

T. S. Eliot's Modernist Christianity

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THE *Times Literary Supplement* called him a “traitor.” Virginia Woolf told her sister, Vanessa Bell, that he was “dead to us all from this day forward.” Conrad Aiken accused him of cowardice (he “seems to be definitely and defeatedly in retreat from the present and all that it implies”). For the pride of writers we now call the modernists, T. S. Eliot’s conversion to Christianity in 1927 was an act of apostasy.

In the view of the literary establishment, Eliot had been the leader of a cultural movement that had dared to graduate from the vague agnosticism of the Victorians and bite the metaphysical bullet—that is, Eliot had realized that the death of God entailed a demise of meaning and a denial of hope. In *The Waste Land* (1922) Eliot had conveyed, according to I. A. Richards in an early review, “a sense of desolation, of uncertainty, of futility, of the groundlessness of aspirations, of the vanity of endeavor,” all of which allowed Eliot’s poem to embody “the plight of a generation.” However vehemently Eliot later disavowed this role, he *had* established himself as spokesman for, as Edmund Wilson put it at the time, “our post-War world of shattered institutions, strained nerves and bankrupt ideals.” But then, only five years later, the renegade wobbled. The seer who had peered into the void now fell on his knees before the *Pietà*. To the chagrin of his peers, Eliot capitulated; fell for cheap religious consolation; faltered, unable to sustain the courage of his modernist convictions.

But I want to argue that Eliot did not betray modernism. For if modernism is viewed as fundamentally a rejection of sentimental romanticism, then the religious poetry Eliot proceeded to write in fact *fulfilled* its promise. Because *Ariel Poems*, *Ash-Wednesday*, and *Four Quartets* show a poet refusing to idealize religious experience.

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The urtext in this reading of modernism (a reading of modernism as a rejection of romanticism) is Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856). Madame Bovary's fate is determined by her literary diet; she is the ultimate victim of romantic literature. When marriage fails to deliver the happiness she expected, we are told that she "tried to imagine just what was meant, in life, by the words 'bliss,' 'passion' and 'rapture'—words that had seemed so beautiful to her in books." Romanticism primes Madame Bovary to believe that strong emotion is the litmus test for authentic existence. As she says, "I detest common heroes and temperate feelings, the way they are in life." Romanticism also makes her pine for (melo)drama in her life:

Deep down, all the while, she was waiting for something to happen. Like a sailor in distress, she kept casting desperate glances over the solitary waste of her life, seeking some white sail in the distant mists of the horizon. . . . Every day when she awoke she hoped that today would be the day. . . . was surprised when nothing happened. . . . Other people's lives, drab though they may be, held at least the possibility of an event. (trans. Francis Steegmuller)

Romanticism sets her up to fail; conditions her for the event which is her affair. The literary critic Adam Thirlwell nicely summarizes why Madame Bovary first falls for Leon:

They were falling in love, these romantics, by the fire. They shared a provincial dislike for all that was provincial, ordinary, domestic: they both believed that a dull life was not a life, that the only true thing was poetry, and feeling.

Real life, they believed, was elsewhere.

. . . Leon will become her lover, because of her romanticism, because of her poetic idea that life is poetry, and should be full of passion.

And the books Madame Bovary has read not only determine that Madame Bovary will in fact have an affair. The *substance* of her subsequent relationships never escapes the conventional either. Here is her

first nauseating conversation with Leon (she has just asked whether he would recommend any particular walks):

“There’s one place, called The Pasture, on top of the bluffs at the edge of the woods. I go there Sundays sometimes with a book and watch the sunset.”

“There’s nothing I love as much as sunsets,” she said. “But my favorite place for them is the seashore.”

“Oh, I adore the sea,” said Monsieur Leon.

“Don’t you have the feeling,” asked Madame Bovary, “that something happens to free your spirit in the presence of all that vastness? It raises up my soul to look at it, somehow. It makes me think of the infinite, and all kinds of wonderful things.”

