by device, by honest purpose or by fraud and oppression—is a menace to others. (59)

Brief reflection follows on the troubles accruing to Germany and Italy as a result of their lack of this balance.

In the following essay in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, titled “Unity and Diversity: Sect and Cult,” Eliot acknowledges that he may appear to be contradicting himself: “The reader may have difficulty in reconciling [just preceding assertions] with the point of view set forth in my first chapter, according to which there is always, even in the most conscious and highly developed societies that we know, an aspect of identity between the religion and the culture” (68). He then elaborates, openly embracing both, and proceeding to the clearest account I believe he ever gave of the character and implications of this prized *tension*, which includes a pointed rejection of “mere” or pure transcendence. I quote the rest of this crucial and fundamental paragraph that grows in importance as Eliot proceeds to think down the page.

I wish to maintain *both* these points of view. We do not leave the earlier stage of development behind us: it is that upon which we build [as with the individual and tradition, or, in Swift’s terms, Moderns and Ancients]. The identity of religion and culture remains on the unconscious level, upon which we have superimposed a conscious structure wherein religion and culture are contrasted and can be opposed. The *meaning* of the terms “religion” and “culture” is of course altered between these two levels. To the unconscious level we constantly tend to revert, as we find consciousness an excessive burden; and the tendency towards reversion may explain the powerful attraction which totalitarian philosophy and practice can exert upon humanity. Totalitarianism appeals to the desire to return to the womb. The contrast between religion and culture imposes a strain: we escape from this strain by attempting to revert to an identity of religion and culture which prevailed at a more primitive

stage; as when we indulge in alcohol as an anodyne, we consciously seek unconsciousness. It is only by unremitting effort that we can persist in being individuals in a society, instead of merely members of a disciplined crowd. Yet we remain members of the crowd even when we succeed in being individuals. Hence, for the purposes of this essay, I am obliged to maintain two contradictory propositions: that religion and culture are aspects of one unity and that they are two different and contrasted things. (68–69)

Here, of course, the essayist has moved close to philosophy as he incarnates Incarnational thinking.

17. As should be clear in time, I object to the term “essayistic spirit,” for the essay precisely roots us in the literal, fleshy world, sometimes, to be sure, proceeding through that to spirit; my objection is to the notion of disembodied spirit. See Claire di Obaldia, *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996). See also Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (London: Routledge, 1988).
18. Eliot, *Sacred Wood* (1920), 10.
19. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
20. *Ibid.*, 1, 13–14.
21. *Ibid.*, 11.
22. *Ibid.*, 24–25.
23. *Ibid.*, 27–28.
24. *Ibid.*, xi–xii.
25. *Ibid.*, xii.
26. Eliot, *Homage to John Dryden*, 31.
27. Eliot, *Sacred Wood* (1920), 59.
28. *Ibid.*, 58–59.
29. *Ibid.*, 59.
30. *Ibid.*, 60.
31. *Ibid.*, 61–62.
32. *Ibid.*, 90.
33. *Ibid.*, 92.
34. *Ibid.*, 92–93.
35. Samuel Alexandr Schneider, “The Objective Correlative” (working paper submitted to author, University of Kansas, spring 2005).
36. Eliot, *Homage to John Dryden*, 27.
37. *Ibid.*, 30.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*, 31.
40. *Ibid.*, 33.
41. *Ibid.*, 134.
42. *Ibid.*, 135.
43. *Ibid.*, 137.
44. *Ibid.*

45. Ibid., 141, 142.
46. Ibid., 143.
47. Ibid., 145.
48. Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Man," in *Poetry and Prose of Alexander Pope*, ed. Aubrey Williams. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), line 121.
49. Eliot, *Sacred Wood* (1920), 146.
50. Ibid., 147.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., 148.
53. Ibid., 149.
54. Ibid., 151–52.
55. Ibid., 152.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., 153.
58. Ibid., 153–54.
59. Ibid., 154.
60. Ibid., 147.
61. Ibid., 153.
62. Ibid., 154.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid., 154–55.
65. Ibid., 155.

CHAPTER 7

1. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943).
2. R. M. Benson, *Followers of the Lamb* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1905), 10–11; qtd. in A. M. Allchin, *Trinity and Incarnation in Anglican Tradition* (Oxford: SLG, 1977), 11.
3. Qtd. in Allchin, *Trinity*, 6.
4. Ibid., 6.
5. Ibid., 7, from *The Oxford Movement*, ed. E. R. Fairweather (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).
6. Qtd. in Allchin, *Trinity*, 9.
7. Ibid., 11.
8. Ibid., 12.
9. Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1959), 125.
10. T. S. Eliot, "Gerontion," *Ara Vos Prec* (London: Ovid, 1920).
11. Elizabeth Drew, *T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry* (New York: Scribner's, 1949), 52.
12. Kenner, *Invisible Poet*, 128.
13. T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," in *Homage to John Dryden* (London: Hogarth, 1924), 31.

14. Ibid., 30.
15. Albert Gelpi, *A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetic Renaissance, 1910–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Eric Whitman Sigg, *The American T. S. Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); James Longenbach, *Modernist Poetics of History: Pound, Eliot, and the Sense of the Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Alfred Kazin, *An American Procession: Major American Writers, 1830–1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age* (New York: Random House, 1971); Peter Sharpe, *The Ground of Our Beseeching: Metaphor and the Poetics of Meditation* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2005); Nasreen Ayaz, *Anti-T. S. Eliot Stance in Recent Criticism* (New Delhi: Sarup, 2004); Marion Montgomery, *T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the American Magus* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1970).
16. B. C. Southam, *A Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot*, 6th ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1994), 70.
17. Qtd. in George Williamson, *A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot* (New York: Noonday, 1953), 108.
18. Drew, *T. S. Eliot*, 52.
19. Ibid., 52–53.
20. Ibid., 54.
21. See, for example, John Keats, *Endymion*, in *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. Douglas Bush (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), line 1; *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, in *ibid.*, part 1: lines 189–90, 201–2; and Keats, *Letters 1814–1821*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 2:837.
22. John Dryden, *Religio Laici*, in *Poems and Fables*, ed. James Kinsley (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), line 399.
23. T. S. Eliot, “The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” in *Prufrock and Other Observations* (London: Egoist, 1915).
24. T. S. Eliot, *Ash-Wednesday* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930).
25. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1964). See also my *Literary Paths to Religious Understanding* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 79–107.
26. Southam, *Guide*, 53. See also the poem’s epigraph from the *Inferno* 27: 61–66.

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