T. S. ELIOT AND THE *FOUR QUARTETS*

The Still Point, Aging, and the Social Bond

*After the kingfisher's wing*

*Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still*

*At the still point of the turning world.—“Burnt Norton”*

Eliot would certainly have objected to the often-voiced view that in the still point of the *Four Quartets*, he had created a symbol, as though he had fashioned a planet and hurled it into the heavens. As we well know, Eliot wanted not to create but to discover. He was no system-builder in the manner of Yeats and Blake. “Man is man,” he wrote in his 1928 essay entitled “Second Thoughts about Humanism,” “because he can recognize supernatural realities, not because he can invent them.” Moreover, if we understand, as we should, that a symbol has an experiential dimension, that it is a magical object that works a transformation of the self, then we should not confer upon the still point the status of a symbol for Eliot. As Roszak explains: “True symbols transcend intellectual deciphering, calling forth another level of consciousness which eludes words. They are, as it were, doors leading into dark chambers of reality, like the entranceways of the old mystery cults. We must take our whole life in with us and be prepared to be totally transformed.”

In Pound's *Pisan Cantos* we find this experiential dimension on all levels; in the *Four Quartets* we do not. In the still point Eliot has neither created a symbol for himself nor has he discovered a true magical object. But the irony is that he has *invented a term* which has life, which spoke to his generation and continues to speak to ours. The irony is that Stevens' notes never built a supreme fiction, but Eliot’s still point functions as one.

The still point, then, is not a symbol but more like a definition. As Eliot wrote in his confident and clear-minded 1916 Harvard doctoral dissertation, which was published under the title *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*: “That at which we aim
is the real as such; and the real as such is not an object. When we define an experience, we substitute the definition for the experience, and then experience the definition; though the original experience may have been itself a definition: but the experiencing is quite another thing from the defining."³

The still point is a hybrid, let us call it a construction, part image and part concept,⁴ the locus perhaps of the two in a modern world where geometry is skewed and parallel planes intersect. It is a fitting, in fact a brilliant, solution for a poet who owed much, perhaps against his will, to the symbolist aesthetic, and who believed, against the main current of twentieth-century Western thought, in the Christian world view.

I. VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS AND LITERARY EXPERIENCE

Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something
Upon which to rejoice
"Ash Wednesday"⁵

To begin, we must distinguish between the still point and a still point, or more accurately, "the unattended moment." First, the still point is a model, an ideal construct, a point that does not and cannot exist within the normal human domain but instead represents a goal which man strives to both comprehend and attain. The still point, in other words, has a clear Christian referent. Unlike Blake, Eliot did not have to create philosophy as well as poetry. He believed in a traditional and coherent system of belief, or at least he believed it was necessary to believe. As he says somewhat pragmatically in his essay on Dante, the advantage to the poet (and to the reader) of having such a system at his disposal is that "it stands apart, for understanding and assent even without belief, from the single individual who propounds it."⁶ The still point belongs to such an encircling system of distinctly defined correspondences. It refers to both a state of mind, which is perfect Christian peace, and to the principle of Incarnation. It is miraculous and does not admit either skepticism or doubt:

The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.
Here the impossible union
Of spheres of existence is actual,
Here the past and future
Are conquered, and reconciled....

"The Dry Salvages"

As such, the still point is *posited* by Eliot as poet but not *experienced* by Eliot as a character in the *Four Quartets*.

For Eliot, man's common, conscious state of mind is suffering and torment, and even to apprehend the Incarnation, to lay hold of its meaning as both event and principle, is a possibility only for saints:

But to apprehend
  The point of intersection of the timeless
  With time, is an occupation for the saint—
  No occupation either, but something given
  And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,
  Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender....

"The Dry Salvages"

The degree of reality of an object for a particular person, Eliot believed, varies in direct proportion with "the experiences which cluster around it: an object is real, we may say in proportion to its relations outside of its objectivity." Eliot thus understands knowledge to be a relation between knower and known. And although he is speaking here in terms of the realm of concrete objects, we can apply his observations to the realm of concepts as well. Just as Eliot would never deny that the "unreal" object qua object exists, we would not deny the existence of the still point as concept. Likewise, we would say that its intensity, its reality, depends upon the experiences of its thinker in conjunction with it. But the experience of a concept or a definition must not be confused with the experience of a sunset, a sculpture, or a meeting with an old friend. The former exists primarily in the realm of the abstract, the latter in the realm of the concrete (which is, of course, mediated by mind).

The still point does refer to the Christian system of belief, and few would deny that, but it does not belong exclusively to this system. Mallarmé, as Hugh Kenner has pointed out, stands within the *Four*
Quartets just as Dante stands behind them, or above them. We see this in the celebrated still point passage in section II of "Burnt Norton," which I quote in the Introduction, and also in the following passage from section V:

Words move, music moves  
Only in time; but that which is only living  
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach  
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness.  
Nor the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,  
Not that only, but the co-existence,  
Or say that the end precedes the beginning  
And that the end and the beginning were always there  
Before the beginning and after the end.

At work here is the symbolist aesthetic, understood primarily not as a doctrine of correspondences but as a theory of linguistic construction whose elements refer to nothing but themselves and the system that they create. It is the pattern of the words that reaches into the stillness, not man.

Mallarmé, we remember, believed, as he said in his 1894 lecture "Music and Literature," that "Literature does exist and, I may add, exists alone and all-exclusively." Mallarmé believed that all literature aspires toward the condition of music, which alone possesses purity of structure and form. We read in the Four Quartets—and Mallarmé would surely have agreed—that

Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still.

"Burnt Norton"

Mallarmé's method was to still the voice of the poet and allow the words themselves, as he put it, to take the initiative. His method was to pass from the concrete to the pure "Idea," to conceive of an object in
its absence, in its silence, to divorce it from "the direct and the palpable," to allude and suggest, to, as Charles Mauron has phrased it, evaporate reality into a musically fluid dream. In his famous essay "Crisis in Poetry," Mallarmé describes the ineffable, the mystery, which is released by poetry:

When I say: "a flower!" then from that forgetfulness to which my voice consigns all floral form, something different from the usual calyces arises, something all music, essence, and softness: the flower which is absent from all bouquets.

Out of a number of words, poetry fashions a single new word which is total in itself and foreign to the language—a kind of incantation. Thus the desired isolation of language is effected; and chance (which might have governed these elements, despite their artful and alternating renewal through meaning and sound) is thereby instantly and thoroughly abolished.

In the still point passages from "Burnt Norton" we see a similar strategy at work. Although Eliot is not concerned to evoke an object, he is concerned to invoke a concept. He does so by beginning with abstraction, the name, "the still point." Then he evokes its quality through incantation and imagery, and finally he allows the concrete image to dissolve, leaving only the pattern and the Word. Eliot achieves what Mallarmé desired: "a single new word which is total in itself and foreign to the language—a kind of incantation." And in this sense the still point has no referent, it is the thing itself.

The still point thus reconciles opposites in two different ways—through the word itself, the system of language and art, and through the Christian religion, a system of articulated correspondences. The still point, in other words, has more than one vanishing point. It disappears into the poem, it disappears beyond the poem. Like an Escher engraving where the perspective of the picture plane is skewed and stairs lead in irreconcilable directions, the still point wavers between image and concept, taking on different meanings at different points in the poem. It is a supreme balancing act, an occupation only for great poets.

If the still point, in either of these two cases, is not a symbol which is "lived into," what is possible in Eliot’s world? In "The Dry Salvages" we read that
For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts.

Many of these moments "in and out of time" are recorded in the Four
Quartets. Above all, we should not understand them as miniature
versions or miniature visions of the still point. The two orders are
similar but not the same. What separates them surgically is this: the
still point is not to be experienced in the commonsense notion of the
term (either it is to be strived for, but never reached, or it is to be
suggested by, embodied in, art), while the unattended moments exist,
or can exist, in an experiential dimension.

In his essay on Pascal, Eliot speaks of illumination, observing that
"what can only be called mystical experience happens to many men
who do not become mystics," noting that "you may call it communion
with the Divine, or you may call it a temporary crystallization of the
mind." It is the latter formulation that most clearly conveys the status
of unattended moments: they fall basically into the realm of cognition
rather than that of divine communion. And here we are reminded of F.
H. Bradley's epistemology, to which Eliot owed so much.