“Some novels,” Flaubert later admitted, “are written with a scalpel (*Madame Bovary*, for example).” Contemporary cartoons duly displayed Flaubert leaning over his characters on a dissecting table. And when Flaubert cuts open his character, when he sets about plucking out the heart of Emma Bovary’s mystery, he in fact finds only *gush*. Flaubert is mocking his literary creation, satirizing his heroine, sending up Madame Bovary. *This* is the basis of Flaubert’s famed realism. Flaubert, Thirlwell concludes, “wanted to be precise about how calmly people were imprecise about reality.”

Joyce, a great admirer of Flaubert, also tries to be precise about how calmly people are imprecise about reality. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, though most critics strangely miss this, it’s clear from the context that Stephen Dedalus’s famous epiphany at the climax of chapter 4 is pure parody. Stephen has just made the pivotal decision to trade in a potential career in the priesthood for one as an artist. Realizing that “it was a grave and ordered and passionless life that awaited him” in the church (“the chill and order of the life repelled him”), and no longer drawn to previous objects of devotion (he “turned his eyes *coldly* for an instant toward the faded blue shrine of the Blessed Virgin”), Stephen is now a free agent. And it is at this moment, knowing now “the oils of ordination would never

anoint his body,” that he receives the artistic call-up. En route to the sea, Stephen encounters some of his school peers, who hail him by his Greek name—clearly a sign!

—Stephanos Dedalos! Bous Stephanoumenos! Bous Stephane-foros!

Their banter was not new to him and now it flattered his mild proud sovereignty. Now, as never before, his strange name seemed to him a prophecy. . . . Now, at the name of the fabulous artificer, he seemed to hear the noise of dim waves and to see a winged form flying above the waves and slowly climbing the air. What did it mean? Was it. . . a prophecy of the end he had been born to serve and had been following through the mists of childhood and boyhood, a symbol of the artist forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being?

How is Joyce presenting this epiphany? Is this writing on the nose or is it a windup? Surely the fact that what Stephen Dedalus’s namesake forged in his workshop—the wings of Icarus—did not prove “imperishable” suggests the reader is not to take Stephen’s moment of anointing at face value. No, I think Joyce is joking. *For Icarus falls flat*. More: in the passage that immediately follows, Joyce sends up Stephen’s identification with Icarus, collapsing the solemnity of the moment with brilliant bathos:

His heart trembled; his breath came faster and a wild spirit passed over his limbs as though he were soaring sunward. His heart trembled in an ecstasy of fear and his soul was in flight. His soul was soaring in an air beyond the world and the body he knew was purified in a breath and delivered of incertitude and made radiant and commingled with the element of spirit. An ecstasy of flight made radiant his eyes and wild his breath and tremulous and wild and radiant his windswept limbs.

—One! Two! . . . Look out!

—Oh, Cripes, I’m drownded!

The prose brings Stephen, like Icarus, down to earth. Indeed, in a famous passage Joyce wrote about his Flaubertian “programme”:

In realism you get down to the facts on which the world is based; that sudden reality which smashes romanticism into a pulp. What makes most people's lives unhappy is some disappointed romanticism, some unrealizable misconceived ideal. In fact you may say that idealism is the ruin of man.

Here in *Portrait* Joyce is smashing Stephen's romanticism into a pulp. Stephen's aesthetic theory is indeed "some unrealizable misconceived ideal." So too is the famous vision that follows, the girl Stephen encounters wading in the shallows who "seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird." In the repetitive, operatic prose—the writing is over the top—we can detect the author's merciless mockery:

Her image had passed into his soul for ever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called him and his soul had leaped at the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! A wild angel had appeared to him, the angel of mortal youth and beauty, an envoy from the fair courts of life, to throw open before him in an instant of ecstasy the gates of all the ways of error and glory. On and on and on and on!

Stephen's feelings for the seabird are no more real than Romeo's for Rosaline. This is pure indulgence. Stephen and the girl do not speak, do not *connect*. The girl functions as a useful Petrarchan muse. She serves her purpose to confirm Stephen's artistic call. With her "thighs, fuller and soft-hued as ivory" and "soft and slight" breast, she is simply the product of his erotically charged imagination. Excessive emotion. Sickening sentimentality. Joyce the archmodernist is here setting his face against romanticism.



