

‘A RAID ON THE INARTICULATE’

T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* and the Christian Journey

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I HAVE LOVED Eliot’s *Four Quartets* for fifty years. Often I have felt lost in a fog of incomprehension, able to respond to the nuggets of beauty and truth contained in the poems, but bemused by the totality. I feel better about my own rather unsuccessful ‘raid on the inarticulate’ though, because that is exactly how Eliot describes his own feeling of failure, as a poet, to articulate the nature of reality and the meaning of his life in this, his greatest work.¹

I am taking a theological approach to *Four Quartets*, because theology is at the heart of what concerns Eliot. But I am acutely aware that these are *poems*—rich and beautiful poems—not a dry theological tract. They are outpourings that speak to all those who have ever looked for meaning, perhaps glimpsed it for a moment, or maybe sadly realised that they had been looking for the wrong things in the wrong place: that maybe they had ‘Had the experience, but missed the meaning’ (*Dry Salvages*, 186).

In *Four Quartets* Eliot unmakes himself—and remakes himself. He expresses the ache of dryness and emptiness, and then dramatizes for us first the terror and then the acceptance of falling into the arms of the living God: ‘I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God ...’ (*East Coker*, 180). Eliot is alienated not just from the world, but also from himself. In going with him on his spiritual journey in *Four Quartets*, we experience the full flowering of his poetic styles, his capacity for passion as well as his intellectual resources in realising his theme. Eliot is true to the principle that great poetry must

¹ *East Coker*, in T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber, 1969), 182. All quotations from *Four Quartets* are taken from this edition, hereafter cited in the text.

enact the experience it describes. In these poems his 'recreation of thought into feeling' is achieved with blistering power.²

He brings to bear his vast creative gifts and his profound knowledge of the poetic tradition of which he is a part to approach his themes from a variety of perspectives, both stylistically and intellectually. He hopes that he can articulate precisely what he means, but always seems to fall back defeated, like Sisyphus eternally striving to roll the rock:

That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:
A periphrastic study in a worn out poetical fashion,
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
With words and meanings ...
(*East Coker*, 179)

But *Four Quartets* is not ultimately a set of poems about failure. It is a spiritual journey that may begin as 'a raid on the inarticulate', but ends by arriving where we started, and knowing the place for the first time (*Little Gidding*, 197). And Eliot achieves this by paring away, with words of absolute precision, meaning after meaning and complexity after complexity, the misguided assumptions we have about life—until we reach what he calls, 'A condition of complete simplicity, / Costing not less than everything' (*Little Gidding*, 197).

His is a journey not unlike the one Shakespeare seems to me to have made between the spiritual wasteland of *King Lear* and the relinquishment of personal power by Prospero in *The Tempest*, as he determines to 'drown my book'.³ And for much of the time it is a journey of desperation and little hope, conducted with the same kind of rigour and desperate self-awareness that we find in Paul's letter to the Romans: 'Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?' (Romans 7:24)

Eliot is experiencing the so-called 'dark night of the soul', described in the book of that name by the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic St John of the Cross. And we too experience this feeling—which is in fact a spiritual discipline—throughout the poems. This discipline is known as the *via negativa*, 'the way of negation', which strives for knowledge of God by renouncing the very possibility of knowledge, and which aims to

² T. S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, edited by Frank Kermode (San Diego: Harcourt, 1975), 59–67, here 64.

³ *The Tempest*, V. i. 57.

understand the fullness of God by the experience of personal emptiness in the face of divine absence.

St John writes:

From now on human thinking has no part to play ... in this purification of the desires ... God brings them into this night to humble them and to change their desires⁴

The seeds of the main themes of *Four Quartets*, this dryness and this desolation, are seen increasingly throughout Eliot's earlier poetic output, as we sense the focus of his concerns changing.