Bradley, we remember, denied that there is any actual dichotomy
between the observer and the observed, desire and the desired. In his
dissertation on Bradley, Eliot explains Bradley's notion of "immediate
experience." "In feeling the subject and object are one," and

immediate experience, we have seen, is a timeless unity which is not as
such present either anywhere or to anyone. It is only in the world of
objects that we have time and space and selves. But the failure of any
experience to be merely immediate, by its lack of harmony and cohe-
sion, we find ourselves as conscious souls in a world of objects.

Immediate experience is thus characterized by wholeness, by the union
of the self with the other. But Eliot does not by any means discount the
role that (self-) consciousness plays. In fact, he argues that conscious-
ness is the necessary agent in the second step that we take in arriving at knowledge. As he explains, "We perceive an object, we will say [immediate experience], and then perceive it in a special relation to our body [the body defined as both physical and mental self, the conscious self being a construction]." Bradley put it this way, and Eliot quotes him: "There is an immediate feeling, a knowing and being in one, with which knowledge begins." Knowledge begins. Immediate experience, or feeling, is wider than consciousness, for the conscious subject necessarily falls partly outside the whole of any feeling. As Eliot concludes: "We must therefore expect to find consciousness to be both something immediately given and something which would not be in the immediate experience unless it also extended beyond it. Consciousness is not an entity, but an aspect, and an inconsistent aspect of reality." And since knowledge is a function of consciousness, it also lies both inside and outside of immediate experience. Moreover, since consciousness is an aspect of reality that Eliot believes does develop, we are free to assume that knowledge too can grow and develop. In referring to the development of consciousness, Eliot makes an interesting observation about the growth of the arts and the aesthetic self: "It is perhaps epistemology (although I offer this only as a suggestion, and to make clearer the sort of thing that I mean) that has given us the fine arts; for what was at first expression and behaviour may have developed under the complications of self-consciousness, as we become aware of ourselves as reacting aesthetically to the object." All of this has special relevance to the unattended moment.

Wallace Stevens knew, as he wrote in the title poem of *The Rock,* that "It is an illusion that we were ever alive." Eliot too believes in the essential discontinuity of experience. On the one hand, he suggests that knowledge is cumulative; on the other hand, in "East Coker," he questions its value, since every appraisal of the past yields a different pattern:

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

For "consciousness and its object," as he puts it, "are both only evanescent aspects in reality." 22

This evanescence of immediate experience, this essential discontinuity, is just what we encounter in the Four Quartets. As a group, the unattended moments are distinguished by a marvelous eclectic mysticism, or we could say, a mystical eclecticism. Together they pinpoint several peaks in Western literary history: the metaphysical poets, the Hesiodic tradition, naturalism, and English landscape romanticism.

In the rose-garden of "Burnt Norton," for example, Eliot gives us the imaginary recollected, not through emotion or tranquility, but through intellection. The way into the garden, into fantasy, is through ratiocination:

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.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.

We think of the English metaphysical poets, for Eliot’s praise of their ability to associate thought and feeling is renowned. But here we find a peculiar version. Here thought does not so much blend with feeling, as logic yields to feeling, reverie, image, immediate experience. And in the rose-garden passage we see that for this imaginary, displaced ex-
perience to be complete, in order to invent history and the impossible future, immediate experience must self-consciously be made conscious. It must be remembered:

Time past and time future
Allow but a little consciousness.
To be conscious is not to be in time
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
Be remembered; involved with past and future.
Only through time time is conquered.

Here "consciousness" must be understood as "immediate experience," as an intense sense of reality, as continuous, as out of time and history, unanalyzable into parts.

But this experience dissolves:

So we moved, and they, in a formal pattern,
Along the empty alley, into the box circle,
To look down into the drained pool.
Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light,
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.

To preserve immediate experience, the self-conscious subject must construct it as an experience, must react aesthetically to the experience as one would to an object.

The method is presented abstractly, as we would expect from Eliot, but the image is a thing of magic. In this passage we see Eliot's genius more clearly, in fact, if we compare his capturing of imaginary experience with Williams' deliberate construction of an imaginary object, the unicorn at the center of a virgin-and-whore scenario in the fifth book of *Paterson*. Williams tries to trap the unicorn in the concrete of tapestry, keeping the icon separate from him. By contrast Eliot's rose-garden is psychological, unstable, flickering, like the flux of Wallace Stevens' world.
In "Burnt Norton" we are presented with the reality of the imaginary which was never actual. In "East Coker" we encounter an historical vision of mythical cast. The sixteenth century surfaces in the twentieth, although how or why we cannot guess. The prerequisite for this privilege, however, and it is twice-repeated, is a peculiar one for Eliot: one must not disturb the past, one must not modify it, one must not come too close:

In that open field
If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close,
On a Summer midnight, you can hear the music
Of the weak pipe and the little drum
And see them dancing around the bonfire
The association of man and woman
In daunsing, signifying matrimonie—
A dignified and commodious sacrament.

This moment is not so much a part of the historical record (and thus, given Eliot's understanding of how the present and past modify one another in endless reverberation, subject to change) as it is outside of history, existing as a utopian hesiodic moment, which can be eternally recovered by the literary imagination but cannot be entered. The time traveler is not free to join the dance. He can only observe. An invisible wall separates the literary anthropologist from this agricultural community. And this invisible wall, we might guess, is consciousness of the second degree.

But the Brueghel-like dance, a timeless round from the annals of primitivism, vanishes, to be replaced in "The Dry Salvages" by a new system of belief. Here we meet turn-of-the-century naturalism, the eternal gods of the sea and river calling up a timeless zone:

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

And later in this Quartet, in the last section of "The Dry Salvages," Eliot casts a glance at nineteenth-century English landscape romanticism, at the unexpected moment of "immediate experience" sparked by "a shaft of sunlight / The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning."

All of these moments, from the rose-garden to the wild thyme, provide, are, "crystallizations of the mind," moments of cognition, of wholeness. And so too is the moment of religious pilgrimage in "Little Gidding":

Here, the intersection of the timeless moment

Such moments populate the Four Quartets. They constitute a kind of catalogue of possible mystical experience. The Four Quartets do not form, in other words, a unified system that is suspended from a Christian or Buddhist point of view in the way that a Calder mobile hangs from a wire string. Rather, Eliot's genius is that he offers us so many different notions and nuances of language and holds them together suspended, as particles are, in solution.

But his medium is a particular one: it is literary. Eliot believes that the purpose of criticism is to establish a tradition, to forge continuity with the literary past, and it is in this way that the unattended moments function in the poem. They convince us that the poem is not solely a Christian poem with Eliot sloughing his way on to reconciliation of fire and roses as doggedly as Bunyan's famous pilgrim made his progress toward heaven. And they succeed as magic in great part because of their insubstantiality, their amazing incorporeity, their lack of hardy autobiographical roots. They exist—we do not deny that—but how, we need to ask, and for whom? For as Hegel said, there is nothing behind the curtain other than that which is in front of it.
The elusiveness of Eliot’s voice is well known. Hugh Kenner has brilliantly discussed this aspect of Eliot’s work in his aptly titled book The Invisible Poet. Kenner shows that in his earlier poems Eliot deals in verbal effects, not ideas, and as a result images and phrases are often unanalyzable, nonsensical. In some of the earlier poems, including “Ash Wednesday,” the reader tries to part the words from each other, only to find nothing there. The tissue of words closes in upon itself. The signifier displaces the signified. Words do not describe but curiously evoke, and often in the manner of, surprisingly enough (for her egotism is as obtrusive as Eliot’s is not), Gertrude Stein. In the Four Quartets Kenner concludes, and I think rightly so, that we find poetry which is for the first time “selflessly transparent.” It is a final triumph of style where the Eliot of many masks disappears in favor of a disembodied voice of unquestionable authority.

We cannot help but contrast this voice, almost sphinxlike, with that of Pound’s in the Pisan Cantos. Pound is alternately irascible and exhausted (“Oh let an old man rest”), irreverent (“Athene cd/ have done with more sex appeal”), irate as well as wise. Pound shows us himself.

On the other hand, as William Moynihan has put it, “the speaker of the poem is a fictive Eliot… old, dry, philosophic, religious, and most important, a poet.” Many have said that the Quartets are the most personal of Eliot’s poems, yet the speaker is curiously absent. We find, with Kenner, that “the first person pronoun prompts no curiosity.” We find that these moments “in and out of time” exist apart from him. The “I,” we feel, is not T. S. Eliot. The “I,” in fact, is often not “I,” but “we” and “you.” One pronoun glides into another, effortlessly, and we follow, but we do not know whom we are following. Moreover we follow the voice into a dimension that is hypothetical, neither ideal or real.