As the poet and literary critic Craig Raine has convincingly shown, modernism was not just about experimentation with form; it also involved an inquiry into feelings. Modernism constituted an all-out assault on romanticism. What did the modernists object to exactly? They objected to the idea that the litmus test for an authentic life was the experience of grand, sweeping emotions. For the romantics,

what did it mean to be alive, really alive? It was to be flooded by feeling, transported by nature, overwhelmed with passion. The romantics had idealized reality by insisting upon what one is supposed to feel rather than what one really does feel.

“I feel compelled to add that I dislike your poetry very much,” reads the letter of Eliot’s contemporary, Richard Aldington; “it is over-intellectual and afraid of those essential emotions which make poetry.” “Quite so,” writes Raine; “Eliot the modernist, Eliot of the classicist ‘tendency,’ was interested in a wider range of emotions, portrayed more precisely.”

Which emotions exactly did Eliot seek to portray more precisely? In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” it is timidity. Eliot inverts traditional amorous verse—specifically Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress”—by depicting a man *lacking* the confidence to seize the day and make a proposal of marriage (“the overwhelming question”). Prufrock’s fear of doing something presumptuous stops him doing anything at all. The more questions Prufrock asks himself—“Do I dare disturb the universe?”; “Should I . . . / Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?”—the less confident we are that he will be decisive. Instead, the subtle shift from the present tense (“Shall I say?”) to the past tense (“And would it have been worth it?”) is poignant. By the end of the poem the moment for action has passed, the window of opportunity has closed, leaving Prufrock only with regret.

A person’s acute sensitivity to appearing foolish is another dynamic the modernists pick up on. Prufrock again:

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

Virginia Woolf explores the same species of feeling in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). When Peter Walsh—Clarissa Dalloway’s old suitor—pays her a visit, he feels acutely aware that, despite all “the millions of things” he is keen to tell her he has done with his life, by her standards he is an underachiever. (“She would think me a failure, which I am in their sense.”) Then, upon his departure, Woolf adds:

[Peter wondered] whether by calling at that hour he had annoyed her; overcome with shame suddenly *at having been a fool*; wept; been emotional; told her everything, as usual, as usual. (my italics)

This sense of embarrassment is Joyce’s theme in the extraordinary short story “The Dead,” which completes his 1914 collection of short stories, *Dubliners*. After a Christmas party a husband misjudges the mood of his wife. Gabriel thinks a romantic and sexual moment is about to unfold when in fact Greta has been reminiscing about a former lover who was killed in a terrible accident. When Greta tells Gabriel this, Joyce lets us in on how he feels:

Gabriel felt humiliated by the failure of his irony and by the evocation of this figure from the dead, a boy in the gasworks. While he had been full of memories of their secret life together, full of tenderness and joy and desire, she had been comparing him in her mind with another. A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him. *He saw himself as a ludicrous figure.* (my italics)

Eliot, Woolf, and Joyce: each writer, then, takes up separately this same syndrome—this sense of having lost face. It’s a syndrome that may never have interested the romantics, but unlike them the modernists were interested in gazing unflinchingly at reality.



In 1932, T. S. Eliot wrote an essay about the Victorian critic Matthew Arnold. “The total effect of Arnold’s philosophy,” Eliot observed, “is to set up Culture in the place of Religion, and to leave Religion to be laid waste by the anarchy of feeling.” We might read

that as Eliot's justification of his rejection of religion. But we would be wrong. For when does Eliot make this observation? He makes it five years *after* his conversion. Which is why it serves, I propose, as a moment when Eliot laid down a challenge for himself, when he set down a new program for his verse.

