

## T. S. Eliot

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T. S. Eliot ranks among the most celebrated and influential poets of the twentieth century. His innovative, difficult poetry is synonymous with what is conventionally known as “high modernism,” that exhilarating and groundbreaking period of artistic experiment after World War I that also produced Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and the beginning of Pound’s *Cantos* (from 1925). Like the authors of these works, Eliot was intensely self-critical, always dissatisfied with what he had just finished and therefore always yearning for new artistic breakthroughs. “One has only learnt to get the better of words,” he writes in *Four Quartets*, “For the thing one no longer has to say” (*Complete Poems* 128). It was, at least in part, this sense of restlessness that gave rise to a series of dramatic creative transformations over the course of his career. And one can begin to grasp Eliot’s achievement by discerning the patterns and continuities that govern these transformations, paying close attention to the insistent echoes and motifs that make his relatively sparse poetic corpus so distinct and recognizable.

## “Prufrock”

We could date the beginning of Eliot’s career as a poet from the appearance in June 1915 of his first major work, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” in *Poetry* magazine. But the beginnings of that landmark poem stretch back to 1908, when Eliot was an undergraduate at Harvard. There he read a copy of the newly published American edition of Arthur Symons’s *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) and was struck by the urban settings, ironic sophistication, and demotic language of nineteenth-century French poets like Jules Laforgue and Tristan Corbière. Their work resonated

with his own experiences in urban St. Louis and Boston more than that of any American authors whom he had read, and he sensed himself “changed, metamorphosed almost . . . from a bundle of second-hand sentiments into a person” (Eliot, “Reflections” 39). He spent a momentous year in Paris in 1910–11, during which he immersed himself in French literature and philosophy. The poems that resulted from these rich and invigorating years, recorded in a notebook that Eliot titled *Inventions of the March Hare*, are infused with a corrosive solution of the irony, intellectual disillusionment, and social derision that he extracted from Laforgue and others. Or perhaps, as some scholars suggest, the sardonic humor and cynicism of the Symbolist poets merely liberated Eliot’s sensibility, which had been stifled beneath the weight of decorous New England reserve, on the one hand, and Victorian sentimentality, on the other (Stayer 109).

If only a handful of these early works ever made it into print, it may be partially because Eliot seemed to leave poetry behind after his return from Paris, embarking instead on a career in academic philosophy in Harvard, where he studied the austere idealism of F. H. Bradley, the analytic realism of Bertrand Russell, and the great spiritual texts of the Indic religious traditions. Eliot was nearing the completion of his PhD when World War I broke out and interrupted his studies just as he arrived in Germany on a traveling fellowship. He went to London and called on Ezra Pound, who was immediately struck by the poems from the *March Hare* notebook. With astonishing swiftness, Eliot saw his first major poems published in important periodicals in England and America. His parents were shocked and dismayed, however, at the equally unsettling swiftness with which he settled in London, married a young English woman named Vivien Haigh-Wood, and left behind a secure and promising academic career in philosophy for an uncertain and ill-paid career as a poet and literary journalist.

The summer of 1915 saw the appearance of “Portrait of a Lady” in the innovative New York little magazine *Others: A Magazine of the New Verse*; “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” and “Preludes” in the bold yet short-lived avant-garde London magazine *Blast*; and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in the influential Chicago monthly *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. “Prufrock” remains one of Eliot’s most accessible and best-known poems, in part because of the unity and pathos of its speaker, and in part because, despite its dense allusions and associative jumps, the poem fits into a recognizable generic category and largely adheres to nineteenth-century verse conventions. The fictional Prufrock, the poem’s speaker, is by turns sympathetic, laughable, intensely self-conscious, and tragically oblivious. His monologue pivots around a crucial encounter with a woman, an imagined meeting that never actually occurs. And it is haunted by a disabling sense of futility and powerlessness that isolates him from the social world, which he both romanticizes and belittles. The poem borrows its epigraph from the *Inferno* of Dante (another of Eliot’s major early influences), implying that Prufrock’s hesitations and doubts have trapped him in a psychological hell. The opening lines rely upon a striking inversion of expectations, a surprise and disorientation that Eliot uses with great success throughout the poem. They begin with a

grandly Romantic, lyrical invitation but suddenly, jarringly, veer toward an image that aims to imply (rather than to state explicitly) Prufrock's condition of mental paralysis:

Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherised upon a table (*Complete Poems* 3)

Eliot's abrupt shifts in diction throughout the poem, as well as his array of learned allusions to Dante and the Bible, Shakespeare and Donne, lend "Prufrock" a sophistication and erudition that some scholars believe we should interpret ironically. From this perspective, the speaker's keen intelligence and grand pronouncements only mask his moral emptiness, the void and self-absorption that underlie his seemingly profound questioning. Others, however, regard Prufrock as a modern antihero, akin to Proust's Marcel, Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, or Woolf's Septimus Smith. For such readers, he is the emblem of a sensitive, receptive mind oppressed and overwhelmed by the spiritual abyss and meaninglessness of modernity.

The masterful "Prufrock" combines several elements of Eliot's characteristic methods and themes that appear separately in other poems from this period. "Portrait of a Lady," for instance, conveys the subtle agonies and deceptions of social exchange and decorum, following an elegantly artificial conversation between a man and a woman as it makes a path through "the windings of the violins" and "things that other people have desired," through sentimentality, manipulation, and stunted self-awakening (*Complete Poems* 9–10). Like many of Eliot's early works, "Portrait" owes much to the social psychology of Henry James; it is also indebted to the visual and verbal portraiture of the Pre-Raphaelites (Dickey 98–105). "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" and "Preludes," on the other hand, both depart from the bitter ironies of the social world to linger in the darkness of the solitary mind, imagining tormented interior "cities," much like the one in which Prufrock observes the half-deserted streets, lonely men in shirtsleeves, and a malingering yellow fog. In "Rhapsody," for instance, the streets and houses assume a malevolent life of their own, while the living creatures of the poem become automatic and mechanical. Even the Romantic moon, which presides with erotic and mystical energy in Symbolist verse, is reduced to self-parody and timid cliché:

She winks a feeble eye,  
She smiles into corners.  
She smooths the hair of the grass.  
The moon has lost her memory.  
A washed-out smallpox cracks her face,  
Her hand twists a paper rose (15)

In poems like these, and in "Gerontion" (1920) as well, Eliot's verse echoes recognizable themes of English and European Romanticism – moonlit encounters, solitary

wanderings, thwarted desires – but the echoes are interrupted, warped, and grotesquely distorted by his relentless doubt and self-questioning.

During these years Eliot also devoted much serious attention to literary criticism. In dozens of reviews and essays written under the pressure of deadlines and in the scant spare time from his job in the Colonial and Foreign Department of Lloyds Bank – where he worked from 1917 to 1925 – he began to articulate ideas about poetry and criticism that exerted a profound influence for many years afterward. Eliot's essays offer penetrating insights into subjects ranging from Elizabethan blank verse to contemporary poetic practice, from modern verse drama to the Russian Ballet, but they are especially valuable for what they reveal about his own ideals and methods. Central to much of his well-known prose from this period – including “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), “Hamlet” (1919), and “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921) – is his concern with the proper role of emotion in poetry. Many critics in his time (and in ours as well) mistakenly characterized Eliot as a detached, intellectual poet who rejected emotional energy. On the contrary, his rise to critical prominence in the London literary world involved deepening and intensifying the way that critics understand and value emotion and personality in poetry. Eliot opposes the Romantic idea that poetry should express the author's emotion. He believes that art's emotional intensity arises not from a spontaneous and subjective outpouring but from an attempt to observe and analyze emotions and then transmute them into artistic form. What matters is not the emotions themselves, he writes, but the “intensity of the artistic process” to which they are subjected (*Selected Essays* 19). In “Hamlet,” he suggests that poets convey emotion not by formulating first-person statements and propositions but by finding “objective correlatives,” sets of objects or events that correspond to emotional states and therefore evoke them in the reader (145). One senses this method at work when the speaker of “Morning at the Window,” for instance, juxtaposes the “trampled edges of the street” and “the damp souls of housemaids”; or when the speaker of “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” describes the ominous “shrunken seas,” “hot-house grapes,” and conspiratorial host, all leading toward a contemporary reenactment of Agamemnon's betrayal and murder (*Complete Poems* 16, 35–36). Though it is not identical to the Imagism of Pound, H.D., and Richard Aldington, Eliot's method is similar insofar as it demands great imaginative restraint and obliquity.