Consider the “Little Gidding” sequence. The last poem of the Four Quartets opens in a spring that is not an actual spring but instead a vagary of winter (we think of Stevens’ last poem in The Rock, where spring is spring). The first stanza closes with a call (a lament?) for the ideal:

Where is the summer, the unimaginable
Zero summer?
The time is out of joint. This is not peace but "pentecostal fire / In the dark time of the year." Furthermore, the next two passages begin in the conditional:

If you came this way,
Taking the route you would be likely to take
From the place you would be likely to come from,
If you came this way in May time, you would find the hedges
White again, in May, with voluptuary sweetness.

And,

If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same: you would have to put off
Sense and notion.

And finally, throughout the entire first section of "Little Gidding," the first person pronoun not only prompts no curiosity, it is literally missing.

As with the other timeless moments, Eliot is not here. He is absent, just as the thrush in the rose-garden, as David Ward has pointed out, is "any thrush or no thrush; an ideal thrush, a thrush of memory or imagination; not even a thrush at all, but a way of expressing a movement of the soul." The particular has disappeared (did it ever exist?). The dialect of the tribe is purified.

And the Four Quartets as a whole possess this quality of the ephemeral. Although the names of each of the Quartets are place names, it is hard to associate each poem with a name (who can remember or rehearse what "happens" in each poem?). And it is even more difficult to remember what particular place is associated with what name. Again the signifier is detached from the signified and referent, lifted away by unknown hands from the concrete world. The words are talismans, not markers or signposts. The unattended moments do not have a locus in time and space, they do not have coordinates, nor are they meant to. This is part of their definition. For immediate experience is "a timeless unity."

This is the magic of such moments: this also divests them of actuality. As readers, like the women in Murder in the Cathedral, we both
know and do not know. We are both satisfied and unsatisfied. Just as the "we" of "Burnt Norton" must return to the rose-garden, we must return to the poem to find it again. The unattended moments exist as perpetual possibilities. Taken together they do not form a track which we feel Eliot himself followed. In Euclidean geometry two points make a line. In the *Four Quartets* these moments, hypothetical, do not make a Poundian periplum. And the Chapel Perilous lies either inside the poem, where Eliot is not, or outside the poem, where Eliot cannot reach.

II. CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE SOCIAL BOND

The World is trying the experiment of attempting to form a civilized but non-Christian mentality. The experiment will fail; but we must be very patient in awaiting its collapse; meanwhile redeeming the time; so that the Faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us; to renew and rebuild civilization, and save the world from suicide.—"Thoughts after Lambeth," 1931

Oh, I suppose the only thing to be done about W. civilization is to think as clearly as one can.—Letter to Bonamy Dobrée, November 12, 1927

Unlike *The Rock* of Wallace Stevens, and within that book of poems the Roman convent that offers Santayana sanctuary, the world of the *Four Quartets* is not limited to the private meditative world of the individual. The nightmare world of urban industrialization and war intrude. We see London, its miles of subway tunnels and streets littered with garbage and buildings razed by bombs. This is as much a part of the *Four Quartets* as the hyacinth garden is of "The Waste Land," perhaps more. The unattended moments, in fact, could be said to evaporate while the "drifting wreckage" remains constant:

Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind
That blows before and after time,
Wind in and out of unwholesome lungs
Time before and time after.

"Burnt Norton"

The question we must pose is: What is the relationship between the model for personal wholeness (whether or not it is either achievable or
achieved) and the social vision of the poem? For we see that there is a disparity between what is possible for the individual and what is possible for an entire society.

The still point is rich in meaning for the individual in metaphysical and cognitive dimensions, but not in the social sphere. In the Four Quartets we find no corresponding model for a utopian society. The field of folk in “East Coker” is the only possibility, but if we compare it with Pound’s Wagadu and Williams’ Tenochtitlan, we can see that it does not at all function in the same way. Like the laughing children in the leaves of the apple-tree in the Four Quartets, the dancers are a literary vision, not an anthropological or historical text.

Whereas both Pound and Williams believed in the social systems of Africa and the Aztec as having literal relevance for their time, Eliot is primarily interested in the zestful dancers as a simple metaphor for social harmony. He was much more cautious, more judicious, prudent, and tentative than either of them. He possessed a much stronger reality principle than either of them. He wrote in terms of “Notes toward a Definition of” rather than an assertive “Guide to.” If Pound’s and Williams’ strength is that they both believed in a direct link between poetry and social change, Eliot’s strength is that he did not. Poetry for him could not legitimately deal with social ideals. As he wrote in After Strange Gods, “I should say that in one’s prose reflexions one may be legitimately occupied with ideals, whereas in the writing of verse one can deal only with actuality.”

In prose, ideals perhaps, but not utopias. Eliot’s temperament was ever purgatorial, not utopian. As he warned in The Idea of a Christian Society, the “prospect involves, at least, discipline, inconvenience and discomfort: but here as hereafter, the alternative to hell is purgatory.” From Eliot’s extensive prose writing, especially the work that flanks and penetrates the time of composition of the Four Quartets (After Strange Gods was published in 1934, The Idea of a Christian Society in 1940, and Notes toward a Definition of Culture in 1948), we are familiar with his views as to why contemporary society was in such a desperate state of disintegration and what was necessary to hold society together.

For him, industrialism, the pursuit of private profit, and the all-
pervading philosophy of materialism were the prime causes, and for him religion the strongest—in fact, the only—meaningful and effective social bond. In both of these areas of discussion Eliot is lucid, almost eloquent. He is less clear on the issue of what a better society would be, could be, like. Unlike Pound or Williams he could not visualize it, he could not image it, in prose. All we are granted, essentially, are a few parameters: that on the local level he favored the small community with a strong tie to place and a stable hierarchical social structure bound together by Christianity, and that on the global level he accepted cultural pluralism, or as he aptly termed it, “an ecology of nations.”

Although Eliot wished to revive Christianity, and for this we would surely call him romantic, in his own terms it is not he, but people like Pound, who are the romantics. For Eliot separates things carefully, into categories; Pound does not. Eliot’s 1919 review of Wyndham Lewis’ novel *Tarr* is telling in this regard. What he says of the main character we can imagine him saying of Pound:

> His literature and his politics and his country life are one and the same thing. They are not in separate compartments, they are one career. Together they make up his real world: literature, politics, riding to hounds. In the real world these things have nothing to do with each other.

A doctrine of segregation, poetics in one genre, politics in another.

Thus, the *Four Quartets* is lopsided, dislocated. Eliot could not build a poem on a model analogous to that of the Elizabethan world view where individual harmony is implicit in social harmony and both are implicit in cosmic harmony. Pound could, for he put one foot outside of his tradition and chose Confucius as a guide. Pound was at heart a *bricoleur*. But this Eliot could not be. To learn another tradition, to go to the center of it, “would require forgetting how to think and feel as an American or a European,” Eliot fastidiously believed, and this was, of course, unthinkable. Thus, the parts of the *Four Quartets* are discontinuous, each is not implicit in the other. Harmony on the individual level cannot find its counterpart in society. “Hints and guesses” of a religious bond are all there are, and they are not enough to hold together the individual and society (or, to rephrase and thus reconstruct the problem in a better way, the organism and its organization).
All that can be reasonably hoped for, in the world of the *Four Quartets*, is that the individual preserve the faith. And, almost ironically, this requires one to all but sever ties with others, to detach oneself. The artist, the man of religion, is thus, to use Victor Turner’s phrase, a liminal man who exists outside of the ongoing social structure which, in Eliot’s case, is industrial and technological society. But whereas for Pound this arena is communal and sexual and literary and natural, for Eliot the possibilities are much more limited.

If Eliot cannot offer us a vision of a utopian society in the *Four Quartets*, he does give us a model for individual growth and development. The ultimate goal is enhanced spirituality and peace. What is possible is increased consciousness. The method is three-fold: religious discipline ("the rest / Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action," we read in "The Dry Salvages"), the "hints and guesses" of the unattended moments, and research.