In February 1927, Eliot wrote to W. Force Stead, anticipating he would be coming to ask for advice about confirmation in the Anglican communion. Eliot swore Stead to secrecy, expressing his desire to eschew any publicity or notoriety. Eliot: "I *hate* spectacular 'conversions.'" What Eliot also hated was much religious poetry. Why? "People who write devotional verse are usually writing as they *want* to feel, rather than as they *do* feel," he wrote in *After Strange Gods* (1933; my italics). Thus I read Eliot's great conversion poem, *Ash-Wednesday* (1930), as an attempt to subvert this expectation of devotional verse. For what does the speaker feel in the poem? In short, very little. The poem begins:

Because I do not hope to turn again
 Because I do not hope
 Because I do not hope to turn
 Desiring this man's art and that man's scope
 I no longer strive to strive towards such things

It is a statement of renunciation. The speaker has made the momentous decision to renounce the world and orient himself toward God. And he realizes it's a definitive decision. He has no intention of turning back to his old life ("I do not hope to turn again") and to strive after the things he used to strive after—most notably, success and acclaim (Shakespeare's "This man's art and that man's scope"). Here, then, is a writer reckoning with the magnitude of his decision to convert. And that is not a thrilling thing. The speaker insists that he rejoices, "having to construct something upon which to rejoice." He continues:

And pray to God to have mercy upon us
 And pray that I may forget
 These matters that with myself I too much discuss
 Too much explain

Because I do not hope to turn again
 Let these words answer
 For what is done, not to be done again

The emotion which pervades the poem is a sense of resignation—another of these subtle, undramatic, low-key, prosaic emotions the modernists were interested in.

Eliot's short poem from 1927, "The Journey of the Magi," is another attempt to write about what people (in this case converts) *do* feel, rather than what they're supposed to feel. The poem is about the journey of the wise men from distant lands in the East to find the newborn Christ and present their gifts to him. What feelings might we expect from those who found what they were looking for, convinced that the child born in Bethlehem would turn out to be the savior of the world? Exhilaration? Joy? The speaker, one of the wise men, will have none of it:

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
 But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
 With an alien people clutching their gods
 I should be glad of another death.

Eliot zeroes in on the experience of the convert who has turned to God but has, rightly, refused to forsake the world. Feeling out of place, "no longer at ease here," because surrounded by all your old pals who still believe what they do when you've fundamentally changed your beliefs—that's the peculiar, very real dynamic in which Eliot is interested.

Eliot also describes the sensational in "Song for Simeon," another of the *Ariel Poems*. Eliot had already explored this territory in his early poem "Gerontion" (1919), which opens with a string of negations:

Here I am, an old man in a dry month,
 Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.
 I was neither at the hot gates
 Nor fought in the warm rain
 Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,
 Bitten by flies, fought.

The series of romantic images, the different martial venues—the “hot gates” (the Spartan stand at Thermopylae), the “warm rain,” the “salt marsh”—are conjured in order to be denied as Eliot inverts the stock trope of a grandfather reliving his rich memories with his grandson. This speaker is defined by who he wasn’t, by the life he didn’t live.

And, again, this theme is one Eliot returns to, confirms rather than upends after his conversion, in “Song for Simeon.” Simeon was the New Testament Jew convinced he would meet Israel’s messiah before his death (and a man celebrated every evening by Anglicans in the “Nunc Dimittis” of the Book of Common Prayer). Like the speaker of “Gerontion,” Simeon declares: “Not for me the martyrdom, the ecstasy of thought and / Prayer / Not for me the ultimate vision.” Martyrs are heroes—men and women who take a stand, gloriously suffer for their principles and convictions, usually giving themselves to posterity in the process. But though Simeon did behold the Anointed before he died, did encounter “the Word unable to speak a word” (when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple for his dedication), *heroism* was not to be Simeon’s destiny. Eliot is true to his modernist disdain for drama.



I take *Four Quartets*, the richest mystical poem in English since *The Cloud of Unknowing*, to be essentially an exploration of the status of epiphanies. The *Quartets* constitute Eliot’s singular attempt to relate spiritual experience to historical, time-bound experience. These episodic visionary experiences, these transcendent moments, what are they like? What are they *not* like? How do they, or should they, “fit” into the rest of our terrestrial lives? What light do they cast on the rest of our lives? What do they signify in the grand scheme of things? What do they point toward?