### *The Waste Land*

Even as he was consolidating his reputation in critical and creative circles, Eliot was desperately struggling to keep his personal life from falling apart. Soon after his hasty marriage, he became aware of Vivien's longstanding battles with nervous disorder and illness. Despite a continued and fruitful creative collaboration, the two became emotionally estranged and antagonistic, each feeding off of the other's weakness and dependence. The strain of coping financially and emotionally with their mutual illnesses and struggles finally became too great for Eliot to bear, and he suffered a

nervous collapse in September 1921. It was in the months following his breakdown, while he recuperated at Margate and placed himself under the care of a specialist in Lausanne, Switzerland, that he composed the majority of his most experimental and ambitious poem, *The Waste Land*. In January 1922, Eliot left the manuscript of the poem, which he later recalled as “sprawling” and “chaotic” at the time, with Ezra Pound, who undertook a remarkable task of criticizing and mercilessly revising the poem until it was reduced to less than half of its original length (Eliot, “Ezra Pound” 28). Shortly thereafter, Eliot’s burgeoning reputation and Pound’s enthusiasm inspired editors and publishers to clamor for *The Waste Land* before even reading it (Rainey 71–101). After much negotiation, it was published nearly simultaneously in England and America – first in October 1922 in the inaugural *Criterion*, the fledgling journal which Eliot himself had just founded and begun to edit, and then in the November issue of the *Dial* in New York. In the following months, it appeared in book form, bearing Eliot’s dedication to Pound at the beginning and a daunting set of scholarly annotations at the end.

*The Waste Land* is Eliot’s most famous poem, and it is likely the twentieth century’s most criticized and analyzed poem as well. Its 434 lines are divided into five sections featuring numerous speakers, interjections, and dramatic vignettes, all of which can seem jolting and disconnected because Eliot intentionally omits transitions and connections. It belongs to no single genre but makes use of many generic conventions, much like *Ulysses*, which Eliot had been reading and admiring in manuscript. The poem also shifts abruptly between tones and discursive registers, at times replicating colloquial speech and at others mimicking or alluding to a multitude of literary, religious, and philosophical texts. And then there are the untranslated passages of foreign languages, both in the text and in the “explanatory” notes. *The Waste Land* is unified, if at all, by its repeated variations on the theme of decay and downfall, ruin and infertility. At its center is a wasted land, both literally and on the level of spiritual and psychological metaphor. It describes the squalor of the metropolis, especially London, but it also portrays the psychological squalor and inward decay of its speakers, few of whom escape paralysis and apathy.

The first section, “The Burial of the Dead,” begins by lamenting the vicious reawakening that the speaker experiences upon the coming of spring. The normally welcome, renewing energies of the season become, from his perspective, agents of painful and undesirable change:

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain. (*Complete Poems* 37)

Eliot’s insistent gerunds and repeated enjambment have the effect of dramatizing, syntactically, the sense of interruption and disturbance from which the poem’s early speakers suffer. For these speakers, change and rebirth are prospects that threaten the

cocoon of self-forgetfulness and oblivion that seems to protect them. A strange female voice then interrupts, evoking childhood memories of freedom and exhilaration:

he took me out on a sled,  
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,  
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.  
In the mountains, there you feel free. (37)

No sooner has she revealed the bitter contrast between this remembered freedom and her present, sheltered state (“I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter”) than she is interrupted several times more, first by a Jeremiah-like prophetic voice warning of shadows and dust, then by a new account of similarly disappointed, unfulfilled experience:

– Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,  
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not  
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
Living nor dead (38)

The series of abrupt shifts and displacements continues throughout “The Burial of the Dead,” concluding finally with the description of a dreamlike confrontation – realistically situated in the business district of modern London, along a route that Eliot himself regularly walked to work – and a harangue involving a reference to an ancient war (“the ships at Mylae”), allusions to writers John Webster and Charles Baudelaire, and an uncanny question that seems to implicate one of the speakers in a domestic murder: “That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?” (39). It is a difficult and puzzling beginning, especially compared with the relatively straightforward narrative that Eliot had originally drafted, which merely recounted the late-night antics of a group of drunken revelers (*The Waste Land: A Facsimile* 4–5).