Research: this is what we would expect from a poet who is one of our greatest, and one of our most scrupulous, literary critics. This is in great part what Eliot means by exploration. The way back to the garden, to the beginning of the poem, to the source of creativity, which is desire and thus movement, is both hard work and its opposite, "inattention and detachment." In such a rose-garden moment, Eliot wrote in his essay on John Marston, is found the "kind of pattern which we perceive in our own lives only at rare moments of inattention and detachment, drowsing in sunlight."39

Here Eliot and the Stevens of *The Rock* agree on method, if not on the pattern or what is perceived. We must look and not look, hear and not hear:

At the source of the longest river  
The voice of the hidden waterfall  
And the children in the apple-tree  
Not known, because not looked for  
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness  
Between two waves of the sea.

And thus at the end of "Little Gidding" we are returned to the rose-garden of "Burnt Norton," but it is a hypothetical return, a return predicted for the future:
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

It is a promise of peace, of reconciliation of beauty and suffering in the eternally projected future. One does not attain that, but one can possess consciousness. And the *Four Quartets* posit that growth.

The high value that Eliot placed on the development of consciousness as a measure of growth is seen not only in this poem but in many other places as well. Throughout his prose the terms "conscious" and "unconscious" appear and reappear like fetishes. A passage such as the following, from "The Function of Criticism," is not unusual:

> A common inheritance and a common cause unite artists consciously or unconsciously: it must be admitted that the union is mostly unconscious. Between the true artists of any time there is, I believe, an unconscious community. And, as our instincts of tidiness imperatively command us not to leave to the haphazard of unconsciousness what we can attempt to do consciously, we are forced to conclude that what happens unconsciously we could bring about, and form into a purpose, if we made a conscious attempt.¹⁰

Just what meanings Eliot assigns to these terms throughout his work need to be untangled further, but here I can suggest a few of the areas which might be explored.

Biological evolution: Eliot has written, for example, that he accepts "the development of consciousness in biological evolution as a development of knowledge."¹¹

The creative process: we are all aware of Eliot's description in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" of the poet's mind as catalyst, but we are perhaps less familiar with a variation on this theme that appears in Eliot's introduction to a 1929 collection of poems by Pound:

> The poet's progress is dual. There is the gradual accumulation of experience like a tantalus jar: it may be only once in five or ten years that experience accumulates to form a new whole and finds its appropriate expression. But if a poet were content to attempt nothing less than always his best, if he insisted on waiting for these unpredictable crystal-
lizations, he would not be ready for them when they came. The deve-
dvelopment of experience is largely unconscious, subterranean, so that
we cannot gauge its progress except once in every five or ten years; but
in the meantime the poet must be working; he must be experimenting
and trying his technique so that it will be ready, like a well-oiled
fire-engine, when the moment comes to strain it to its utmost.42

Just as in the *Four Quartets* the growth of consciousness requires
discipline, research, and creative readiness for the unexpected mo-
ment, the creative process for Eliot makes the same demands. The
‘‘unpredictable crystallizations’’ of mind that are necessary for crea-
tion of form are indistinguishable from the unattended moments of the
Quartets. The creative process and the intuitive cognitive process in-
tertwine. The model for each is the same: the transformation of what is
unconscious (but not necessarily the Freudian or Jungian unconscious)
into consciousness. What is unformed is granted form. Consciousness
is knowledge of form, and knowledge of form confers history:

A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments.

‘‘Little Gidding’’

Significantly, however, the act of writing uncovers a message which
the poet sends first to himself. In meditative poetry, Eliot says, the
poet ‘‘does not know what he has to say until he has said it; and in the
effort to say it he is not concerned with making people understand
anything.’’43 For Eliot, the unconscious, the subterranean, is thus iden-
tified as a source, a breeder, of knowledge. It is also associated with
the vitality of the primitive in the area of language.

Language: the auditory imagination, we remember, is defined as
‘‘the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the con-
scious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking
to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing
something back, seeking the beginning and the end.’’44 The metaphor
is that of the journey, and the very words recall the search in the *Four
Quartets*: ‘‘In my beginning is my end.’’ But poetry has a social
function, and of this Eliot was always mindful.
The poet: according to Eliot, the poet is "more conscious" than "his people," other people. The poet has a more refined sensibility and a clearer apprehension of feeling, and it is through our experience of form, the aesthetic experience, that he keeps alive our collective ability to feel.

Eliot, however, has a specific notion, a highly Eliotic notion, of the kind of knowledge that the word "consciousness" connotes. For him F. H. Bradley is one of the men who possesses such knowledge, which Eliot calls wisdom: "Of wisdom Bradley had a large share; wisdom consists largely of skepticism and uncynical disillusion; and of these Bradley had a large share. And skepticism and disillusion are a useful equipment for religious understanding and of that Bradley had a large share too." The coolness and composure, the utilitarian and almost technological vocabulary ("useful equipment") that Eliot uses to describe the skeptical modern mind is striking, although not surprising. In the *Four Quartets* he speaks of "agony" but the tone is often professorial—abstract, parenthetical, and logical:

Now, we come to discover that the moments of agony
(Whether, or not, due to misunderstanding,
Having hoped for the wrong things or dreaded the wrong things,
Is not in question) are likewise permanent
With such permanence as time has.

"The Dry Salvages"

The wise mind, his own mind, cannot be free of skepticism and doubt. This is the burden of much of *The Elder Statesman* and Eliot's important essay on Pascal. In the latter we encounter slightly different terminology, but we must not let this mislead us, for Eliot makes essentially the same point. Skepticism of Montaigne's brand he condemns, and the radical doubt of Pascal he praises and would take as his model.

Pascal, he asserts, is the religious writer most relevant to us: "I can think of no Christian writer, not even Newman, more to be commended than Pascal to those who doubt, but who have the mind to conceive, and the sensibility to feel, the disorder, the futility, the meaninglessness, the mystery of life and suffering, and who can only
find peace through a satisfaction of the whole being." The acceptance of Christianity by the individual is not so much accomplished by a Kierkegaardian leap of faith as by a conscious and conscientious, disciplined act of the mind. Thinking the problem through properly, Eliot explains, leads one into faith. Thus, the intelligent believer of today, the conscious believer of today, he affirms, must successfully join doubt and skepticism with faith (but, it is not Santayana’s animal faith). It is this marriage of opposites that is one of the most important in the *Four Quartets*. And it is one that is not figured in the still point, for the still point, we remember, does not admit of skepticism or doubt. It lies beyond man’s ken, although it exists as an ideal to guide him.

The still point can not be reached, although man must pretend that it could be. Likewise, Eliot recognized that global Christendom was unfeasible, but believed that we must act as if it were. This raises the question of his model for cultural development. Do we find that the process of cultural growth and development is analogous to that of individual development and the creative process? The answer is basically yes, although it is a yes that must be firmly qualified.

Comparison of Eliot’s views with the “Prolegomena to the History of Primitivism” by Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, first published in 1935, suggests how complex Eliot’s notion of historical development is. The classifications offered by Lovejoy and Boas are rigorously schematic and logical, dividing primitivism first into chronological primitivism and cultural primitivism, then into finitist and infinitist theories, theories of undulation, decline, and ascent, and so on. The point to be made, however, is that Lovejoy and Boas use the words “savage” and “primitive” interchangeably, largely dismiss cultural primitivism as escapism, and at no time mention consciousness as a measure of cultural development. Eliot, as we see in *Notes toward a Definition of Culture*, does not begin by accepting these axioms and thus cannot draw such sharply defined conclusions about primitivism. His tone, in fact, if we compare it with that of the passionate cultural historian of the seventies, William Irwin Thompson, who in great part shares Eliot’s analysis of Western development, is neutral and calm.
On the one hand Eliot recognizes that primitive communities are characterized by social cohesion, a shared culture, and lack of specialization. He understands that as civilization grows more complex, class consciousness appears, and religion, science, art, and politics split and coagulate into separate institutions, which must deliberately, consciously battle each other for power. He does not lament this loss of unity but does comprehend that it is a genuine loss: "the one thing that time is ever sure to bring about is the loss: gain or compensation is almost always conceivable but never certain." But, on the other hand, increased consciousness and skepticism accompany increased complexity of civilization as compensation. And finally, although in his view cultural specialization is not necessarily equivalent to cultural disintegration, he does observe that in the West specialization has begun to degenerate into irreparable fragmentation.

Eliot, in other words, does not hold a rigid theory of either general progress from the primitive to the "civilized" or, conversely, general decline from organic community to fragmented polity. As he says, "We do not assume that there is, over a long period, progress even in art, or that 'primitive' art is, as art, necessarily inferior to the more sophisticated." In this respect he was ahead of his time.