The first quartet, “Burnt Norton,” written in 1936 as a stand-alone poem, poses questions and raises problems only addressed in the later three quartets—“East Coker” (1940), “The Dry Salvages” (1941), and “Little Gidding” (1942). What questions? What problems? In short, “Burnt Norton” asks, what is the point of mystical experience

if it is so transient? And it raises the problem of whether, if the visionary moment does not last, it is worth anything.

“Burnt Norton” begins with Eliot’s elusive but vivid description of a moment of enlightenment. During the summer of 1934, Eliot, with the love of his life, Emily Hale, visited an uninhabited mansion near Chipping Camden in Gloucestershire—the site of a house burned down two hundred years before. Section 1 of the poem imagines that setting as the venue for a vision. While the speaker is peering at a drained concrete pool at the heart of the rose garden, minding his own business, suddenly he sees something out of the ordinary and finds himself transported.

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 the heart of light,
 And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
 Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.

A strange sight: a vision of the impossible—“water out of sunlight.” In the rest of “Burnt Norton” Eliot takes pains to describe the nature of this vision as precisely as possible, to delineate five distinctive features of the vision he received. First, the vision is unsought. The speaker is not actively searching for a transcendent experience; it is simply given. This spiritual inbreaking, this intersection of the timeless with time, which constitutes an arrival at consciousness (for “to be conscious is not to be in time”), thus retains the character of a gift. Secondly, the revelation comes as a relief. “At the still point of the turning world,” Eliot elaborates in section 2 of “Burnt Norton,” there is felt

The inner freedom from the practical desire,
 The release from action and suffering, release from the inner
 And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded
 By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving.

Happily, the need to grasp at the future—the compulsion to act—is momentarily deferred. The pressure is off (“the release from action”),

and there is too a letup to suffering and the grind of life (“release from the inner / And the outer compulsion”). Thirdly, the revelation is properly apocalyptic. It unveils reality.

concentration
Without elimination, both a new world
And the old made explicit

The revelation communicates something novel to the speaker (“a new world”) while also shedding light on the familiar (“And the old made explicit”). This means something important: the vision is no escape. The speaker’s present situation and context is not forgotten, or simply put out of mind. Rather, situation and context are put in perspective. The speaker gets clarity on what he’s doing and what he’s about. Next, the vision is tolerable. And finally, the vision is discrete. It ends. And abruptly. The description of the closure (“Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty”) is superbly bathetic. As Harry Blamires writes in his *Quartets* commentary: “A cloud covers the sun and the momentary revelation is over. It has constituted an instance of the given joy by which we are from time to time made aware of the mystery and the meaning lying behind the temporal order. Such instances, in which the frame of finitude is punctured, are represented here in an experience of natural beauty.” In the context of this quartet, within “Burnt Norton,” *that* the vision dissipates—*that* this transcendent, revelatory moment proves transient—causes problems for the speaker and is clearly experienced as loss. “Burnt Norton” ends with these famous lines:

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
Even while the dust moves
There rises the hidden laughter
Of children in the foliage
Quick now, here, now, always—
Ridiculous the waste sad time
Stretching before and after.

Eliot is determined to square up to the fleeting nature of his epiphany. He refuses to idealize mysticism by pretending that the visionary moment will last—that he can make it last—longer than it does. The epiphany is strictly bounded, flanked on either side by historical experience. And what is the character of this “before and after”? Eliot is unsentimental: “ridiculous the waste sad time.” At this point in *Four Quartets*, then, here at the end of “Burnt Norton,” Eliot is quite clear that visionary experience is strictly orthogonal to “normal” life. Epiphanies interrupt, punctuate, the rest of life yet leave it sorely unchanged. Transcendent experience is not yet seen in the poem to pervade or bleed into or redeem historical experience. Epiphanies leave the “waste sad time” of past and future unaffected, simply ready to resume upon the end of the vision, like a dissipating dream before the horror of the morning.