These scenes and others like them are moderated by a kind of echo principle, similar to that of dream or nightmare, one that works by way of repetitions, metamorphoses, and motifs. One such dominant echo throughout the work is the terror of nothingness and annihilation, the sense that, unlike the enduring cycles of seasonal change, the mental and cultural depletion of the modern waste land will not be reversed by the processes of rejuvenation. “What branches grow,” one speaker asks, “Out of this stony rubbish?” (*Complete Poems* 38). The creative, generative power – sexual, spiritual, artistic – has reached exhaustion, and in the words of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, “nothing will come of nothing” (I.1.90). Such elements, as Ronald Bush suggests, “provide an undercurrent to the poem, dominating it the way a buried incident that is too terrifying to confront dominates a nightmare and occasionally breaks its surface” (58). Adding further to its dreamlike quality, the poem frequently intermingles its

uncanny nightmare visions with fragments of popular music, song, and stage performances (like the “Shakespearean Rag” that interrupts the frantic exchange in “A Game of Chess”). These are not simply comic digressions: scholars have recently demonstrated the crucial place that such elements of popular and musical culture hold in Eliot’s expansive sensibility (Chinitz).

The mental and cultural devastation of *The Waste Land* reaches its critical point in the final section, “What the Thunder Said,” when Eliot invokes the Lord of Creation from the sacred Sanskrit text, the Upanishads, to deliver a message of spiritual instruction and reproof. The Thunder utters three moral strictures – translated and interpreted as “Give, sympathize, control” – all of which implicitly address the failings and torments of the poem’s speakers. Each monosyllabic divine utterance (“Da”) is expanded and clarified in an example (but formulated by whom, readers often ask, and on what authority?). Each example, however, portrays not an exemplary action but a missed opportunity, an aberration rather than a saving grace. Rather than culminating in positive, spiritual illumination, the poem descends into a cacophony of voices and echoes, jumbling quotations and foreign languages that dramatize – by their lack of transition, their focus on pain and lament, and their decontextualization – the crisis of mental collapse and disintegration at hand. The poem concludes with a deeply ambivalent repetition of the word “Shantih,” a mantra and closing prayer in the Hindu tradition that, according to Eliot’s note, corresponds to the Christian formulation “The peace which passeth understanding” (*Complete Poems* 55). It remains unclear, however, whether Eliot intends the mantra to reflect a state of spiritual achievement or illumination; a moment of resignation or even madness; or a desperate plea against the chaos threatening in the penultimate stanza.

The earliest critics and reviewers were often bewildered by the disjointedness of *The Waste Land*, and they either damned or praised it for its obscurity and its isolated moments of intensity. The next generation of scholars discerned a comprehensive order in the poem by following Eliot’s own suggestion that it derived its plan and symbolism from books about literature, myth, and primitive ritual by Jessie Weston and James Frazer. According to this perspective – articulated in varying degrees by F. R. Leavis, Cleanth Brooks, and Grover Smith – readers can follow the metamorphosis of a central hero-speaker (or “quester,” as Smith calls him) throughout the poem, as he embarks on a mythic quest for healing, regenerative powers. However, especially since the discovery of the poem’s original manuscripts – which reveal its essentially fragmentary origins – such efforts at unification have lost favor. Maud Ellmann even refers to it as “a sphinx without a secret”: “to force it to confession may also be a way of killing it” (91). Scholars generally agree, however, that *The Waste Land* replaces conventional narrative with some form of the “mythic method” that Eliot describes in his 1923 review of James Joyce’s newly published *Ulysses*, that is, with an experimental form of composition that involves bringing past and present into meaningful juxtaposition, “manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” (“Ulysses” 483).