The problem, however, is this. For Eliot the relation between religion and culture in an ideal state is one in which "people are unconscious both of their culture and their religion." As he writes in his essay on "Religion and Literature," "What I want is a literature which should be unconsciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly Christian."

But later in that essay he involves us in a contradiction: "It is not enough to understand what we ought to be, unless we know what we are and we do not understand what we are, unless we know what we ought to be. The two forms of self-consciousness, knowing what we are and what we ought to be, must go together." This more or less mirrors the distinction between tradition and orthodoxy that Eliot makes in After Strange Gods: tradition is basically unconscious and does not possess the means to criticize itself, while orthodoxy is basically conscious. Tradition can not be deliberately put on, like a raincoat to protect oneself from the elements. But orthodoxy can—and
Eliot adopted it in the form of Anglicanism. However, orthodoxy is not strong enough to hold a specialized society together. In other words, what is unconscious can be brought into consciousness, but the process cannot be reversed. And while the former may be repeated in each individual, the latter is impossible, I believe, for a civilization: once a fundamental tradition has hardened into orthodoxy, it is impossible for it to dissolve into its former state of invisible tradition.

And this brings us to the key point of this discussion. Whereas for the individual,

\[
\ldots \text{the end of all our exploring} \\
\text{Will be to arrive where we started} \\
\text{And know the place for the first time},
\]

such an accomplishment is impossible for a civilization. Collective consciousness cannot give us back a tradition that has been lost. The split between organism and organization, the individual and his specialized technological society at large, cannot be healed by a return to Christianity. A civilization cannot go home again. In the *Four Quartets* Eliot, whatever his dreams, does not lie to us. In “The Waste Land” ancient wisdom couldn’t lift the curse, nor can it here. As Eliot says in *Notes toward a Definition of Culture*, “Understanding involves an area more extensive than that of which one can be conscious; one cannot be outside and inside at the same time.” Yeats wrote in his last letter that “man can embody truth but he cannot know it.” Eliot would have agreed, but he also would have accepted the reverse proposition that “man can know truth but cannot embody it.”

### III. THE QUEST FOR COMMUNITY

And what the dead had no speech for, when living,  
They can tell you, being dead: the communication  
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living  
Here, the intersection of the timeless moment  

“Little Gidding”

If, as Eliot believed, the act of writing releases a message hitherto unknown to the poet himself, if the poet “cannot identify this embryo
until it has been transformed into an arrangement of the right words in the right order, we must ask what this message is in the *Four Quartets*. And to answer this question it is appropriate to ask where it is that Eliot qua Eliot appears in the poem. This in turn involves us in a definition of the meditative poem.

For most critics of Eliot, the poetry of meditation is understood as the language of abstraction. But Eliot himself has a different notion of what meditative poetry is. For him it is poetry that we generally label "lyric" poetry, poetry of the first person. This accords, in part, with Louis Martz' helpful notion of the meditative poem as drama wherein the poet seeks himself in himself, or as we might put it, projects a part of himself, an image of himself, in order to know himself. We have already seen that in the *Four Quartets* Eliot as a character playing himself is not distinctly or directly identified with the unattended moments beginning with the "Burnt Norton" rose-garden and stretching to the churchyard in "Little Gidding." These moments exist in a timeless and in great part a spaceless dimension without him.

But there is one passage in the *Four Quartets*, a passage which has been called "one of his finest pieces of writing," where Eliot does appear: the "Little Gidding" dramatization of his meeting with "a familiar compound ghost." This scene, extraordinary for Eliot, combines the immediacy of anecdote with the truth of dream. Old Possum, the Eliot who all his literary life has championed the art of the impersonal, here lays aside that dictum. We remember his famous words of years earlier in "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates." What is so moving in the ghost sequence is that the mind which creates is no less perfect, but the man who suffers is closer to us and more human.

If, as Helen Gardner has pointed out, "The Hollow Men" is in part a work that presents the crisis we call middle age, then the *Four Quartets* deals directly with the crisis of old age. The message which Eliot sends himself, and us, is a message from the dead. Eliot assumes a "double part." He is both himself and the other. We see Eliot as a character bringing what is unconscious, what is beyond and below, into consciousness, into the present:
So I assumed a double part, and cried
And heard another’s voice cry: ‘What! are you here?’
Although we were not, I was still the same,
Knowing myself yet being someone other—
And he a face still forming; yet the words sufficed
To compel the recognition they preceded.

Kenner has observed that the mechanism of the Eliot plot is “the entry of Lazarus, the man who has crossed a frontier and come back: Harry with his Furies invading Wishwood, Sweeney the uninvited guest at the ragtime jollification, the Magi returning to a kingdom in which they are no longer at home, where an alien people clutch their gods.” But here there is a significant variation: Lazarus is greeted by a man of his own kind, he is not alone. The past is greeted by the present. The dream is that the literary tradition is continuous, not discontinuous, that it exists for a moment in space rather than time. And it is a moment of grace for them both. The “familiar compound ghost,” like Stevens’ Santayana and Pound’s Confucius, represents the cultural tradition that Eliot has both learned from and become a part of. This scene condenses the truth that, as Octavio Paz puts it, “the poem is not literary form but a meeting place between poetry and man.” The figure is a master, a teacher, a wise old man.

The message he delivers is one that neither Pound nor Stevens could have received and only Eliot could have conceived. It is first and foremost purgatorial, the vision of old age is a bleak and bitter one:

‘Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age
To set a crown upon your lifetime’s effort.
First, the cold friction of expiring sense
Without enchantment, offering no promise
But bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit
As body and soul begin to fall asunder.
Second, the conscious impotence of rage
At human folly, and the laceration
Of laughter at what ceases to amuse.
And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others’ harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.
Then fools’ approval stings, and honour stains.’

This could be Shakespeare’s Jacques speaking. Until, unless,
‘From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.’

Skepticism and faith, the two together, wisdom: this is one form of knowledge the ghost possesses and this is the knowledge Eliot presumably was in need of. But if the Eliot of skepticism and despair yields to the Eliot of skepticism and faith, this is no surprise to us. It is a formal solution to a poetic problem which Eliot had come to terms with in his life some time before. This I will come back to later.

This moment differs significantly from those preceding it in the *Four Quartets*. It opens to include the contemporary wasteland while others do not. It was the war, we remember, that prompted Eliot to write poetry again, to write “East Coker” and to continue with “The Dry Salvages” and “Little Gidding.” Appropriately then, this scene takes place in London in the predawn hour after an air raid, and together the two men form “a dead patrol,” a watch over the city. They are its guardians. It is a ritual action which they perform. And as we know, the one who participates in a ceremony is like an actor who plays a part: everything is and yet everything is not. It is a supreme achievement, for in all of the *Four Quartets* this is the single section where Eliot is able to unite the two worlds of cultural disintegration and individual illumination.

Not surprisingly, the context is an aesthetic one. Moreover, it is not a weightless union of abstractions (“In my end is my beginning”) but a concrete, tangible reconciliation of opposites achieved within the frame of a dramatic situation. This scene has specific historical coordinates of space and time, and yet “this intersection” is “nowhere” and has “no before and after.”

This is what the vision is. We must also realize what it is not. Eliot’s poetry is not a poetry of ecstasy. This section in “Little Gidding” does not dramatize a vision of Incarnation or of mystical contact with God. Eliot knew what his limitations were in a secular society, and he knew
what his possibilities were. And accordingly, he presents us with a
poet, not a prophet, who delivers a vaguely Christian message. This is,
of course, exactly the role Eliot set for himself. Eliot could not write a
_Bhagavad-Gita_, where Krishna manifests himself. Eliot is not a New
Dante and could not send himself a Beatrice. Nor is he Pound; he could
not en-vision the eyes of a goddess in this London landscape. But in the _Four Quartets_ Eliot does move far beyond the empty allegory of
‘‘Choruses from ‘The Rock.’’’ Whereas in ‘‘Choruses,’’ the Rock is
handed wooden lines to speak before an undefined audience, in the _Four Quartets_ we find a situation which is both dramatic and imagina­
tive.