In 'The Hippopotamus', with its youthful, easy mockery of organized religion: 'The church can sleep and feed at once'.⁵ In 'Whispers of Immortality', expressing Eliot's revulsion against unbridled sensuality and his equal suspicion of asceticism: 'But our lot crawls between dry ribs / To keep our metaphysics warm'.⁶ We sense the same revulsion in the horror with which he approaches modernity and its spiritual ugliness, expressed so bleakly throughout *The Waste Land*. And the seeds are also there in *The Hollow Men*, with its strained attempt at stoicism: 'This is the way the world ends, / Not with a bang but a whimper'.⁷

By the time we get to *Ash Wednesday*, the struggle to find meaning and purpose has begun in earnest. No longer does Eliot hide behind mockery, intellectual superciliousness or irony. He confronts time and mutability, plunging into the Bible in an anguished search for truth:

Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still ...
Our peace in His will
And even among these rocks ...
Suffer me not to be separated
And let my cry come to Thee.⁸

The scene is now set for the great task of *Four Quartets*.

⁴ St John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, edited and translated by Halcyon Backhouse (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), 1.9.8–9.

⁵ Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 49.

⁶ Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 53.

⁷ Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 86.

⁸ Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 98–99.

Each of the four poems has its particular atmosphere and its own poetic style. Though they are considered together, each has a complete unity of theme and intention. *Burnt Norton* is the most accessible of the four in some ways, and it introduces all the themes that are brought to fruition in the remaining three poems. It shows us a world where we are imprisoned in time, a world that, apart from occasional intense experiences, is without meaning or obvious purpose.

East Coker begins with a magnificent attempt to impose a meaning on life by rooting ourselves in a shared history, so that we can take part in at least some form of common meaning and purpose. But then it swerves into something quite different, becoming the most threatening and austere of all the four poems. Here the 'dark night of the soul' is described in all its bleakness and desperation. And the inability of human thought to encompass reality is finally accepted. We shall look later at the passages in this poem which seem to me to be the tipping point and fulcrum of meaning of the entire *Four Quartets*.

The Dry Salvages looks at the unknowable and awe-inspiring nature of God. It is perhaps the most impassively reflective of all the four poems, giving the impression of 'calm of mind, all passion spent'.⁹ This poem



Burnt Norton house

⁹ John Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, in *The Complete Works of John Milton*, volume 2, *The 1671 Poems* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 119.

offers us a measured understanding of all that has gone before and of what is to come, before Eliot gathers all his forces to bring his spiritual journey to a conclusion in *Little Gidding*.

And in the course of *Little Gidding* the epiphany arrives: the revelation of the ultimate hidden significance of the spiritual life, and of the process by which all human striving must dissolve into humility and acceptance. I shall take the four poems in order, acknowledging that it would need a much longer article than this to do justice to even one of them. An overview is all I can hope to offer.

Burnt Norton

In this poem we are made to feel imprisoned in time, and Eliot acts as the anguished observer, who is also the prisoner. He asks what time is:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
(*Burnt Norton*, 171)

The images that follow, of a bird and of voices in a garden, both symbolize those few peak moments, those epiphanies, when we seem able to break free of time, when everything seems to connect and to have some faintly comprehended meaning. But these moments of ‘seeing beyond’ are taken from us in an instant, and we are left once again caught up in worldly time and human consciousness that ebbs and flows around us, unpredictable and uncontrollable.

Eliot makes increasingly desperate, but increasingly halting, attempts to define what the underling reality of time might be:

Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.
Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present

Yet the enchantment of past and future
Woven in the weakness of the changing body,
Protects mankind from heaven and damnation
Which flesh cannot endure.
(*Burnt Norton*, 172–173)

Time keeps us hanging, in suspense. We feel stifled by it, but without it we would die from over-exposure to reality. So:

Caught in the form of limitation
 Between un-being and being.
 Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
 Even while the dust moves
 There rises the hidden laughter
 Of children in the foliage.
 Quick now, here, now always—
 Ridiculous the waste sad time
 Stretching before and after.
 (*Burnt Norton*, 175–176)

Burnt Norton is soaked in *Weltschmerz*, ‘the pain of being in the world’. And *East Coker* intensifies the struggle, as Eliot moves from observer to interpreter, and looks for meaning in the nature of history and of human life, as they are observed objectively over time. But, constantly, the anguish of desire in the face of meaninglessness keeps coming back to overwhelm him.

East Coker

Of all the *Four Quartets*, *East Coker* covers the most ground and demands the most of the reader. But for me it contains within it the key to the whole series, as will become clear.