Now, the romantic poets idealize transcendent experience, not necessarily by pretending or deceiving themselves that visionary moments make up all of life. “Fled is that vision!” writes Keats. Rather, the romantics identify “real life” or authentic existence with those visionary moments and then make seeking them the order of the day. The romantics are escapist insofar as they show themselves to be “chasing a high” (also their enthusiastic recommendation to the reader). What is the appropriate response to “Fled is that vision”? In short, to pore over it, to milk it for all its worth, or simply to seek out the next one. Thus, Wordsworth writes, in “Tintern Abbey,”

But oft, in lonely rooms, and ’mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them [“beauteous forms”]
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart.

But Eliot will not have this. He can’t bring himself to believe that the visionary moments can by themselves sustain a life. In fact, ruminating over them in the way Wordsworth does is another way of trying to make them last longer, and that will not do. (Wordsworth also implies such ecstatic experiences can be sought out, but, as we saw earlier, for

Eliot moments of transcendence are strictly given; they are unsought, occasions of grace.) Throughout *Four Quartets* the challenge laid down to the reader is not to escape the world by constantly seeking out these moments of transcendence, but rather to relate them to the framework of faith, to incorporate them into the daily life of the believer.

About the character of the “before and after,” the nature of historical experience, Eliot is even bleaker at the beginning of his second quartet, “East Coker.” The transience of the world itself is the theme Eliot takes up in that poem’s opening:

In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.

The bathos of “a by-pass” warns us that we’re not in here for some heady celebration of renewal. Eliot’s assessment of the cyclical character of human endeavor is too all-encompassing to allow for that kind of consolation. No, the message is clear: nothing will last. “In my beginning is my end.” All our initiatives—the fresh projects we launch in the world—are doomed from the start. There may be “a time for building / And a time for living and for generation.” But it is a limited time. Eventually, inevitably, what we have built will be destroyed by more powerful elemental forces (“a time for the wind to break the loosened pane”). Even when Eliot evokes some human spirit, in the country dance of the following passage, the reader is never permitted to forget that the peasants who enjoy themselves, “in rustic laughter / lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes,” are long gone. Their mirth was short-lived (“mirth of those long since under earth” now only good for, we are told, “nourishing the corn”). Further: reference is made to “the time of the coupling of man and woman.” But there’s no mention of the fruit of their union. In “East Coker” sex is not procreative. Eliot refuses the opportunity to invoke a pretty tale about the human story carrying on through the generations. Instead,

“coupling of man and woman” is immediately followed, and debased, by the again bathetic: “And that of beasts.” As for the last word, it goes not to the invigorating memory of “Feet rising and falling”—to a consoling fantasy, in other words; the last word goes to “Dung and death.”

Eliot writes in “East Coker” 3:

So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the
dancing.
Whisper of running streams, and winter lightning.
The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,
The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy
Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony
Of death and birth.

Here I take Eliot to be saying that these kinds of ecstatic moments—these episodes of awareness of the beauty of nature, these occasions of the intersection of time with the timeless—are neither everything (as they are for the romantics) nor nothing. They are insufficient. They depend on something else for their meaning and significance and power. But what? Eliot says they are “Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony / Of death and birth.” The straightforward reading of this is to say that they require spiritual death. But whose spiritual death? On one level, clearly, ours. But I find Rowan Williams’s suggestion (in his superbly rich unpublished lectures on the *Quartets*) that the answer is found in a more contextual reading of “East Coker” to be compelling. He writes of section 4:

Our only sustenance and hope of survival is, again, death: “The dripping blood our only drink, / The bloody flesh our only food.” But, this time, not simply our death; that remains the pre-condition of our salvation, of our being “warmed” by the flame of love. . . . but the kindler of this flame sustains us only by *His* death, *His* self-renunciation. The creator’s hands behind history are themselves “bleeding”; He shares our sickness, that is to say, He is as vulnerable as we are to the destructive force of the historical vortex.

On Williams's persuasive view, "East Coker," and indeed Eliot's whole sequence, hinges on the scandalously particular claims made in section 4 about the historical person of Jesus. For ecstasy, Williams claims, "is pointless unless it is involved with the whole sequence of temporal and 'worldly' experience." It is only the Incarnation—the Word made flesh and dwelling among us—that ensures that "through time time is conquered."