But the satisfaction we feel in this passage is not only a literary one.
The message of the ‘‘familiar compound ghost’’ may have Christian
overtones for those who would hear them, but the whole of this brief
drama has an important sociological meaning. Contemporary urban
society, as reflected in its subway faces,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{\ldots the strained time-ridden faces} \\
\text{Distracted from distraction by distraction} \\
\text{Filled with fancies and empty of meaning} \\
\text{Tumid apathy with no concentration}
\end{align*}
\]

is impacted, a dull mass. The individual, as we know Eliot believed, is
in great part ‘‘empty of meaning’’ because the forces of industrialism
and secularism have uprooted him from his traditional, personal
associations—family, church, guild, village—in which he had clearly
defined status, a coherent set of moral beliefs, and fellowship. And
nothing has filled this vacuum. The subway rider is a displaced person
among other displaced persons. As the Chorus asked in ‘‘Choruses
from ‘The Rock’’’:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{When the Stranger says: ‘‘What is the meaning of this city?} \\
\text{Do you huddle close together because you love each other?’’} \\
\text{What will you answer? ‘‘We all dwell together} \\
\text{To make money from each other’’? or ‘‘This is a community’’?}
\end{align*}
\]

There is a basic human need for community, observes Robert Nisbet
in _The Quest for Community_, and it is a need which is all the more
pressing in our century. "The problem," Nisbet argues, "lies in the realm of the small, primary, personal relationships of society—the relationships that mediate directly between man and his larger world of economic, moral, political and religious values."66 Our traditional small social groups, which had functional significance and also provided moral cohesion, have atrophied, he points out, and no new associations have taken their place. Our need for them is a fundamental one, he urges, and with this Eliot would agree. In "Choruses from 'The Rock'" the notion of community that Eliot offers is exclusively a Christian one. In *The Elder Statesman* he explores the remaking of community on the level of the nuclear family and friends. But in the *Four Quartets* he stresses the importance of another kind of association. As a poet, he recognizes and dramatizes his need to belong to a literary community that possesses a strong tradition and plays a vital role in the present. In the ghost passage we do not see Eliot detached "from self and from things and from persons," and we are glad of it:

I said: 'The wonder that I feel is easy,
Yet ease is cause of wonder. Therefore speak:
I may not comprehend, may not remember.'

He might have written: "The ease that I feel is cause of wonder."

The "familiar compound ghost" contains many poets particularly important to Eliot—Dante and Dante’s Arnaut and Yeats and Pound and Shelley and Mallarmé and Milton. Together, and including Eliot, they form a guild in which master passes on craft and wisdom to apprentice. Given Eliot’s belief in "the indestructible barriers between one human being and another," as Kenner has put it,67 this is as close as he ever allowed himself in poetry to break down that barrier. Here we cannot help but contrast Eliot’s pale abstraction of these poets with Pound’s almost literal calling out of their names, one by one, in the *Pisan Cantos*. But the relationship of poets is not purely literary. It is also, for Eliot, psychological, moral, and religious. And finally, it is social: for their common concern was, and is, language and speech and urging "the mind to aftersight and foresight" ("Little Gidding"). As this passage makes clear, it is in great part concrete association (however hallucinatory) with the living tradition which gives strength and makes the ongoing fight possible. The ghost is itself the "embryo"
T. S. Eliot and the Four Quartets

that comes into life "near the ending of interminable night." Consciousness brings resolve:

Old men ought to be explorers.
Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation

"East Coker"

And next year's words await another voice.

"Little Gidding"

In contemporary society, Nisbet argues, one of the roles of small social associations is to act as a check against the totalitarian tendency of a mass society. And for Eliot this is the role of the literary community.

Thirteen years after Eliot finished the Four Quartets he gave an address at Hamburg University on "Goethe as the Sage." His tone in that essay is personal and almost affectionate, and his voice is wise. In the Four Quartets he had written: "The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless." The virtue of humility is a great part of the Hamburg lecture, and its words help us understand the wisdom of the Four Quartets. It is possible, Eliot argues, to distinguish between the philosophy of a poet and his wisdom. Whether or not we can accept the beliefs of Dante or Shakespeare or Goethe, we can accept, he maintains, their wisdom:

It is precisely for the sake of learning wisdom that we must take the trouble to frequent these men; it is because they are wise men that we should try, if we find one of them, uncongenial, to overcome our aversion or indifference. Of revealed religions, and of philosophical systems, we must believe that one is right and the others wrong. But wisdom is λόγος ζυνός, the same for all men everywhere. . . . That the wisdom and the poetry are inseparable, in poets of the highest rank, is something I have only come to perceive in becoming a little wiser myself. 69

It is this inseparability of wisdom and poetry that we find in the Four Quartets.

The distinctive nature of the "wisdom" of Eliot's last major poem
must be pursued just a bit further, however. Eliot provided his generation with a model of wholeness in "the still point" (for them the phrase expressed the ineffable, although for us it may have, unfortunately, become a cliché). Pound, Stevens, and Williams each define for themselves a still point which is invested with the specific gravity of a long life, the particularity of a certain poetic problem, and personal urgency. But for Eliot, as I have argued earlier in this chapter, the still point remains a linguistic construction. It is only in the ghost passage of "Little Gidding" that Eliot is able to unite the private world of mystical illumination with the social world of violence. And this is especially important for us because his doppelgänger speaks of the impending violence of old age, presenting him with a vision which is terrifying and offering veiled counsel which is indeed wise, but, I believe, not heeded.

Earlier I said that the *Four Quartets* deals directly with the crisis of old age. They do, but they do more than that, and this twist of time in Eliot's imagination is also distressing. It is crucial for us in the twentieth century to project ourselves imaginatively into our own future, our old age, for as individuals we tend to repress old age psychologically just as industrial culture has devalued the elderly as a nonproductive group and pushed them out of sight. But the surfacing of old age, in Eliot's sense, in middle age is a chilling prospect, and this is just what we encounter in the *Four Quartets*. Eliot imposes a dark vision of old age on his middle years. He is, we would say, old before his time, and here we mean old in the pejorative sense. For Eliot was only forty-seven when "Burnt Norton" appeared in his *Collected Poems* and only fifty-five when he published the entire set of poems together as the *Four Quartets*. Thus we might more accurately conclude that the *Four Quartets* deals with the crisis of middle age as viewed through the distorting lens of a repulsive old age.

The *Four Quartets* confirms that Eliot has a strong sense of the life cycle and the sequence of generations, but it is one that is bizarrely truncated: the stress is on physical decay, never growth. In "Burnt Norton," for example, he turns a lifetime of decrepitude to advantage:

> Yet the enchainment of past and future
> Woven in the weakness of the changing body.
Protects mankind from heaven and damnation
Which flesh cannot endure.

A few lines earlier in the poem the still point is described as the point "where past and future are gathered," but while the locus of these different points of time is lovely in abstraction (they are "gathered" together), it is purgatorial in the concrete, "the changing body" where they are enchained.

F. R. Leavis has called this attitude of Eliot's a sin against the principle of life. And indeed it is a funereal way of understanding that "In my beginning is my end." These words open the second Quartet, which refers us to Eliot's ancestry by its title: Eliot's family came to America from the village of East Coker, located in Southeast Somersetshire. But the poetic point that Eliot makes is general, not specific to his own psychological and social history, not directed at the influences of his family's origins on his development. Instead he submerges all autobiography in the continually crumbling arc of time. We would agree, I think, that to a large extent his perspective is "wise": what a generation creates must necessarily die, and within a given life time one devotes oneself, appropriately, to different tasks at different times (this is perhaps less understood by the young than the old):

Houses live and die: there is a time for building
And a time for living and for generation
And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane
And to shake the wainscot where the field-mouse trots
And to shake the tattered arras woven with a silent motto.

We cannot help but notice, however, that Eliot places the weight of time on destruction, decay, and death.

The time for building, living, and generation in Erikson's conception of the life span (generativity means caring for one's children, nurturing the next generation, turning one's attention to those younger than oneself) contracts to a line and one-half and receives no figurative attention, whereas the entire last three lines of the opening stanza of "East Coker" turn to decay which is rendered imagistically, not merely stated. These images are familiar and contribute to a perhaps comforting tone of domestic melancholy and rural elegy, but earlier in
the section there appears an image of decay that is disturbing in its surreal mixture of organic matter—the earth which has always been and will always be a compost of "flesh, fur and faeces." Surely this is not wise but disquieting instead, an unhealthy vision of the dissolution of life while it is still intact and distinct, specifically recognizable in its various forms (the earth "is already flesh, fur and faeces, / Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf"). For Eliot, this is the middle way, which will persist to the end, into old age: the two are part of a continuum of decay.