*Asb-Wednesday*

Despite the controversy and interest that *The Waste Land* rapidly generated, Eliot regarded it almost immediately as an end rather than a beginning. Pound called it “the justification of the ‘movement,’ of our modern experiment,” but Eliot saw it as the culmination of an old style and mindset (Pound 248). In the years that followed, he immersed himself in an experimental verse play that did not see the stage for nearly a decade, and he was occupied by the practical details of editing the *Criterion*; by the consuming and increasingly painful struggle to care for his ailing wife; and by the demands of his spiritual life, which grew ever more important to him. Not long after Vivien attempted suicide and was temporarily committed to a sanatorium in Paris, Eliot took the decisive steps of joining the Anglican Church and becoming a British citizen. His essays, which had always addressed matters of ethical and metaphysical import, grew increasingly concerned with theology and the history of the Church, and with the religious and moral significance of figures like Dante, Thomas Aquinas, and the Anglican Bishop Lancelot Andrewes. The spiritual anguish and ambivalence in *The Waste Land*, which had assumed a muted tone in the somber lament of “The Hollow Men” (1925), now reemerged with new creative force and urgency in another difficult composition of disconnected fragments and shifting perspectives, which Eliot titled *Asb-Wednesday* (1930) after the first day of Lent, the Christian period of prayer and repentance.

Eliot’s religious conversion in 1927 certainly informs the poem, but if one considers a conversion as a devotional experience of spiritual fulfillment and resolution, it would be greatly misleading to call *Asb-Wednesday* a “conversion poem.” Eliot himself frequently insisted that it was neither religious nor devotional verse; rather, he argued, it dramatizes the experience of a man “trying to explain to himself his intenser human feelings in terms of the divine goal” (qtd. in Gardner 29). And, as he related in letters from the time, the poem represents merely an intermediate stage in a journey begun in his earliest work. *Asb-Wednesday* comprises six parts, three of which were published independently before Eliot brought the whole together and published it in 1930. Like his earlier work, it omits transitions and narrative connections, relying instead upon echoes, allusions, and motifs; this time, however, the echo-principle seems intended to convey the thoughts and emotions of a single, first-person speaker as he meditates upon sacrifice and surrender, as well as upon the relationship between earthly and divine love. Though characteristically oblique in its descriptions, the poem conveys a few things clearly: the speaker has made an irrevocable decision; he will undergo pain and suffering because of it; and the goal or end of his new direction involves a recalibration of desire and its objects. The desolate landscape of anguish and isolation in *The Waste Land* reappears in surprising ways in *Asb-Wednesday*: a sterile desert, dry bones, an “old man’s mouth driveling,” and even a “dreamcrossed twilight between birth and dying” to echo the earlier poem’s crepuscular “violet hour” (*Complete Poems*



63, 66, 43). The tone of *Ash-Wednesday*, however, is subdued and meditative, replacing the frantic and despairing exclamations of *The Waste Land* with reflective circularities and all-embracing tensions; it alludes to the measured sermons of Lancelot Andrewes, to the liturgy of the Anglican mass, and to paradoxes and lucid dream visions. Eliot's Dantesque imagery conveys simultaneously famine and fulfillment:

Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree  
 In the cool of the day, having fed to satiety  
 On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained  
 In the hollow round of my skull. (61)