Human life does have meaning and consistency, says Eliot. It is not merely a series of meaningless moments, interspersed with those rare times when the curtain is withdrawn and just for a flash we can ‘grasp the heel of Heaven’, as mystics say. It is more than just moments of significance interspersed with eons of desert and despair.

But the meaning we find in our lives is bounded and limited by another kind of imprisonment: that of our personal place in history. It is provisional, not absolute; temporary, not eternal. Admittedly, history can provide a feeling of kinship, an illusion of permanence. But all it can ultimately promise is meanings that, despite being experienced communally, die when we die.

Does such a small consolation have to be enough for us? It feels for a moment as though Eliot is inching towards stoicism. He asks how best to express what he means. His point of reference this time is not, as in *Burnt Norton*, ‘the deception of the thrush’ and ‘the hidden laughter /



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The church at East Coker

Of children in the foliage’, but the progress of history, and human life rooted in earth. He indulges in a pastiche of medieval poetry, imagining the continuity of human life in terms of a rustic marriage dance, enfolded in the eternal cosmic dance of life and death:

Round and round the fire
Leaping through the flames, or joined in circles,
Rustically solemn or in rustic laughter ...
As in their living in the living seasons
The time of the seasons and the constellations
The time of milking and the time of harvest
The time of the coupling of man and woman
And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.
Eating and drinking. Dung and death.
(*East Coker*, 177–178)

Some kind of fulfilment is available. But because of its provisional character, history also tricks us with its deceptions and betrayals. The permanence offered by the collective unconscious within human society still cannot redeem us from the extinction of individual life and of the sense of self. No personal absolutes are possible:

Had they deceived us,
 Or deceived themselves, the quiet-voiced elders,
 Bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit?
 (*East Coker*, 179)

In a sudden mood-swing from this state of stoic reflection, Eliot utters a howl of despair, as he finds his resistance, his urge to intellectualise his way out of situations, giving way to a sense of overwhelming weariness. And, like so many who feel a calling, a desperate cry of resistance is wrenched out of him. As if to protest: is this what you want from me, Lord? Surely not me! Do I have to? Now Eliot admits in despondency, and then in anguish:

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
 Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.
 The houses are all gone under the sea.
 The dancers are all gone under the hill.
 ...
 And we all go with them, into the silent funeral,
 Nobody's funeral, for there is no one to bury.
 (*East Coker*, 179–180)

This is the tipping point, the moment of crisis within *Four Quartets*. The poet starts to move slowly from despair to renewal. In the face of this bleak prospect, can Eliot accept the offer of trust in God? To believe that Christ's incarnation brought salvation? Can he even know what that means? Or would this knowledge be the 'too much reality' that human beings cannot bear?

The dripping blood our only drink,
 The bloody flesh our only food:
 In spite of which we like to think
 That we are sound, substantial flesh and blood—
 Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good.
 (*East Coker*, 182)

Eliot now revisits the theology of the dark night of the soul—but this time he is able to find comfort and acceptance there, instead of just horror. He is beginning to understand the idea of God's darkness that can lead him to a new and greater light, beyond all human understanding:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
 For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
 For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
 But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
 Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
 So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.
 (*East Coker*, 180)

'The laughter in the garden' that haunted Eliot with such a sense of loss in 'Burnt Norton' is now a sign of 'echoed ecstasy, not lost, but requiring'. The fact that it cannot be understood by analysis is the very root of its power. It is a part of what the anonymous fourteenth-century mystic (with whose writing Eliot was familiar) referred to as 'the Cloud of Unknowing'. 'Unknowing' becomes the sign of true knowing. We get the flavour of that thinking, and its influence on Eliot, from the words of this medieval spiritual writer:

Let that meek darkness be your whole mind and like a mirror to you.
 For I want your thought of self to be as naked and simple as your
 thought of God, so that you may be with God in spirit without
 fragmentation and scattering of your mind.¹⁰

Compare this with Eliot's articulation of the same thought—it is almost a paraphrase:

In order to arrive at what you are not
 You must go through the way in which you are not.
 And what you do not know is the only thing you know
 And what you own is what you do not own
 And where you are is where you are not.
 (*East Coker*, 181)

In daring to make this leap of faith we are not just casting our lives adrift, we are paradoxically affirming its absolute meaning, because: 'Love is most nearly itself / When here and now cease to matter' (*East Coker*, 182). Now, finally, Eliot can articulate at least a hint of what the longed-for immortality might be:

¹⁰ 'Epistle of Privy Counsel', quoted in Evelyn Underhill, 'Introduction' to *A Book of Contemplation the Which Is Called the Cloud of Unknowing, in the Which a Soul Is Oned with God* (London: John M. Watkins, 1912), 28.