I have dwelt on this at some length because although Eliot certainly possesses an acute sense of history, his sense of time in terms of his own life is severely impoverished. In the *Four Quartets* a sense of the future is not palpable, only an indefinite stretch of the middle way, which is a kind of death in life. When Eliot writes, "In my beginning is my end," I fear that the end has absorbed everything. We learn in "The Dry Salvages" that his life is one of endless ends, a kind of Sartrean hell from which there is no exit:

There is no end, but addition: the trailing
Consequence of further days and hours,
While emotion takes to itself the emotionless
Years of living among the breakage
Of what was believed in as the most reliable—
And therefore the fittest for renunciation.

Although only middle-aged—and this is still a time of building—Eliot portrays himself as paralyzed, particularly in terms of poetry and the future. At the same time, he dismisses the tranquility of the wise old man for himself—and for others. "Autumnal serenity," we read in the second section of "East Coker," is in fact lethargy, dullness of mind, a reliance on old insights and useless knowledge.

Eliot is "wise" to recognize his limitations in poetry (the limitations of language). And I do not at all find his admissions of inadequacy to be duplicitous, an exaggerated humility masking pride, as others have. When Eliot writes of his attempts and failures over a period of twenty long years to use words in a supremely accurate way adequate to his time, I believe him and admire the unflinching accuracy of his perception and the significance he attributes to work in language:
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment, always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to conquer
By strength and submission, has already been discovered
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
To emulate—but there is no competition....

I am in awe of his courage, the fierce demands he makes upon himself, but I wish for more, an energy of action. Given the vast span of history, Eliot may be "wise" to devalue his own anguish, to present it clinically, as he does in "The Dry Salvages," effacing his own torment and asserting that time is no healer; but does this "wisdom" not have an inordinate cost?

Although we commonly observe that things must be placed in perspective in order to be seen with clarity, the olympian summit of Eliot's point of view so diminishes his self that he disappears before his time. As we will see later in Wallace Stevens' "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," such a perspective is appropriate, fitting, for a man of Santayana's age who has done his work. And so is the mode of his being, which is the meditative mode: detachment.

But is not Eliot's detachment from his own life premature and thus unwise? We read in the third section of "Little Gidding" that "detachment / From self and from things and from persons" is a method for liberating oneself from an impossible future and an equally impossible past. Detachment, like memory, appears to be a way of tranquilizing the present, protecting oneself from it:

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

Is not memory overvalued in his middle age? Eliot does not write of memory as a pleasure. Rather, it serves a "use"; his attitude toward it is pragmatic. Memory is a strategy for annulling desire, the impulse toward things, and persons, and the enhancement of the self. Why this fear of desire? Why this emphasis on a stillness, which, for a middle-
aged poet of great talent, does not so much resemble the balance of Stevens' Santayana, for example, as it does a stasis, perhaps stagnation? Clearly nothing seemed possible—either his life in poetry or his marriage. That anguish he believed could only be relieved and that tormented self vanish by submitting it to a higher meaning—"that refining fire" to which the ghost refers and which presumably will order one's life, providing a disciplined pattern in which "you must move in measure, like a dancer" (the italics are mine).

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

Although it is ungracious of us to ask more of Eliot than he was capable of giving, on the other hand, I think he did not follow his own best advice, the advice of the ghost he sent himself. As we have seen, the ghost's last words do counsel him to submit himself to the discipline of Christianity. And the final section of "Little Gidding" rehearses that theme. It is common to conclude therefore that the end of the Four Quartets represents the successful completion of a spiritual journey in which "the fire and the rose are one." But here I agree with F. R. Leavis who complains that the Four Quartets ends on a note of declaration rather than poetic persuasion.72

However this is not my major point. For the ghost had more to say. His speech is divided into three parts: the last three lines, which invoke the Christian tradition and come as an abrupt coda to both the first part, which is concerned with the relationship of the poet to his work, and the second part, which, as we have already seen, is concerned with the psychic and physical horrors of old age. It is the first section that is most relevant to us here. Speaking with authority, the ghost declares that "'Last season's fruit is eaten.'" This is not an unfamiliar theme to us—Eliot has acknowledged this throughout the poem. But the ghost elaborates:

'For last year's words belong to last year's language
And next year's words await another voice.
But, as the passage now presents no hindrance
To the spirit unappeased, and peregrine
Between two worlds become much like each other,
So I find words I never thought to speak. . . .

Our attention is focused on the present, the potential for a living tradition. The ghost, like Eliot, is wretched, his "spirit unappeased," but he represents the possibility of presence, of utterance, of speech whose words do and will reach into the silence.

This is, for me, the wisdom which the ghost imparts. Not the Christian religion, for Eliot had embraced that years earlier, both in his poetry and his actions, but rather the possibility of poetry for Eliot himself. It is as if Eliot is prompting himself to speak, in poetry, to continue his work, despite its problematics, to act. "So I find words I never thought to speak," says the ghost, himself astonished that the words for this time, that place could be found.

D. W. Harding, commenting on "Little Gidding," declares that the last section of the Quartets "suggests a serene and revitalized return from meditation to one's part in active living."73 Action for Eliot: would that not have meant a life in poetry? As we learned from his essay on "Tradition and the Individual Talent," which he had written years earlier, he believed in the power of the poetic community to affect its culture in a meaningful way. And in the ghost sequence of "Little Gidding," he is finally able to dramatize that power poetically. But he does not follow his own advice. After the Four Quartets he leaves his life in poetry, unable to find a voice in the present, and the plays that follow do not fulfill the measure of his talent.

4. Eliot makes an interesting distinction between an idea and a concept. A concept, he writes in Knowledge and Experience (p. 46), "is a thing-in-itself; it can be suggested rather than defined, through more and more general ideas, but is at no point to be identified with these ideas. . . . And we must not confuse the development of the language with the development in concepts; for it would, I think, be more apt to say
that the development of language is the history of our exploration of the world of concepts.


7. *Knowledge and Experience*, p. 158.

8. To mention but a few. Ethel Cornwall in *The Still Point: Theme and Variations in the Writings of T. S. Eliot, Coleridge, Yeats, Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and D. H. Lawrence* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1962), p. 60, concludes that Eliot’s still point is “the intellectualized presentation of a Christian concept. Union with the still point,” she says, “is equivalent to union with God.” Or, D. E. Maxwell: “‘The still point’ is God, and represents a summary and reconciliation of all the paradoxical attributes of the symbols (the axle-tree, wheel, river, etc.) which at once depend upon it and help to illustrate its nature—they could be described as a symbolic substratum.” (*The Poetry of T. S. Eliot* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952], p. 176). Or, Morris Weitz: “The still point, of course, is the symbol of the Logos, but it is also the symbol of the Christian God” (“T. S. Eliot: Time as a Mode of Salvation,” in *T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets: A Casebook*, ed. Bernard Bergonzi [London: Macmillan, 1969], p. 147). What I object to is the reductionist tendency of such findings: on the whole the *Four Quartets* have suffered severely from the wealth of academic nations and the criticism of demystification. The general tack of critics is to say that the still point is a symbol of something else and that the rose garden, revolving wheel, and so on, are in turn symbols of the still point—a clear fill-in-the-blank hierarchy, as well built as a plaster-of-paris parfait, and as devoid of life, translucency, and richness. The *Four Quartets*, we must not forget, has a singular ability to contain conflicting images, but unfortunately many critics have treated Eliot as though he were more Descartes than Pascal. Eliot, we remember, found the esprit de géométrie to be “excessive” in Descartes, and the pensées of Pascal, although fragmentary in form and expression, to cohere magnificently in thought.

9. Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 136. We might consider pushing this distinction and conclude that the still point lies not only on the vertical axis of metaphor but also on the horizontal axis of metonymy. In his famous essay on aphasia, Roman Jakobson calls attention to the two basic ways in which the elements of language operate: the selection of a sign among similar items (this relation of similarity he calls “metaphor” and we may imagine it as a vertical axis). See his “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” in Roman Jakobson and M. Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1956), pp. 55–82. The most important works of Mallarmé—*Un Coup de Des* and *Le Livre*—do not fit the commonly accepted definition of symbolism as metaphoric substitution. Mallarmé’s early work, in other words, employs a priori codes (as Eliot employs the code of Christianity), but in his later work Mallarmé images man as creator of new codes. Syntax, the creation of meaning by contiguity and context, assumes, in other words, a greater importance than the use of metaphor.