The appropriate response of the believer to this stupendous reality, to the action of God in history, Eliot suggests in the third quartet, "The Dry Salvages." Eliot encourages us to allow these moments of encounter with the Absolute to prompt us to die to self—we are back at the renunciation of *Ash-Wednesday*—in order to be made new by God. Eliot writes:

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. These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.

The moment in the rose garden ("lost in a shaft of sunlight") and other moments of transcendence are to be taken as clues—as "hints and guesses" of the reality that God has manifested himself in time through the Incarnation of his Son. This does not mean that God is yet "all in all," that his presence is pervasive; but it does provide grounds for hope that these individual experiences of the absolute are not made-up or mistaken or sheer self-deceit. And in the meantime, rather than spending all our time seeking out wondrous apprehensions of nature, we have something to be getting on with—the hard work of "prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action."

The venue for the final "intersection of the timeless moment" in *Four Quartets* is Little Gidding, in the English county of Huntingdon.

Again, Eliot's emphasis is upon receptivity to a given encounter via surrender to God (rather than an entitled grasping after what we desire, the expectation we arrive with):

You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel.

The place, again, is significant: the revelation occurs somewhere "prayer has been valid"—on the site of a seventeenth-century devotional community established by Nicholas Ferrar. And the time is significant: the revelation occurs in a unique season all of its own—"midwinter spring," one that thus escapes the usual meteorological pattern ("This is the spring time / But not in time's covenant . . . / Not in the scheme of generation"). The phenomenon of sunshine in winter signifies, according to Blamires again, "a season of its own that breaks the natural cycle. Its shaft of sunlight is a point of illumination intersecting time's familiar routine of successiveness. It belongs in a sense to the pattern of the timeless."

This revelation indeed belongs to the pattern of the timeless—it constitutes a real encounter with the transcendent. Nevertheless, once again the epiphany is presented as anything but an escape from time. After a necessary initial confrontation with death and mortality ("And turn behind the pig-sty to the dull facade / And the tombstone"), in the third section of "Little Gidding" Eliot proceeds to disavow an otherworldly asceticism, insisting that the opposite of "attachment to self and to things and to persons" should not be "indifference" but an "expanding / Of love beyond desire." Epiphanies should lead to the transformation, not the excision, of our affections. Further: the enduring meaning of the vision is guaranteed only because all of history has been redeemed:

History may be servitude,
History may be freedom. See, now they vanish,
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, love
them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.

Sin is Behovely, but
 All shall be well, and
 All manner of thing shall be well.

The quotation from the fourteenth-century mystic and theologian Julian of Norwich beautifully suggests the universal reach, the global scope, of God's action in history. Because of the divine intervention to which "East Coker" 2 bears witness, there can be an eternal future for the vanishing "faces and places": there can be a renewal of all things. Sin is advantageous, a *felix culpa*, because it prompted God to become man so man could become God. Accordingly, the forces of death and destruction can function as a purifying fire ("The only hope . . . Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre").

♦ ♦ ♦

On the one side, then, there is discontinuity; there is a real conversion. Stead, again, noted of Eliot's volte-face that it was "a change from skepticism to belief, from a state of mind in which he could hardly affirm anything to a state of mind in which he can say the Athanasian Creed with conviction." But on the other side there is a remarkable continuity in Eliot's verse. The subversion of romanticism, the disdain for melodrama, the insistence on accepting what we do feel rather than what we should feel: these are unmistakable features of Eliot's early verse. But they are unmistakable features of his later verse too. Eliot was attracted to a particular strain of Christianity—"Anglo-Catholic in religion"—which did not insist he pretend religious experience is something it is not. In 1930, upon the publication of *Ash-Wednesday*, Eliot wrote to "a great friend," John Hayward: "It is exactly as if one had been living on drugs and stimulants all one's life and had suddenly been taken off them. I know just enough—and no more—of the 'peace of God' to know that it is an extraordinarily painful blessing." Because his later poetry channels *this* kind of faith, we can say that Eliot, as a modernist, comes good in the end.