The Dry Salvages

Those rare moments of insight that in *Burnt Norton* Eliot experienced as always being snatched away from us are now accepted as the most we can expect or deserve, a hint of that ‘eternal moment’ which happens only with the fusion of created and Creator in the mystery of incarnation:

Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.
(*Dry Salvages*, 190)

These hints can never become completely clear in this world. We do not wholly understand, we can never wholly understand. And it does not matter:

For most of us, this is the aim
Never here to be realised;
Who are only undefeated
Because we have gone on trying.
(*Dry Salvages*, 190)

Now finally, in *Little Gidding*, we are offered a hint of God’s total, ineffable presence—that may some day be ours to know and dwell in.



Sunrise, Little Gidding

Little Gidding

Little Gidding is an immense drawing together of all the themes of the previous poems. First, Eliot gives us a conscious echo of the opening of *Burnt Norton*, with its evocation of the paradoxes of nature: 'This is the spring time / But not in time's covenant' (*Little Gidding*, 191). But everything has changed. A huge shift of perception has taken place. For Eliot all things are now sacred. The ache of loss, the incomprehension, the meaninglessness are no more. Instead of those things, there is the abandonment of self to something greater than self:

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

You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid
The communion of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the
language of the living.
(*Little Gidding*, 192)

To comprehend all this, Eliot must revisit, yet again, the pain of the dark night of the soul and fight to come to terms with it. For its potential agony is always lurking close to us, able to reappear. And Eliot does come to terms with it, in a passage that bursts out in lyricism, like a still-painful triumph, as he describes the deaths that the soul must undergo—the deaths of air, earth, water and fire—before it can come out of the darkness and into the light.

What then follows is the enactment of a symbolic death—'The death of hope and despair'—and the funeral of his old self, his ghostly double, so that he can be reborn in spirit:

In the uncertain hour before the morning
Near the ending of interminable night ...
I met one walking, loitering and hurried
As if blown towards me ...
I caught the sudden look of some dead master
Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled ...
The eyes of a familiar compound ghost
Both intimate and unidentifiable ...
I was still the same,
Knowing myself yet being someone other.
(*Little Gidding*, 193)

Eliot is warned by his alter ego of the roots of bitterness that are reserved for old age: 'Unless restored by that refining fire / Where you must move in measure, like a dancer' (*Little Gidding*, 195).

So Eliot lets go of all that perpetuated his pain and emptiness. The new form of emptiness that he must embrace is one that makes room for God to work in him. He must renounce:

The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
By the purification of the motive
In the ground of our beseeching.
(*Little Gidding*, 195–196)

But what is to replace human thought and striving, and the familiar incomprehension and heartbreaks of ordinary life? How are we to be remade? Transformation can only happen through the purgative, cauterizing power of the Holy Spirit: 'The dove descending breaks the air / With

flame of incandescent terror' (*Little Gidding*, 196) And thereby we are made new: 'With the drawing of this love, and the voice of this Calling' (*Little Gidding*, 197).

And so finally, joyfully, Eliot comes home to his true self.

During the majestically controlled twists and turns, the pains and the epiphanies of these astonishing poetic testaments we, both writer and reader, have undergone renewal. We have been baptized into the blessings of a new self-knowledge and a newfound capacity to know God. We have been shown what was always there waiting for us, if only we had known how and where to look for it:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
(*Little Gidding*, 197)

Now we *have* arrived where we started, able to see reality with new eyes. Now we finally know that human life and faith can only ultimately be: 'A condition of complete simplicity / (Costing not less than everything)' (*Little Gidding*, 198). *Four Quartets* is a work of profound Christian witness, embodied in a dazzling poetic achievement. It can be a life's work just to scratch the surface of its meanings.

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