14. In the strange opening passage of section II of "Burnt Norton," Eliot brings the two poles together—the vertical pole of metaphor and the horizontal pole of metonomy:

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

Here Mallarméan syntactics and the contradictory medieval notion of correspondences are juxtaposed, and they cohere.

17. *Knowledge and Experience*, p. 31.
20. *Knowledge and Experience*, p. 28.
22. *Knowledge and Experience*, p. 156.
23. Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959). Kenner discusses this question, however, mainly from the point of view of the relation between the words and the "zone of consciousness" from which they emanate, not from the point of view of the relationship between the words and what they point to as signifier or referent. I would further observe, in fact, that often Eliot's poems are susceptible to the criticism he offers of Swinburne: "It is, in fact, the word that gives him the thrill, not the object. When you take to pieces any verse of Swinburne, you find always that the object was not there—only the word" ("Swinburne as Poet," in *Selected Essays*, p. 284).
24. The Invisible Poet, p. 293.
33. See Stephen Spender's essay "Remembering Eliot," in T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work: "Possibly, then, the centre of Eliot's work is its exploration of the truth that there cannot in our time be a synthesis between the modern city of the industrial world—bound entirely to the temporal and gambling every moment with destruction—and the eternal city with aims of civilization outside the temporal" (p. 63).
34. "We have not given enough attention to the ecology of cultures," he wrote in Notes toward a Definition of Culture (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), p. 58. This, we realize, some thirty years later, was a prescient, not a reactionary, statement to make.
35. Published in 1919 and quoted in The Invisible Poet, p. 113.
37. Compare with the last paragraph of "The Pensées of Pascal," Selected Essays, p. 368, from which the following is excerpted: "We cannot quite understand any of the parts, fragmentary as they are, without some understanding of the whole [Eliot is here referring to the form of Pascal's work]. Capital, for instance, is his analysis of the three orders: the order of nature, the order of mind, and the order of charity. These three are discontinuous; the higher is not implicit in the lower as in an evolutionary doctrine it would be. In this distinction Pascal offers much about what the modern world would do well to think."
38. As used by Raymond Williams, this is much better terminology because it reveals the artificiality of treating these two terms as distinct from each other rather than as different aspects of a single system, which they are. See his The Long Revolution (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 100. See also his Culture and Society, 1780–1950 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), which contains an excellent discussion and evaluation of Eliot's views of culture.
40. Selected Essays, p. 13. What Neumann has to say about this in Art and the
Creative Unconscious, p. 159, is instructive: "The separation between the psychic systems, which becomes intensified in the course of development, leads more and more to a defensive attitude of consciousness over against the unconscious, and to the formation of a cultural canon that is oriented more toward stability of consciousness than toward the transformative phenomena of possession. Ritual, which may be regarded as a central area of psychic transformation, loses its regenerative significance."

41. Knowledge and Experience, p. 17.


44. T. S. Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), pp. 118-19. See also "The Music of Poetry," in On Poetry and Poets, pp. 31-32: the poet "has the privilege of contributing to the development and maintaining the quality, the capacity of the language to express a wide range, and subtle gradation, of feeling and emotion; his task is both to respond to change and make it conscious, and to battle against degradation below standards which he has learnt from this past."


48. I disagree, therefore, with William Chace, who, in The Political Identities of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1973), p. 200, argues that Eliot viewed consciousness as a central and impossible obstacle to the development of culture, and that Eliot is devoted to "consciousness negated, to the unconscious absorption of society by self, self by society," and that "all does gradually become One, just as in Four Quartets."


50. Thompson offers a Jungian-Yeatsian theory, arguing that we have fallen from unity to multiplicity, that surplus and specialization have increased the distance between men in different roles, and that we are approaching a new phase in Western cultural development, which he calls the scientific-planetary civilization. This is, of course, where the prudent Eliot, not having a taste for futurology or speculation, could not follow. See "Values and Conflict Through History: The View from a Canadian Retreat," At the Edge of History: Speculations on the Transformation of Culture (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 104-50. Thompson, by the way, graces his dedication page with a quotation from the last stanza of "Little Gidding," and he records in his next book, Passages about Earth: An Exploration of the New Planetary Culture (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), a pilgrimage he makes to Lindisfarne, which echoes, as he was no doubt aware, the pilgrimage to Little Gidding.

51. Notes toward a Definition of Culture, p. 25.

52. Notes toward a Definition of Culture, p. 29. See also Eliot's essay "The
Modern Mind," in The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, p. 122, in which he
discusses the development of self-consciousness in poetry and the criticism of poetry
beginning with Dryden and continuing into the twentieth century: "I have not wished
to exhibit this 'progress in self-consciousness' as being necessarily progress with an
association of higher value. For one thing, it cannot be wholly abstracted from the
general changes in the human mind in history; and that these changes have any
technological significance is not one of my assumptions."

53. Notes toward a Definition of Culture, p. 31.
54. Selected Essays, p. 346.
55. Notes toward a Definition of Culture, p. 353.
56. Notes toward a Definition of Culture, p. 41. Neumann puts it more strongly in
Art and the Creative Unconscious, p. 167: "Differentiation and hyperdifferentiation of
consciousness down to the most dangerous one-sidedness and disequilibrium are the
hallmarks of our culture, whose faulty balance can no longer be repaired solely by the
natural compensation of the psyche. But a return to the old symbols, an attempt to
cling to what still remains of the symbolic religious values, also seems doomed to
failure. For our understanding of this symbolism, even our affirmation of it, implies
that the symbol itself has departed from the numinous realm of the creative and entered
into the sphere of conscious assimilation."

58. F. O. Matthiessen, for example, in The Achievement of T. S. Eliot, 3rd ed.
(London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 183, identifies the opening of "Burnt
Norton" as "a meditation on time," and Helen Gardner, in The Art of T. S. Eliot
Less common is the view of A. Alvarez ("A Meditative Poet," in T. S. Eliot, Four
Quartets: A Casebook, ed. Bernard Bergonzi, p. 240), with whom I am in complete
agreement: "He is, in some ways, a meditative poet. But this does not mean a poet
who deals in abstractions; Eliot's meditations are meditations on experience, in which
the abstractions belong as much as the images; they are all part of his particular cast of
mind, the meaning he gives to past experience. But Eliot is, I think, a relatively indiffer­
ent, or uninterested, observer of the phenomenal world—though in his earlier poems
he was a sharp observer of manners. He is instead a supreme interpreter of meditative
experience."

60. The Poem of the Mind, p. 31.
63. The Art of T. S. Eliot, p. 111.
64. The Invisible Poet, p. 31.
65. The Bow and the Lyre, p. 5.
66. Robert Nisbet, The Quest for Community (New York: Oxford University Press,
1953), p. 49. Eliot was not only aware of but approved of Nisbet's work, which he
considered to be "conservative" (see "The Literature of Politics," To Criticize the
The title of the second section of this chapter is taken, in part, from the title of one of Nisbet's books, 

Critic, p. 141). The title of the second section of this chapter is taken, in part, from the title of one of Nisbet's books (The Social Bond: An Introduction to the Study of Society [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970]).

67. The Invisible Poet, p. 90.

70. See F. R. Leavis' commentary on "Little Gidding" in The Living Principle: "English" as a Discipline of Thought (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975). Leavis also singles out the ghost sequence as extraordinary to the Four Quartets. He observes that Eliot's experience as an air-raid warden during the Second World War "was a rude and salutary exposure to life—a kind of exposure necessary to a life-fearing potential major poet. In the Dantesque narrative Eliot is, and very impressively, a major poet; the complexity inseparable from its being so unmistakably creative evocation—organic, and in a way remote from assertion, so urgent—is not confined to the sensory vividness of the warden-poet's report.

"Nowhere else does Eliot come so close to full recognition of the realities of what he is—to full recognition that is, of the human nature that he shares, life being in himself" (p. 256).

71. See, for example, John Barker Muth, "The Patterned Pursuit: T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets and the Meditative Tradition" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1976). I have only a few minor disagreements with Muth, whose scholarship on the Four Quartets I found very useful and his notion of wisdom as unlearning, provocative (we might wish to relate it to the principle of de-creation in Wallace Stevens).

72. The Living Principle, p. 256.