What seems bewildering at first (if the speaker was consumed, how is he still speaking?) becomes clearer when we understand the scene as a surreal portrait of resignation: the speaker has surrendered himself to the consuming forces of the spiritual desert. The passage returns us to what Eliot calls in *The Waste Land* “the awful daring of a moment's surrender,” envisioning it now, however, as neither a prescription nor a missed opportunity but as a *fact* of the spiritual life, a *donnée* – an innate property, a given – which the speaker must struggle to accept (49). Each section of the poem portrays similarly overwhelming challenges: a stairwell scene with mirror images of the speaker's past selves (likely adapted, again, from the fiction of Henry James), a mythic scene with a seductive garden god, a visionary scene reenacting the fantastical advent of Beatrice in Dante's *Purgatorio*. And each section dramatizes the intense experience of turning, in the midst of danger or distraction, toward a “divine goal.” Sections end abruptly with incomplete prayers and truncated biblical allusions (“Pray for us sinners,” “Lord, I am not worthy,” “O my people” [61, 63, 65]), suggesting the effort of prayer rather than its achievement, the struggle of spirituality rather than its potential comfort. Rather than concluding with resounding affirmation, *Ash-Wednesday* ends on a familiar note of ambivalence. Eliot uses evocative memories of the New England coast from his youth to convey the speaker's persistent attachment to the sensual past, to the worldly pleasures and emotions that he must, it seems, leave behind in his quest for spiritual fulfillment:

And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices  
 In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices  
 And the weak spirit quickens to rebel  
 For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell  
 Quickens to recover  
 The cry of quail and the whirling plover (66)

These are apparently the obstacles to the speaker's aim of self-forgetfulness and renunciation. But they are couched in lines of great rhythmic and lyrical beauty, providing a stark contrast to the awkward and halting repetition of the poem's more explicitly devotional lines, such as “Although I do not hope to turn again, / Although I do not hope, / Although I do not hope to turn” (66). This aesthetic contrast echoes and

dramatizes the spiritual one, the unresolved and unresolvable tension between matter and spirit. “The tension itself is a good,” Hugh Kenner argues: “the opposite pull of the senses and the devotional spirit – of God’s creation and God – is to be maintained as a fruitful and essential equivocality, not ‘solved’” (265).

*Asb-Wednesday* marks another kind of turning point in Eliot’s career as well. For over a decade before, he had been writing about and promoting the resuscitation of verse drama, a form that was favored by nineteenth-century poets like Shelley and Swinburne but despised by modern proponents of realism and admirers of Ibsen and Shaw. Eliot had experimented with poetic drama earlier in the decade with a fragmentary, incomplete play called *Sweeney Agonistes*, which was begun in 1924 but not produced until 1933 in America. The darkly satirical play features a strange cast of nearly interchangeable characters – including, for instance, two ladies of questionable repute, Doris and Dusty, and two boorish American businessmen, Klipstein and Krumpacker – whose seemingly inane banter Eliot conveys in quick, rhythmic lines that are meant to lend their language the weight of a semiconscious ritual or ceremony. Sweeney, the protagonist, arrives speaking what seems rhythmic nonsense, but his evocations of cannibalism, murder and sacrifice, and primitive fundamentals – “birth, and copulation, and death” – reveal Eliot’s intention for the play to straddle two “levels” of significance, as he put it: that of everyday, “furnished flat” living and that of a darker, more intense spiritual reality (*Complete Poems* 80; *Use of Poetry* 146). *Sweeney Agonistes* has received increased attention in the past two decades as scholars attempt to gauge the implications of Eliot’s experimental theatrical techniques.

In the years following *Asb-Wednesday* and *Sweeney Agonistes*, however, Eliot devoted much time and energy to assembling viable and successful stage productions, immersing himself enthusiastically in the practicalities of what W. B. Yeats dispiritedly calls “Theatre business, management of men” (143). The first results included *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and *The Family Reunion* (1939). Rather than distracting him from poetry, Eliot discovered, composing these plays had an invigorating and generative effect on his imagination, and he soon set to work on his most ambitious verse project yet, the sequence of philosophical poems that became *Four Quartets* (1943).

### *Four Quartets*

The last of Eliot’s major nontheatrical works in verse, *Four Quartets* is a sequence of four five-part poems. Its parts are intricately connected, and they build slowly in a tonal and thematic crescendo, as if through a widening series of concentric spheres. This ambitious and ordered project, however, began almost accidentally, with a few cancelled lines from *Murder in the Cathedral* that Eliot elaborated into a meditative poem titled *Burnt Norton*, printed at the end of his *Collected Poems, 1909–1935*. As in each of the subsequent poems in the sequence, the title points to a specific place: “Burnt Norton” refers to a manor house and its environs in Gloucestershire, in the west of England. As Eliot later revealed, each poem in *Four Quartets* arises from a

specific time as well, tapping into the wellsprings of an intensely personal experience, “never to be explicated, of course, but to give power from well below the surface” (qtd. in Gardner 67). The subterranean “power” of *Burnt Norton* derives from Eliot’s accidental visit to the manor house in 1934 on a country walk with Emily Hale, an American teacher whom he had loved as a young man, whose memory he had long treasured, and with whom he had recently reunited. The poem’s meditations on “Time present and time past” – so closely akin to the mixing of memory and desire in *The Waste Land* – and its reflections on “What might have been and what has been” thus assume an emotional and personal poignancy unparalleled in Eliot’s career (*Complete Poems* 117).

Echoing the structure of both *The Waste Land* and “The Hollow Men,” *Burnt Norton* is divided into five sections, each of which involves shifts in tonal register and diction. The first narrates a visionary moment on the grounds of the manor house, when the speaker and his companion peer into a dry concrete pool only to find it momentarily flooded with water:

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. (*Complete Poems* 118)

The “heart of light” that appeared in part I of *The Waste Land* overwhelmed the speaker into silence: “I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed” (38). This one, however, is pregnant with meaning and possibility, as the couple seems to be visited by a pair of ghostly alternate selves (an uncanny embodiment of “what might have been”) or spectral children standing just behind them. In fact, we might consider the remainder of the poem – even perhaps the remainder of the *Quartets* – as the prolonged creative and intellectual attempt to grasp the significance of this fleeting moment, which Eliot calls an “intersection of the timeless / With time” (136). The speaker meditates, in section II, on “the still point” of the vision, the inner sense of release and resolution that it promises. But his relief is short-lived, and in the next section, he embraces a harrowing course of voluntary spiritual darkness and deprivation: “Desiccation . . . / Evacuation . . . / . . . abstention from movement” (120–21). The poem concludes by affirming the power and value of the extraordinary vision but decrying, in effect, everything else:

Quick now, here, now, always –  
Ridiculous the waste sad time  
Stretching before and after. (122)

In this way, the end of *Burnt Norton* is both a triumph and a failure. The speaker has isolated and concentrated the vision’s spiritual value; he has attempted to abandon the desires and distractions that would otherwise threaten to obscure it; but he cannot

integrate it into a life that, ultimately, must also contain mundane realities and unfulfilled desires. His visionary freedom remains painfully separate and distinct, a token of his divided world. In the haunting play that Eliot composed shortly afterward, *The Family Reunion*, the protagonist exclaims, “people . . . don’t understand what it is to be awake, / To be living on several planes at once” (*Complete Poems* 266).

It was in 1939, when Eliot sat down to compose *East Coker*, that he first began to envision the sequence of *Four Quartets* as a whole: a series of poems with corresponding sections, running motifs and themes, elemental symbolism, and a consistently philosophical, meditative undertone. Based upon his visits to the village of East Coker in Somerset, home to one of Eliot’s distant ancestors, *East Coker* immediately confronts the jarring disconnect that concluded *Burnt Norton*: the place of visionary, spiritual exuberance in a mundane life of growth and decay, of change, routine, and habit. “[T]here is a time for building,” he writes, echoing Ecclesiastes 3, “And a time for living and for generation / And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane” (123). “Prufrock” contained a similar formulation, almost thirty years before: “There will be time, there will be time / . . . / There will be time to murder and create” (4). But there, the declaration aimed to inoculate the speaker against the intensity of the experience he envisioned. The echoes of these lines in *East Coker*, on the contrary, attempt to bring that intensity into the realm of daily living, a realm that Eliot now characterizes in this way:

Not the intense moment  
Isolated, with no before and after,  
But a lifetime burning in every moment  
And not the lifetime of one man only  
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.  
There is a time for the evening under starlight,  
A time for the evening under lamplight  
(The evening with the photograph album). (129)

After this second poem, *Four Quartets* proceeds to an austere American landscape in *The Dry Salvages* (named after a rock formation off the coast of Gloucester, Massachusetts, where Eliot sailed as a young man) and finally back to England and the wintery scene in *Little Gidding* (a parish church and small village with ties to George Herbert and the Anglican religious community). In both, Eliot extends and multiplies moments of intensity or epiphany similar to the heart of light in the first poem, instances of what he calls “the moment in and out of time”: “the winter lightning / Or the waterfall,” “the children in the apple-tree,” “a secluded chapel” (136, 145, 144). Despite these moments, however, *Four Quartets* never breaks through into a visionary clearing, leaving behind the agonies of doubt and regret. Instead, intimations of transcendence and divine patterns act as counterweights to the poem’s continued skeptical reflections on waste, ruin, and war. The two even merge unexpectedly at times, as in section IV of *Little Gidding*, which integrates the language of the Christian Pentecost – a feast commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit as tongues

of flame – and description of the German bombings that Eliot witnessed as an air-raid warden in London during World War II: “The dove descending breaks the air / With flame of incandescent terror” (143). Ronald Schuchard characterizes the method that produces similar juxtapositions in each part of the poem: “In each quartet the eternal stillness of a divine pattern of reality is set against the endless movement of a temporal pattern, a pattern characterized by action and appetency” (188). *Little Gidding* concludes the sequence with neither a logically compelling resolution nor an argument that attempts to justify the poem’s commitments; it concludes, rather, with allusion and paradox, with echoes of the English anchorite Julian of Norwich and with a Dantesque image that maintains the poem’s central and sustaining tensions: time and infinity, unity and multiplicity, suffering and divine love:

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. (*Complete Poems* 145)

*Four Quartets* represents the last of Eliot’s major poetic achievements. In the years that followed, Eliot wrote a number of minor poems but devoted his attention almost entirely to writing for the stage. With his first real attempt at popular theater, *The Family Reunion*, he had discovered a multitude of creative, practical, and intellectual challenges that would sustain him for the rest of his creative life. As his fame as a poet and man of letters grew, Eliot worked steadily at the practice of stagecraft to produce theater that would be both artistically valuable and commercially successful. His *The Cocktail Party* opened in 1949; *The Confidential Clerk* in 1953; and *The Elder Statesman* in 1958.

Though he virtually stopped writing poetry after 1942, the public accolades and celebrity only continued to increase. In 1948, he was awarded the highest civilian honor in England, the Order of Merit, and in the same year, he won the Nobel Prize for literature. “One of the most daring innovators of twentieth-century poetry,” the Nobel committee called him: “he has followed his belief that poetry should aim at a representation of the complexities of modern civilization in language and that such representation necessarily leads to difficult poetry” (Frenz 438). It is to Eliot’s credit that such critical acclaim for the difficulty of poems like *The Waste Land* can exist alongside the popular enjoyment of *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* (1939), a book of perfectly rhymed, whimsical poems that he originally composed for his godchildren and that earned him even greater international renown when Andrew Lloyd Webber adapted it for the popular and long-running 1981 musical *Cats*. Reflecting on the unlikely simultaneity of these two achievements is a good way to conclude this chapter, insofar as Eliot’s poetry consciously embraced tension, contradiction, and paradox throughout his career. Although words may, as he writes in *Burnt Norton*, “strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden, / Under the tension” – and Eliot is

certainly celebrated as the poet of fragmentation and “broken images” – it is perhaps the explosive drama and excitement of his imaginative effort to hold them together that continues to compel our attention and admiration, and that has secured his place among the major poets of the century (*Complete Poems* 121). As sure as that place is, we have much to learn still about Eliot. Good biographies are available, including Peter Ackroyd’s and Lyndall Gordon’s, but an authorized study of his life has yet to be written. For years, only a small portion of Eliot’s essays and letters were accessible in book form, and there were no definitive editions of his creative works – a problem that is at last being addressed with scholarly editions of his poetry and plays, his nonfiction prose, and his correspondence. And as our valuation of Eliot’s work changes – as we come to appreciate more fully the breadth and depth of his achievement – so too will our understanding of modernism and of twentieth-century poetry.

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